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Assessment among Associates:
Using Peer Evaluation in
Courses on International Politics

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the benefits and potential draw backs of using peer evaluation for undergraduate courses in international politics. Peer evaluation requires students to apply their knowledge and skills in different way from traditional course work. Rather than narrowly focusing on finishing their own assignments, peer evaluations can expose students to new ideas and methods among their classmates. The ability to evaluate their colleagues’ work and to respond effectively draws upon several essential skills. Students engaging in assessments will develop critical thinking, problem solving, social interaction, and effective communication skills, making it a useful tool for building and improving students’ abilities for the modern world. Designing effective peer evaluations can be tricky as students often see themselves and their college associates as unqualified to appraise their work. The paper addresses this underlying problem with peer evaluations, and presents some strategies for overcoming them when teaching international politics.

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In the modern world, instructors need teaching methods that can serve a multitude of goals effectively in order to collaborate with students on their education and to help them prepare for the professional world. This paper is an initial investigation into how educators can effectively use the pedagogical method of peer assessment in their classrooms. Recent research has identified a few problems with implementing peer evaluation in the classroom that stem from a common core: students do not see themselves as ‘experts’ in assessment techniques and material content. As a consequence of this perception, the students doubt the reliability as well as the validity of the evaluations that their peers can provide. If an instructor wants to generate an environment that is conducive to “assessment among associates,” we have to recognize this perception as well as some related issues in using this pedagogical method. Following that insight, we need to rethink the design of our courses in order to effectively distribute the benefits of the peer evaluations to students both for their educational experience as well as the future professional careers. Here, I present some strategies for educators to consider when using peer assessment.

My paper on peer evaluations will make three contributions to the literature and the broader themes of the conference. First, my project encourages delegates to revisit an old teaching method by providing new strategies for its implementation. Peer evaluation can be an effective tool for teaching when we anticipate and account for its weaknesses. Hence, we can improve upon our current methods for the next generation of students’ benefit. Second, we need tools in the classroom that operate efficiently to help students develop primary skills for employability. Peer evaluations have the potential to engage many essential skills – such as

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critical thinking and communication—that students will use throughout their education and during their careers. Third, we can teach students to criticize the publications of authorities, but we also need to encourage them to develop the tools necessary to engage and assess one another. The ability to evaluate colleagues should be a fundamental component of education. When students learn how to effectively assess the assignments of their peers they also learn how to evaluate their own work.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section addresses some of the advantages for using peer assessment in the classroom. The second section addresses the problems that researchers have recognized with peer assessment as a pedagogical tool. The third section presents some recommendations for using peer assessment as a pedagogical tool, focusing on how to overcome the problems identified in section two.

**Peer Assessment, the Value of the Method**

The utility in using peer assessment is in establishing the importance of collaboration among students as part of their education experience. Collaboration is the essence of an education: students and teachers working together to understand scholarship while developing and assessing essential skills. Peer assessment increases collaborative learning by granting students an enlarged role in their education, both in learning from their peers and applying their developing skill sets. As instructors, we can use peer assessments as a way for students to allow others to engage their work while simultaneously bringing students into the evaluation process.

In many classrooms, students only receive feedback on their papers at the end of a semester. That format, however, prevents us from giving the students some important opportunities for learning about the assessment process that they will likely encounter in the

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professional world. First, students should have a chance to learn from their work beyond just receiving a grade, or mark, for their efforts. Students need feedback on the assignments in order to know what they did right as well as where they have weaknesses that need further improvement. Second, we should then expect that students learn how to navigate and respond to such assessments. In the professional world, students will have to incorporate feedback from peers and higher ups into their work. At the university, we should encourage them to start working with such evaluations early in their development.

As instructors, we have limits to the time and energy we can devote to helping students develop. Sometimes, we have our hands full with the big picture that we do not have time for smaller things that might be important but go unnoticed. That is not to say we shirk on our responsibilities, but we do have a tendency to economize on our time and effort in evaluations. We train ourselves to look out for bigger issues when evaluating our students’ work. Peer evaluations can help us redirect resources by allowing multiple inputs into the students’ work products. Allowing the students to participate in assessments can improve their skills, but also help students receive more diverse feedback. Peer assessment does not alleviate our responsibility as evaluators. Instead, it provides us with more opportunities to help students discover the strengths and weaknesses of their work while giving them more insights on how to improve.

