ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF PEER REVIEW

Peer review is, arguably, one of the more important skills that we expect of our students. In the early stages of their studies with us, students can find the concept of critiquing their fellow student's work challenging and uncomfortable, but being employed in the creative arena, as we hope a lot of our students will be, their work will often be subjected to public scrutiny. As they say, everyone's a critic. To prepare students for this, our programmes encourage the development of critical thinking and we expect our students to evaluate the work of their peers. Whether it's performing a scene in an acting workshop, a short solo recital in a performance class, reading aloud the latest chapter for a creative writing workshop or passing a critical eye over the performance of a TV studio production team, PME students are expected to have a well informed, reasoned opinion both of the work of their peers and their own creative outputs.

As academics, we understand the value of peer review, however the practicalities of it can challenge the best of intentions. Let's say you want 200 level 4 students to begin the process of peer reviewing a short article. First, you need to provide them with a framework upon which they can form their opinions. For it to be a fair assessment you feel the review should be anonymous both for the reviewer and the reviewed. And to ensure a broader view on the work, you're going to ask each student to review two peer works. That all seems reasonable until you consider the amount of effort needed to take in the work, make it anonymous where necessary and allocate it randomly to students, and then there's collecting the reviews in and distributing them back to the original authors. How are you going to keep track of who has submitted and who hasn't? Who has completed their peer reviews and who hasn't? So, prepare yourself for lots of time with checklists and piles upon piles of paper. Unless there's another way? This is where Moodle comes in, and in particular the Moodle Workshop activity. It's fair to say that this activity is probably one of the least used in Moodle at BCU. Possibly, this is due to the rather complex looking screens, which are a little off-putting at first. However, once you get your head around it, Moodle workshop can ease the admin drudgery in peer review and make the process simple for both staff and students.

Beyond Basics

Workshop uses phases to decide what action needs to be done when. The first of these is the setup phase. Here, you define the purpose of the workshop, the instructions to your students on what they need to submit for review and the assessment framework that will guide them through the assessment process. The assessment form consists of a number of weighted aspects, and each aspect has a grading element. These grades can be numeric or scales such as a simple pass/fail. To further help your students, you can add an example submission, which they can complete prior to submitting their own work or starting their reviews. Once your setup is complete, you'll want students to upload their work and this is done in the submission phase, which is also responsible for allocating students to work to review. This can either be manual – you chose who reviews what – or random – Moodle allocates the reviews to students. This last method can be scheduled allowing it to occur at a specific time.
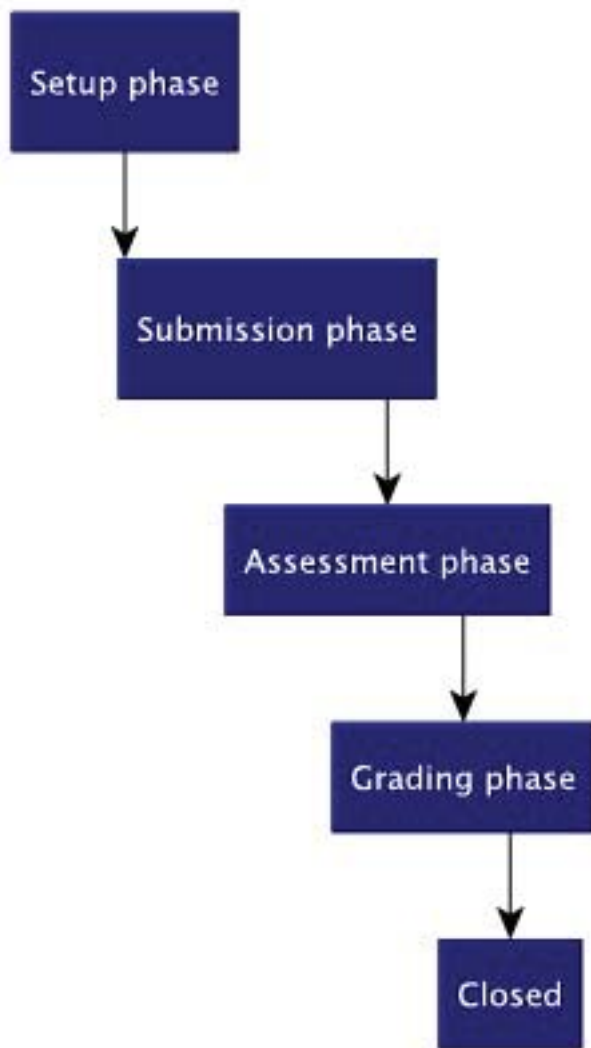
Figure 1: The phases of a Moodle Workshop

Following on from submission the next step is to commence the peer review process in the assessment phase.

By making use of the framework that you have previously provided, students now begin their peer reviews. The penultimate phase is the grading phase. The grading mechanism behind the Moodle Workshop is complex, but don't let that put you off. You don't have to use it, but if you want to see what it can do there is plenty of information in MoodleDocs (http://docs.moodle.org) — the documentation website for all things Moodle. So, I'll skip over that for now and go straight to the final phase, closed. At this point grades and feedback comments are released, as is any additional support material you want to add to round off the workshop. So, how does all this work in a real life situation?

A Working Example

In Approaches to Reading: Criticism, a level 4 module in the School of English, students are expected to create three short blog-like articles which require the student to: apply critical and cultural theory from class based activities, to be able to communicate effectively and to write academically and in a scholarly fashion. To help to prepare them for the exercise, prior to each blog we ask them to submit a shorter blog post on a different topic already covered in the module. These are then peer-reviewed using the Moodle Workshop activity. I asked Dr Sarah Wood, Head of School of English and Module Leader for Approaches to Reading for her initial thoughts on how the process had worked:

The Workshops have a dual benefit: they allow students the opportunity to formulate a structured response to concepts raised in the lectures and seminars in a formative learning environment, whilst also applying detailed assessment criteria to their peers' work. This then enables a clear and structured understanding of what is required in their summative assessment. Signposting the links between this formative workshop and their summative assessment has made the workshop immediately relevant to students and initial feedback seems positive.

This is the first time we have used this feature of Moodle and the initial reaction has been positive. Student engagement for the first task was high and the standard of reviews was encouraging. We ran into trouble on the second task as this coincided with the sign-on system problems that prevent our students accessing Moodle.

This, in turn, knocked confidence in the system for both students and staff, and is a timely reminder that as we make wider use of technology in our teaching practice the infrastructure needed to support it needs to be robust.