Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

An Agency of the Government of Ontario

Stakeholder Summary

Peer- and self-assessment build community in large classes

A common criticism of large classes is that they are impersonal and restrict opportunities for students to interact with instructors and classmates. A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that a learning technology based on peer- and self-assessment can help students feel more connected to the course content, the instructor and fellow students.

Project description

By design, technologies using peer-assessment divide a large class into smaller subgroups that are trying to help one another improve, say the authors of *Building a Sense of Community in Large-Sized Classes via Peer- and Self-Assessment.* They theorized that although such technologies were not created specifically to enhance community, they might well serve that purpose in a large-class setting.

The study examined the effects of peer- and self-assessment on students' perceptions of community in a 1,600-student introductory psychology course at the University of Toronto, Scarborough (UTSC). The course used peerScholar, an online program developed at UTSC's Advanced Learning Technologies Lab that incorporates peer- and self-assessment in writing, evaluating and reflecting on course assignments.

A series of experiments conducted before and after students used peerScholar gauged their overall sense of community, based on the results of a Community of Inquiry questionnaire. The survey examines three spheres of community: cognitive presence (course content), social presence (fellow students) and teaching presence (the instructor).

Findings

On average, students who participated in peer- and self-assessment had a more positive outlook about being part of a community. The study found that sense of community as defined by the three forms of presence was significantly higher when measured after the peer-assessment activity.

A previous HEQCO report found that technologies using peer assessment also increased critical thinking skills. The authors say that such technologies might be particularly beneficial in the first years of postsecondary education, when classes tend to be the largest – providing students with a solid foundation in critical thought and sense of community. The authors also suggest that upper-year courses with smaller class sizes might be enriched by incorporating these technologies. "Large classes may become the engine of educational innovation more generally, which would be beneficial for all students at all levels."

Authors of *Building a Sense of Community in Large-Sized Classes via Peer- and Self-Assessment* are Dwayne E. Paré, Lisa-Marie Collimore, Steve Joordens, Carol Rolheiser, Robert Brym and Garfield Gini-Newman, University of Toronto.