Learning to other assess others is an important skill in the educational and professional world that students should be cultivating during their time at college. As previous research has recognized, students will have to evaluate their own strengths and weakness for future

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employers. Whether in a job interview or during a performance review, students need tools as well as experience to help them develop the necessary skills for effectively assessments. This is particularly important, for as David Boud notes, “There is often a gap between what we require of students in assessment tasks and what occurs in the world of work, whether it be in the public sector, commerce or industry, or academia.” In part, instructors need to insure that what we do in the classroom should reflect – in some ways – how the students can develop themselves now for their emerging professional careers.

The developing of student assessment skills can also improve their chances of pursing education as a lifelong goal. We should encourage students to understand education as a process, not a destination, and that process is one which they will hopefully pursue for the rest of their lives. By improving how we engage students with learning, we can also help them develop a better attitude towards their education and improve retention of the material. We want students to reflect on their peers’ work as a way to improve their own efforts as well as learn how to provide and address feedback. Teaching students to assess others can provide them with more incentive to engage in self-reflection of their own work, a critical component for growth and improvement.

Hence, by using peer assessment we can focus on identifying and developing some of the more important, yet difficult skills that all students need. Learning to assess others can improve students’ abilities to engage in self-reflection, to provide informative feedback, and to assist in the integration of diverse material. All of these components are essential in effective

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assessments, and helping students develop these skills will improve their placement later in the job market. During their years at the university, using peer assessment will provide us as educators the capacity to evaluate their growth and competency in using new tools that will have some application in the world outside of the academy.\textsuperscript{8}

**Identifying the Problems with Peer Assessment**

In general, students have expressed a number of concerns with using peer assessment in the classroom, including doubts about their own objectivity, the potentially unfair and risky assessments that they will receive from peers, and the lack of training in proper assessment techniques.\textsuperscript{9} These are three broad problems with peer assessment that we have to account for when considering whether to use this pedagogical method in our classroom. In order to do so, we have to recognize the unifying dilemma with these three concerns: students do not see themselves and their peers as qualified to provide assessments of each other’s work. Students have significant concerns with the reliability and validity of the evaluations that their peers provide given that they do not see themselves or their classmates as ‘experts.’ As Julia Kaufman and Christina D. Schunn have found with online peer assessment, students will accept peer evaluations in tandem with those from instructors. However, students have difficulties accepting that their associates alone have the expertise to engage in the assessment of their writing.\textsuperscript{10} The implication here is that instructors have the expertise to engage in assessments whereas peers are perceived as lacking the training and skills to effectively evaluate their work. This empirical


finding extends beyond the online realm, and can undermine efforts to use peer assessment in the classroom as well. In part, the students perceived lack of expertise results from a lack of knowledge on how to evaluate. Sue Bloxhan and Amanda West state that while students need to understand assessment as an essential part of their education, this knowledge on how to evaluate work is not being fully transmitted during their coursework. 11 Hence, when students see themselves and their peers as unqualified to be experts, it increases the likelihood of their resistance to peer evaluation. That increased resistance, then, contributes to diminishing the effectiveness of peer assessment as a pedagogical tool. In order for instructors to use peer assessment in the classroom, we have to redress these concerns on lacking expertise to increase the effectiveness of the technique.

Next, we have to recognize that students have become adept at finding critical weaknesses without fully appreciating the larger value of ideas and the potential they offer for understanding. Being critical is important, but we have to encourage students that criticism in and of itself is not the sole hallmark of either an education, or the only purpose for developing critical thinking skills. In a recent New York Times article, Michael S. Roth stated that being critical, while highly valuable in the university setting, is insufficient to define an intellectual growth and holds little utility in the world outside of academia. 12 We have to inform students that critical, as we use it in the university, is much more the criticizing. Students should recognize the potential shortcomings of intellectual works, but they should also be able to take on the ideas presented to them to learn about the world. We have to encourage students to engage work as it stands to find its potential contributions and opportunities as well as its weaknesses. In order to


accomplish this, we first need to realize that students will likely understand peer assessment as being criticism. We have to help them broaden that understanding of critical thinking, and push them towards developing an appreciation of the work they are evaluating, in particular their peers’ writing. Otherwise, the students focus solely on criticism. Their peers will only receive ‘overly’ critical assessments of the weaknesses in their work without any attendant recognition of strengths or opportunities. Hence, the tendency of critical thinking to become merely criticism can increase the resistance of students to the use of peer evaluation techniques in the classroom.

