



## Students as Partners in Assessment (SaPiA)

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**In this case study, the author outlines the development of an institutional approach to embedding student partnership in assessment practices, known as SaPiA. The Teaching Enhancement Unit in DCU undertook a broad literature review and scoping exercise to shape definitions and understandings of SaPiA that could then be used to shape staff-student projects within disciplinary units.**

### Introduction and Context

Our SaPiA project grew out of some work that the Teaching Enhancement Unit did on an Erasmus+ project called INTEGRITY with four European partners, led by our Georgian partner, Ilia State University. Our role in the project was to develop supports for academic staff and to promote academic integrity. One of the key outputs from our work was the development of a suite of 12 principles for designing assessments to promote academic integrity. We divided them into three categories, the third one of which was “Student Ownership”. The thinking behind this category is that involving students in their assessment encourages them to act with integrity as they feel a sense of ownership.

This project came to a close in 2019, around the same time that we became acutely aware of a number of converging trends and developments. Within the national and international higher education sector, we recognised the growing discussion and focus being directed at staff-student partnerships and student co-creation. The work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education shone a light on both enhancing assessment and on engaging students as partners, as did that of NStEP. Similarly, work was gathering pace outside and inside DCU to embed universal design for learning practices in our teaching, learning and assessment to enhance student experience. All of this motivated the TEU to partner with DCU Students’ Union to make a submission for internal funding to develop some resources and capacity to help our academics and students to partner together in assessment.

Our previous work and external influences told us that involving students in assessment, partnering with them, working with them as co-creators, is good for academic integrity, universal design and overall learning achievement. But we wanted to move beyond this and to figure out: What does partnership look like in assessment? What practices foster partnership in assessment? How can we support staff and students to come together in assessment?

## Project Outline

Our first step in this project was to conduct a literature scoping review to determine what is out there already related to student partnership and assessment. The TEU and DCUSU employed a graduate research assistant for this task. To structure our literature search we used the PICO model (Schardt et al, 2007): the Population, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome approach. This model is used commonly in evidence-based medicine research as a specialized framework to formulate search terms. Our initial literature search produced over 200 results which were screened and reduced to 14 core papers. A fifteenth, written by a project team member, was then added. The literature review also provided contextual commentary on the broader trends influencing student partnerships, mentioned previously. The literature review synthesized three core themes. The role of self and peer assessment was prominent in the literature, with lots of examples of how that can happen. The second theme was involving students in aspects of designing assessment criteria and tasks for designing rubrics. The third theme was around students acting as collaborative graders with other stakeholders in the grading process.

It was important for us to distil this already focussed, practical literature review into a simple, straightforward guiding resource for students and staff to use to get them started with assessment partnership. The three core themes and their practices were mapped along a 'continuum of partnership possibilities', a broad framework to give staff and students suggestions in how to come together in partnership. These possibilities range from low-level partnerships to high-level partnerships. We felt it was important to present it in this manner, as partnership is a journey in which staff and students become more adept over time. Furthermore, there can be a sense of unease or risk for staff in students in coming together in this way, particularly if they have no prior experience. This continuum presents a 'safe' pathway in which to grow together in assessment partnership.

In collaboration with NStEP and a student focus group co-ordinated by DCUSU, we captured the student voice on assessment. We incorporated their perspectives into the guiding resource, which were: Dialogue, Direction, Fairness, Learner Agency. We bookended the resource with their advice to both staff and fellow students around getting involved in assessment partnership and making it a success.

Across two academic years, we then recruited modules to pilot one or more of these assessment partnership approaches and evaluated their impact with students and staff. The pilots were:

### Year 1

- Computer science: Choice in assessment mode and topic
- Economics: Peer review in student-led tutorials
- Early childhood education: Choice of assignment, material, group composition, co-creation of grading rubric
- French language: Peer review and peer assessment
- History: Co-creation of quiz questions
- Human resource management: Choice of topic with formative feedback
- Politics: Peer assessment of a peer's draft essay, before final submission

### Year 2

- Aviation: Co-creation of marking criteria and peer review
- Digital Business: Peer assessment
- Education: Choice of group project format and group peer review
- Marketing: Peer reviews
- Physical Education: Co-creation of rubric, choice of formats in e-portfolio
- Science and Engineering: Group and individual peer assessment
- Social Science: Choice of paper and presentation topic and submission date
- Sociology: Choice of essay and poster topic

All outputs from this project are available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence, at [www.dcu.ie/teu/sapia](http://www.dcu.ie/teu/sapia). They are freely available for students and staff at other institutions to use, adopt, remix and more.

## Reflections

Having received ethical approval from DCU Research Ethics Committee, the pilots in each year were evaluated by way of an anonymous survey to staff and students involved in participating modules. At present, the year 2 data is under analysis, therefore the year 1 findings are presented here.

Extract from student findings:

- Felt involved and engaged in the assessment: **78%** strongly agree or agree
- Understood requirements of the assessment: **73%** strongly agree or agree
- Felt my assessment was integrated: **70%** strongly agree or agree
- Satisfied with assessment approach: **66%** strongly agree or agree
- Felt assessment was fair: **67%** strongly agree or agree
- Felt I had input or voice: **60%** strongly agree or agree
- Felt I performed well because of involvement: **64%** strongly agree or agree

Some comments from the student respondents include:

**“We were treated like adults”**

**“It was interactive and I felt more involved in this module than my other modules which allowed me to better enjoy and want to do better in it”**

**“...pulls away from the traditional learning off by heart”**

Open-ended comments from the student respondents mentioned how they appreciated the novelty of the particular partnership approach utilised, and the variety supported engagement. As peer review and assessment were used quite extensively, students commented that they enjoyed the process of seeing other’s work and reflecting on it and in turn reflecting on their own work. Students also mentioned the need to remain acutely aware of assessment workload and expectation, especially when it comes to group assessment.

These experiences of both the students and staff involved suggest that the variety of assessment partnership practices synthesised from the literature have a positive impact on both parties. Nonetheless, there is room for improvement, particularly around managing the student workload and expectations arising from assessment. It is also important to ensure the right partnership approach is chosen for the level at which the staff and students are at. For example, it might be wise for staff and students to co-create grading rubrics after students have had some experience of completing assessment, and not when they are new students to the institution. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to deeper integrate assessment partnership practices in modules and programmes, building on the positive experiences in these pilots. A deeper integration would spread the benefits of staff-student partnership further afield, and contribute to the building of a culture of partnership within assessment and other practices of the university.

## Reference List

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