

CHAPTER 3

PEER EVALUATION IN INTERPROFESSIONAL GROUP WORK TO FOSTER EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE HEALTH SCIENCES STUDENTS

¹. R Koch / ². Y Heymans

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¹. Centre for Health Professions Education
Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa
rhea.koch@nwu.ac.za
ORCID: 0000-0003-2398-9475

². Centre for Health Professions Education
Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa
yolande.heyman@nwu.ac.za
ORCID: 0000-0003-4459-2266

Abstract

To function effectively in a healthcare landscape, health professions educators must prepare students with the necessary interpersonal skills to work effectively in a multidisciplinary team. Despite the ongoing emphasis on interprofessional education (IPE) in health sciences, the development of interpersonal skills remains a challenge. Although peer evaluation has the potential to enhance experiential learning and foster interpersonal competencies, exploring students' perceptions of the use of peer evaluation to foster experiential learning remains underexplored in health professions education. Grounded in an interpretive paradigm, data in this qualitative research were collected using an open-ended reflection activity at the end of the academic semester. The study population comprised all students registered for a compulsory, second-year, interprofessional module in the Faculty of Health Sciences at a university in South Africa (N: 1734). A total of 1145 students consented to the use of their responses in the reflection activity for research purposes. Findings from the thematic analysis reveal that students moved through each stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle in a meaningful way. The responses suggest that peer evaluation did not just assess performance; it became part of the learning itself. It helped students see more clearly what good group work looks like and gave them the chance to grow their own interprofessional skills. By framing peer evaluation as an active learning process rather than merely an assessment tool, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how students engage with and learn from peer evaluation. Addressing a gap in health professions education literature, this study explores undergraduate healthcare students' perceptions of using peer evaluation within interprofessional group work (IPGW) to foster experiential learning.

Keywords: peer evaluation, peer learning, interprofessional group work, peer review, experiential learning, undergraduate health sciences students.

1 Introduction and background

To function in a collaborative, real-world healthcare setting requires more than disciplinary expertise (Volmink, 2018). The healthcare landscape is marked by complexity, interdependence, and shared responsibility; therefore, health professions educators must prepare healthcare students with the necessary interpersonal skills to communicate respectfully, work across professional boundaries, and provide constructive peer feedback (Barr & Gray, 2013). As health professions education continues to shift toward competency-based and collaborative care, there is increasing recognition that interpersonal skills must be explicitly taught, scaffolded, and practised in authentic, interdisciplinary learning environments (Patel et al., 2025).

This study was conducted within the context of a large, undergraduate online module offered by the Faculty of Health Sciences at a South African university. The module has over 1,500 students and aims to foster interprofessional collaboration, allowing students from 14 healthcare disciplines to learn from, with and about one another during the theoretical and practical component. A central feature of the practical component is the Interprofessional Group work (IPGW) activity, in which the students are placed in groups of five, each representing a different healthcare discipline. Over a period of four months, and using Google Sites, interprofessional group members work together to design a fictitious, yet contextually grounded wellness clinic website that addresses a health-related issue of their choosing. Group work allows students to apply their disciplinary knowledge to a work-related context and also enables the development of interpersonal skills such as effective communication, cooperation, contribution and attitude, and accountability (Fellenz, 2006). While the value of group work as a teaching strategy is widely confirmed in research, challenges persist in implementing peer evaluation and feedback effectively within group work (Francis et al., 2025; Ion et al., 2023).

Also grappling with these challenges associated with peer evaluation and feedback, this chapter reports on the perceptions of undergraduate

healthcare students at a higher education institution in South Africa on the use of peer evaluation within interprofessional group work to foster experiential learning.

Drawing from the work of Topping (2009), peer evaluation refers to a structured process in which individuals assess the contributions, behaviours, and performance of their peers within a collaborative setting. In health professions education, peer evaluation serves as both an assessment and learning tool that fosters accountability, promotes self- and other-awareness, and develops interpersonal competencies such as giving and receiving constructive feedback (Senden & Coertjens, 2024). When implemented thoughtfully, peer evaluation encourages students to reflect on group dynamics, recognise diverse contributions, and take ownership of their role in group success. It also prepares students for real-world professional environments where peer evaluation and feedback are integral to team-based care, quality improvement, and lifelong learning (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020).