These concerns can lead to resistance among students when we attempt to use peer assessment in the classroom. Though the literature has identified the potential problems in using peer assessment, it yet to provide some general guidelines and specific recommendations for overcoming these problems in the classroom. By recognizing that the source of resistance from students stems from their concerns over the reliability and validity of their peers, we have identified the first step in addressing the problem. Now, we need to draw on this knowledge to devise strategies and materials to overcome students’ resistance, and improve our use of peer assessment in the classroom.

**Possible Solutions for Peer Assessment**

By recognizing that students have difficulties trusting their peers as experts, we have to address this concern when using peer assessment in our courses. I offer some recommendations across three areas to help instructors implement this pedagogical method. First, I suggest that educators design courses that encourage students to become experts by narrowing the research material for their projects. Second, I recommend that instructors focus on students providing thorough evaluations rather than the grades for their peers. Third, I suggest that instructors adopt
SWOT analysis as the evaluation method for students. The following section further explains how to implement each of these three suggestions.

*Course Building & Narrowing the Focus*

In order for students to become experts in a field, I suggest that instructors limit the material from which students can generate their own project ideas to focus on a single academic or policy literature. All of the students would have access to this material in which to generate ideas for their research projects, and they would all use this literature as a basis to evaluate their peers’ projects. I would suggest allowing students to expand on this material, but requiring that the substantive focus stay within the literature provided. They must incorporate the materials provided and if necessary, they can build on that foundation through their own research. The purpose here is to give students an opportunity to become “experts” in a particular literature in order that they might more effectively evaluate their peers’ work.\(^{13}\) For example, in teaching a course on undergraduate research methodology the students will likely have to apply the methods taught in a substantive area. Rather than allowing the students to pick a subject, focus their attention on a single substantive literature in particular field. In this case, I might select the rationalist/bargaining theories of war as the focus for their research papers. Any literature for a substantive topic area would likely suffice. As long as it provides the students with an opportunity to engage in some academic debates as well as fruitful ideas for research projects. In the course, the students would be assigned a number of articles focusing solely on that subject. From these materials, they would have to develop projects.

\(^{13}\) An alternative to narrowing the material would be to encourage students to share their relevant materials used in their projects. This might prove invaluable for those students evaluating the project. However, doing so requires a significant increase in the amount of work students must accomplish before evaluating their peer. This approach might give the students more freedom academically in their projects, but it can diminish the possibility of developing experts and reduce the effectiveness of peer assessment.
There are several advantages to narrowing the material for students to use in their research papers. First, each student would have access to the same foundation of information regarding the previous scholarly literature on a specific topic. By limiting the range of material, the student does lose the ability to choose an area that might be of greater interest to them. But, the trade-off here is that the student – along with her classmates – has a single, unifying foundation that they can focus on and develop their expertise. Second, narrowing the literature also provides some incentives for students to do the work that is expected of them. If their classmates are all developing projects based off a single literature, and then evaluating each other based on that material, that awareness can increase the students’ incentives to do the work. Third, narrowing the literature may help address the problem between students’ focus on content in writing essays, and our focus as educators on the arguments they develop. Finally, as a further benefit, students can learn that there is more to scholarship than criticism. By narrowing the literature, students have to do more than criticize a perspective: they have to adopt that perspective and use it to generate their own ideas. I imagine that doing so will likely increase their awareness of a particular literature to the point of improving their quality of their research projects as well as their assessments of peers.

