

Using Peer Assessment to Improve Literature Reviews in Economics

Julie K. Smith
Department of Economics
Lafayette College
Easton PA 18042
Phone: 610-330-5301
Fax: 610-330-5715
Email: smithjk@lafayette.edu

Writing comprehensive and well-organized literature reviews in economics is a difficult task for most undergraduate students. Students must gather, organize and synthesize large amounts of information from the academic literature. Professors, given limited time, cannot effectively provide feedback to all students on their literature reviews. I developed a peer assessment form to give students additional feedback about their literature review from another student in the class.

The literature review is one of several writing assignments that my students have in an upper division Money and Banking course. From the students' perspective this is the most difficult writing assignment because they chose their own topic, find the relevant academic articles and finally, synthesize those articles into a 10 page review of their topic. Most students at Lafayette College can find a topic and the articles but then fail to efficiently organize and synthesize the information that they have gathered.

After numerous semesters where students turned in poorly crafted literature reviews I developed a peer assessment form. The form contains some questions which use a Likert scale and others which require written responses. I randomly assign students to pairs and the students have one week to read their partners draft and complete the form. Additionally, I give the students 15 minutes of class time to discuss their drafts. Finally, as a class we discuss any remaining questions.

Assessing the effectiveness of this teaching innovation is difficult because different students are enrolled each semester and the topics the students choose change as well. Most students effectively use the Likert scale questions; however, a few students could do with some additional explanation. The comments on the open-ended questions vary considerably. The better students in the class are able to make comments that are useful to their classmate. Generally when I read over the comments I agree with them. Other students make weak comments that are unfocused much like their own writing. For these students I need to find a more productive way for them to contribute to helping their peer's writing.

Quantitative empirical evidence that the peer assessment is improving the students' literature reviews is practically non-existent at this point. I have used the peer assessment survey in one semester, Spring 2010. I have not taught this course since. In addition my grading of students' papers has changed; therefore, it is not easy to compare grades given on papers from earlier semesters to the Spring 2010 semester. The qualitative evidence, which is based on my own judgment, suggests that the peer assessment does improve the writing. It provides the students feedback and clears up lower-order issues such as grammar and sentence structure. It does not as currently designed address higher-order writing issues such as organization and synthesis. Going forward, I plan to modify the peer assessment form to attempt to address these higher-order issues.

3. The style is efficient, not wordy or unclear.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all

Completely

4. There are clear transitions and connections between the parts of the paper.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all

Completely

5. The literature review correctly uses economic terms and concepts.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all

Completely

6. The literature review synthesizes/integrates the economic ideas from different sources.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all

Completely

7. What did you think the author did best in this paper?

8. What did you find most frustrating about this paper?

9. What is the **one thing** you would have the author work on in revision?