To support the development of competencies associated with peer evaluation and feedback, the design of the peer evaluation activities was informed by Kolb's experiential learning theory. The peer evaluation component was facilitated using TEAMMATES, an online system to facilitate peer evaluation and feedback in group work developed by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL) at the National University of Singapore (TEAMMATES, n.d., www.teammatesv4.appspot.com). Over the course of two rounds, students assess their fellow group members in terms of key collaborative dimensions such as attitude, contribution, cooperation, communication, and accountability. In addition, students were also required to provide constructive feedback to their fellow group members on how they could improve their interpersonal skills (see Annexure A for screenshots of the TEAMMATES interface).

2 Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was developed by David Kolb (Kolb & Kolb, 2006). ELT puts the learner and the learner's lived experiences at the

centre of the learning process (Kolb, 1984). As illustrated in Figure 3.1, Kolb (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) argues that at the heart of ELT is the Experiential Learning Cycle, which consists of four interrelated stages, namely Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE).

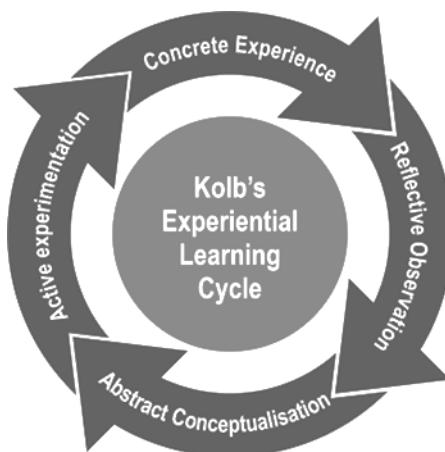


Figure 3.1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Adopted from Kolb and Kolb (2017))

Stage 1 in the Experiential Learning Cycle refers to Concrete Experience (CE), where learning takes place through direct, tangible experience, e.g., what the student does. Kolb and Kolb (2018) argue that it is the experience itself and the fact that the learner is pushed outside his/her comfort zone that enables learning to occur.

The second stage in the Experiential Learning Cycle is Reflective Observation (RO). In this stage, the student moves from an active participant in the experience to an observer (Kolb, 2015), and learning takes place by reflecting on that experience from multiple perspectives. In addition, reflecting on their experience lays the foundation for deeper understanding (Youngcharoen & Piyakhachornrot, 2024).

Stage three of the Experiential Learning Cycle entails Abstract Conceptualisation (AC). During stage three, the learner interprets his/her reflection and begins to make sense of the experience by forming new ideas,

theories and concepts. According to Kolb (2015), this is where the learner thinks critically about what happened and why, connecting his/her RO to existing knowledge to develop a broader insight which could inform future actions (Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Kolb, 2015; Youngcharoen & Piyakhachornrot, 2024).

Stage four in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle focuses on Active Experimentation (AE), and during this stage, learners apply what they have learned, which entails, but is not limited to, testing new ideas or approaches in real-world situations, using the insights gained from the previous stages to guide their actions and to generate new experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Youngcharoen & Piyakhachornrot, 2024).

According to Kolb and Kolb (2018), learning is not a linear process of transmitting knowledge but a continuous cycle of creating knowledge as learners move through all four stages in the Experiential Learning Cycle. By unpacking, examining and testing their existing ways of knowing, being and doing, students refine and deepen their understanding (Kolb, 2015). According to Kolb and Kolb (2006), many scholars acknowledge the successes of using experiential learning in skills development. Kolb and Kolb (2018) emphasise that experiential learning requires careful planning to ensure a balance between content and the learning process. During the design of the IPGW activity, which entailed group members evaluating each other and providing constructive feedback aimed at enhancing interpersonal skills, the lecturers designed and structured the learning activity around Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Engaging in peer evaluation and asking the students to provide constructive feedback students learned through a direct and tangible experience (CE). Upon receiving their peers' constructive feedback, students reflected on their feedback and experience (RO), which allowed them to identify what they did that worked, what did not work, why what they did worked or did not work and what they needed to focus on to improve their interpersonal skills (AC). In the subsequent group tasks, students were encouraged to experiment actively with new strategies and approaches based on these new insights (AE). By integrating two rounds of peer evaluation within a broader cycle of group activities, the IPGW design created another

opportunity for students to again learn and deepen their understanding of interprofessional peer evaluation and give constructive feedback by being guided through the four stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

3 Problem statement

Despite the growing emphasis on interprofessional education (IPE) in health sciences, the development of interpersonal skills such as giving and receiving constructive feedback remains a persistent challenge, particularly within group-based learning contexts. Within the context of this study, the authors argue that in IPGW, students often struggle with evaluating fellow group members and providing constructive feedback to enhance interpersonal skills. Although peer evaluation has the potential to enhance experiential learning and foster essential interpersonal competencies, students' perceptions exploring the use of peer evaluation to foster experiential learning remain underexplored in health professions education. This study addresses this gap by reporting on the perceptions of undergraduate healthcare students at a higher education institution in South Africa on the use of peer evaluation within IPGW to foster experiential learning.