As experts ourselves, we need to help the students with some cues on how to develop their expertise. How did we, as teaching scholars, become experts in our respective fields? We read the relevant material, and we struggled to understand it in a meaningful sense. As scholars, we each had different methods to overcome that struggle: note-taking, highlighting/margins, extensive outlines, literature trees, literature reviews, etc. If we want students to develop their expertise for the course, I suggest having students turn in notes on materials required for a

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project, or at least for a few of the materials. Many students know the importance of creating an outline to focus their attention. Yet, relatively few students have honed this skill to the point of being comfortable reading through the assigned material, and writing up their understanding in a systematic fashion. Again, this method here also sends a signal to the other students: if everyone has to turn in notes, or examples of outlines, the perception of whether a peer has the expertise to engage in an effective evaluation can be altered.

A final issue when designing a course that uses peer evaluation concerns the timing of assignments. Students need sufficient time to become experts in the literature, and they also need time to develop their research projects. The most important part here is that students also need time to evaluate their peers’ work. The instructor has to insure that the students have sufficient time to produce quality research, but also the students need sufficient time to develop strong assessments of their peer’s work.\footnote{A further extension here can be that the students have an opportunity to respond and incorporate the evaluations of their peers in a final draft for the end of the course. I acknowledge that it would certainly be a viable and attractive possibility to further the students’ understanding of the research process. However, it could push too much into a single course and that can lead to an overload in learning that diminishes the effectiveness of the method. See David Boud, Ruth Cohen, and Jane Sampson. 1999. Peer Learning and Assessment. \textit{Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education} Vol. 24 (4): 413-426.} As noted in the next section, developing a thorough evaluation will likely take time on the evaluator’s part.

\textit{Defying the Game}

I strongly suspect that undergraduate students view peer assessment as a classic game of prisoner’s dilemma.\footnote{The classic statement on this remains Robert Axelrod. 1984. \textit{The Evolution of Cooperation}. New York: Basic Books.} Both the assessor and the assessed want to do well on their respective projects. Just like the prisoners in separate rooms, they want to receive the maximum payoff for their efforts. If they both cooperate, then both students can receive better payoffs, or in this case, grades for their work. I am not suggesting that undergraduate students are engaging in extensive
collusion outside of the classroom, or that they have more nefarious intentions that led to some back room negotiations. Instead, I am suggesting that the students want to perform well, and they might be concerned about reciprocity when engaging in peer assessment. We cannot stop communicate among students by locking them away in separate integration rooms. However, we can mitigate their interests to cooperate by redesigning the game.

I suggest first, that instructors grade the evaluation that students provide. Students already have questions regarding the grade, or mark, that we assign their work. They want to know why they received a particular score as opposed to some other, and rightly so, they should raise questions about how we evaluated their work. With peer assessment, we do not necessarily want the students to focus on a grade. Instead, we want students to focus on the feedback they receive from their peers, and the quality of that feedback. I think letting the students grade each other’s work is more than we should ask when using peer assessment in the classroom. As Ngar-Fun Liu and David Carless have found, actually having the students assign their peers grades can result in a lost opportunity for valuable feedback and exchange of ideas.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, I strongly suggest that when using peer assessment, that educators do not grant assign the evaluator the responsibility of giving a grade to her peer.

Sue Bloxhan and Amanda West suggest moving beyond giving the students criteria for grading, and by providing an evaluation of the peer assessment that reflects on its strength and weaknesses.\textsuperscript{18} If we are to use peer assessment, we should have the evaluator focusing on writing a solid evaluation of her peer’s work. To encourage that, then, the evaluator does not assign a grade. Instead, the student provides well written evaluation for a peer. It diminishes the focus on


\textsuperscript{18} Sue Bloxhan and Amanda West. 2004.
a single grade, and hopefully increases a more holistic response to the assessment itself. As instructors, we can then grade the peer assessment to increase the students’ incentives for learning how to evaluate another’s work, and we can grade the student’s response to an evaluation in order to see how she handles feedback. In part, then, this also helps alleviate some concerns about whether students will feel compelled to provide higher marks for their classmates.

Using a Method: SWOT Analysis

A further, necessary component for conducting a peer evaluation in the classroom is choosing a method for the students to follow when assessing their classmates. Students recognize that their concern of whether they have the expertise for evaluating their peers stems from a lack of training and guidance in how to assess their classmate’s work. In order to overcome that obstacle, instructors should establish the methodology for the evaluation, and provide some training in how to evaluate their peers’ work. Logically, then, we need a methodology for students to engage in peer assessment. It is an excellent pedagogical tool for instructors to develop a number of skills, but to use it successfully we need another tool for students to understand how to assess their peers. This aspect of peer evaluation is critical if instructors want students to accept their peer’s feedback as reliable and valid. We have to match expertise in material with training for evaluation in order to make peer assessment an effective pedagogical tool.

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19 As a side note, I am agnostic as to whether the instructor evaluates the initial work as provided for peer assessment. I think many of us would be tempted to, and perhaps that would be beneficial for the parties involved. However, it might also be fruitful to evaluate the final product from a student, and then compare that against the peer evaluation. I think that decision is best left to each individual instructor.

20 Dochy, F., M. Segers, and D. Sluijsmans. 1999. The authors take this recommendation a step further: they contend that students should participate in the selection of an evaluation method for peer assessment. I am not entirely sure how one would do this, especially if the students have no experience with evaluations.
Here, I purpose that instructors use a technique commonly known in the business world as SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) analysis.\textsuperscript{21} I think most of us might recognize SWOT, or some variation of the methodology in another form or name. Students themselves might also recognize SWOT analysis (or a variant of it). In brief, SWOT provides four categories for organizing information. It requires students to recognize the internal advantages and disadvantages of a project while recognizing its external potential and limitations.

The question then is why should instructors of international politics use SWOT analysis with peer assessments? I contend that SWOT analysis provides a relatively efficient methodology for students to learn as an introduction to conducting evaluations for several reasons. First, there are many real world examples of SWOT that across over into international business that educators can use to demonstrate the importance of learning this method. Here, I have included one such example: a recent report by the Universal Postal Union on financial inclusion serves as an excellent case in point where the international organization engaged in extensive SWOT analysis.\textsuperscript{22} Students should find such examples easy to engage, and valuable enough to understand why learning how to SWOT in the classroom will improve their skills for the professional world. In addition, these examples should serve to reinforce that learning this method now can provide students with a skill that will serve them beyond earning a grade in the

\textsuperscript{21} SWOT analysis is certainly not the only method for students to use for peer evaluations. I am sure that alternative methodologies for evaluations are available and could demonstrate an equal utility for students. Here, I want to accomplish two things. First, I want to insure that instructors adopt a method when using peer evaluation in the classroom. Without a method for the students, the likelihood of resistance will certainly increase and that effectively decreases the usefulness of peer assessment. Second, SWOT analysis allows us as instructors to introduce some interdisciplinary work into our courses as well as applicable skill training. If we want to encourage students to be interdisciplinary, one way to accomplish that is to demonstrate how our work and their classes cut across different subject materials.

classroom. If we want to encourage students to engage in the learning process, we should demonstrate that what we teach has implications beyond the classroom.

A second advantage in teaching the students how to SWOT is that the method incorporates the critical thinking skills that we want students to embrace. We can all recognize that SWOT analysis provides students with a relatively basic system for evaluating peers. It seems straightforward: identify the four components in a clear and concise manner relatively to a peer’s project. The demanding aspect of a SWOT analysis is actually conducting one. Students have these four categories, but each evaluator will have to apply their ‘expertise’ to understanding the project on its terms. That requires students to observe the evidence in the relevant narrowed literature, to place the project within that literature’s context, and to establish how they judged the project relative to the previous literature. The evaluation, then, should encourage the students to pursue clarity, credibility, and precision in their analysis. The SWOT analysis pairs well with the idea of narrowing the literature as it gives students an opportunity to simulate expertise and to understand how experts operate.