4 Research design and methodology

4.1 Research design

This study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm which focuses on understanding how people make sense of their experiences. This aligns with this study, as students perceive working in interprofessional groups, evaluating their fellow group members, and giving constructive feedback differently. A qualitative approach was therefore chosen to collect and analyse data to provide insight into how undergraduate health sciences students at a higher education institution in South Africa experienced peer evaluation within IPGW to foster experiential learning.

4.2 Population and sampling

The study population comprised all students registered for a compulsory, second-year, interprofessional module in the Faculty of Health Sciences at a comprehensive, multi-campus university in South Africa (N:1734). Using non-probability and voluntary sampling allowed all students an equal opportunity to participate. After being fully informed about the intended research, 1145 students (n:1145) consented to the use of their responses in the reflection activity being used for research purposes.

4.3 Data collection

Data collection commenced after approval by the Health Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty (NWU-00187-21-A1) and the Institutional Research Data Gatekeepers Committee (NWU-GK-21-026). Students were asked to respond to the reflective question: *“Please share your thoughts on the peer-reviews, not only to evaluate each member's contribution to the team, but also to help you enhance your teamwork skills?”* Students' responses were collected using QuestionPro, a web-based software programme for administering online surveys.

4.4 Data analysis

To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the collected data were deidentified and any identifiable information removed. Data were thematically analysed using ATLAS.ti 23, a qualitative data analysis software, and was guided by the steps of Creswell and Clark (2018) and the principles of Tesch (1990). After preparing the data, the authors engaged with the data to familiarise themselves with the content, noting their initial thoughts on the data. Data were deductively analysed using the four stages in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Mindfully analysing the participants' reflections, the authors linked the related text to a code. For text segments that could not be linked to an initial code, the authors created new codes (Tesch, 1990). Using the networking functionality in ATLAS.ti 23, the researcher linked the codes to sub-themes and sub-themes to themes. Lastly, the researchers discussed the findings to make meaning of the data.

Co-coding was used to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the research.

5 Findings and discussion

In this study, a research question guided the data analysis process to identify the themes and sub-themes. The research question posed was: What are the perceptions of undergraduate healthcare students at a higher education institution in South Africa on the use of peer evaluation within IPGW to foster experiential learning? Findings are presented under four themes with sub-themes and supporting quotations are included to elucidate the findings, as illustrated in the figure below.