By using an evaluation method such as SWOT for peer assessment, we also inform students as to what will be the evaluation criteria. We want students to think about the consequences of their work, how will certain ideas be received, what benefit this project could provide, etc. By establishing the evaluation method upfront, students can anticipate and craft their work accordingly. Thus, we encourage students to plan ahead on how their classmates might see their project. We create an environment in which students have relatively clear expectations on how to develop their work. Thereby, we encourage independent thinking in how they plan out their projects and anticipate their peers’ responses.
In addition, SWOT analysis helps the students develop beyond being mere criticizers, and pushes them into learning a tool that they can use in numerous ways as they grow into it.\textsuperscript{23} As mentioned earlier, students are frequently caught in the trap of learning to criticize work without considering its larger implications for politics, business, life, etc. A SWOT analysis might mitigate that tendency to focus on criticism, as the students have to identify both the strengths and opportunities for a peer’s project for two reasons. First, students have to adopt the perspective of SWOT analysis. Some might recognize the limitations of the method, but we want students to focus on applying it and learning what a SWOT analysis has to offer them before they dismiss it as an intellectual tool. Second, in order to carry through the evaluation, students have to adopt the perspective of their peers and find the value that a project brings into discussing a subject. It is an important aspect of critical thinking, and one that we can help students develop through peer assessment when we match it with a methodology for evaluation.

Second, I think using SWOT follows a suggestion made by David Boud in that we want students to engage in a practice he refers to as “sustainable assessment.” Rather than having students learn a particular method for a single course, we want to encourage students to develop skills in a course that will carry over into future course work. SWOT provides just that function as a tool for sustainable assessment. Students can learn the basics of how to SWOT in the classroom, and then have that method to use later in their academic as well as professional careers.\textsuperscript{24} SWOT analysis provides an easy, yet important foundation for establishing assessment skills that students can then carry over into both their personal and professional lives.

\textsuperscript{23} The SWOT method provides guidelines on how to think about evaluating a project, but it does not establish specific measures for each of the four criteria. Miller has found that more specific measures can improve the evaluation of work when students are providing scores and grades on projects. See Peter J. Miller. 2003. The Effect of Scoring Criteria Specificity on Peer and Self-Assessment. \textit{Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education} Vol. 28 (4): 383-394.

Some might want to criticize me for going corporate, by taking a methodology that is traditionally practiced in business and turning it loose on future specialists in international relations. I think, however, that international relations as a discipline has to adapt to the demand of employers for individuals with transferable skills. I think that SWOT is something that has a lot of potential for a number of different areas. If our students majoring in international politics can effectively use SWOT, then they can be competitively in the business world. As the example cited above demonstrates, our students could also use SWOT analysis when working with international organizations. The method has multiple applications, and I think that is invaluable for students to have skills that work well in a number of different environments. We know that business and politics frequently intersect. By bringing in SWOT analysis, we give our students a more interdisciplinary approach to politics. At the same time, our students can then present themselves as understanding some of the basic tools of business that they can use while also bringing in political perspective. By explicitly introducing SWOT, we teach our students a reliable methodology for assessment as well as giving them an introduction to topics that are related and frequently intertwined with international relations.

In order to effectively use SWOT, we also need to include some time in the course for students to learn how to use the method. Though we might think it is an intuitive approach, students need some basic instruction in how to use the methodology effectively. In turn, this helps establish what we as instructors will expect in their peer evaluations. Even if an instructor is not using SWOT, she should expect to spend some time helping the students understand the basic functions and procedures for evaluating their peers. As noted, students often see the lack of training in peer assessment as a missing element. By not offering some lessons, we undermine their confidence to act as experts who can engage in reliable and valid evaluations. Instructors
can include lectures on the subject, as well as using examples that the students can review both in class as part of the instruction. Following the example of the Universal Postal Union, we could encourage students to develop graphs that distill the basic points of their SWOT analysis into the four categories in combination with written evaluations. It might seem rote to students, however, it develops the discipline to think in the method.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I sought to address three major points related to the use of peer evaluations in the classroom, and to generating a positive environment for ‘assessment among associates.’ First, the paper has offered a defense of peer evaluation as a valuable pedagogical method for generating collaboration among students in the classroom. Second, the paper has identified an essential problem in the method: students’ perception that they lack the expertise to engage in reliable and valid evaluations. As instructors, we have to design courses in such a way as to help students become experts in order to overcome their perceptions. Finally, I have offered three strategies for more effectively incorporating peer evaluation into our classrooms.
References