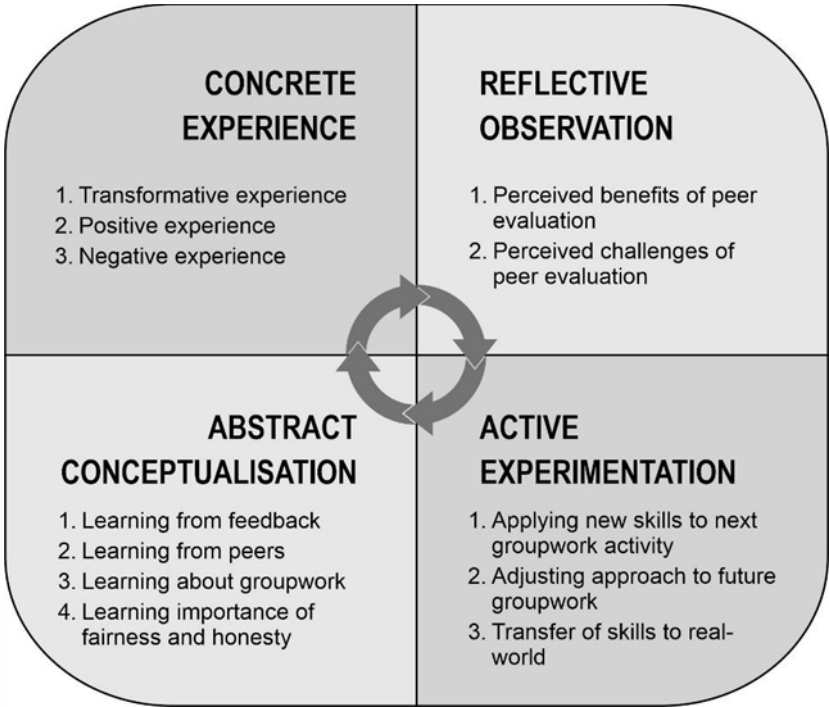


Figure 3.2: Themes and sub-themes

5.1 Theme 1: Concrete experience – Engaging with group work and peer evaluation

This theme relates to the first stage of Kolb's learning cycle (CE) by examining what students experienced during the group work and peer evaluation tasks, which formed the foundation for subsequent reflection and learning.

5.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1 Transformative experience

While critical reflection is often seen as the key driver of learning, Kolb and Kolb (2018) argue that it is the transformative experience that disrupts our expectations or pushes us out of our comfort zone that sets the learning process in motion. As noted previously, students were placed in diverse groups with peers from different cultures, disciplines and campuses. In addition, students were also required to take on different group roles during various activities such as chair, scribe, time-teller, submitter and finaliser. This exposed them to unfamiliar dynamics and new challenges.

Students reflected on the difficulty of giving feedback to their peers. One student explained that: *"It is not always easy to review your peer's work."* Another noted *"Peer reviews are also difficult, but had a positive effect."* These reflections show that the peer evaluation experience pushed students beyond their comfort zones giving them a concrete experience that was significant for their learning as highlighted by Kolb (1984). Stenberg et al. (2021) also stress the importance for health professions educators to create these activities that challenge students and support them to develop the skills to give and receive feedback effectively.

5.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2 Positive experience

Most students reported a positive experience of the peer evaluation. They reported that the inclusion of peer evaluation in group work played a key role in the overall success of the collaboration within their groups. As this student noted, *"it did help change a lot of things in the group everyone shared work equally and it made it easy for us all because we knew that we will be evaluated for it."* This aligns with the findings of Yin et al. (2022), who reported that even though there were some mixed feelings, the majority of

their participants displayed a positive attitude towards peer evaluation. In contrast, Double et al. (2019) argue that students' perceptions of peer evaluation are not always positive, particularly among those with little experience. However, they note that the quality of feedback tends to improve over time, highlighting the importance of providing students with guidance and practice.

While students reflected on both giving and receiving feedback, the data showed a much stronger emphasis on the value of receiving feedback. Several responses revealed a genuine interest in hearing how their contributions were perceived by others. As these students reflected: *"I think it is great, it lets you see yourself in someone else's eyes and you can learn from constructive criticism ..."* Another noted, *"The peer review is a space that examines how you've contributed your efforts and whether or not that made group members happy. Therefore, it is always reasonable for peer review to exist so that individuals can be evaluated and learn from their mistakes."*

5.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3 Negative experience

A small number of students reported having a negative experience with peer evaluation. Analysing the data revealed that students reporting negative experiences pivoted around students not enjoying doing the peer review, feeling that the peer reviews were not accurately done by group members and that lecturers should be the only ones assessing the students' work. In addition, one participant suggested the use of a different criteria as opposed to what they had to use to assess their group members. Supporting quotations include: *"please remove it [the peer evaluation] as a review on what individuals have done. It should be a review on if everyone did their part and to comment on it not to put the marks in the students hands due to some student can be deliberate and give bad marks in situations and it is the lecturers part of assessment."* Another student added, *"Peer reviews are quite unfair because there isn't always honesty I don't recommend them."*

Findings support research conducted by Chin (2016) who states that students sometimes, due to the concern that their grades are influenced by and dependent on other students, do not see the advantages of peer

evaluation. Senden and Coertjens (2024) also speaks to the negative emotions that may arise from peer evaluation and mention that it should be managed through careful design and the training of students prior to peer evaluation.

5.2 Theme 2: Reflective Observation – Processing the feedback

This theme relates to the second stage of Kolb’s learning cycle (RO) and explores what students noticed, realised, or felt as they reflected on the peer evaluation experience. Including peer evaluation in group work encourages students to reflect on their own learning by switching between the observer and the observed (Stenberg et al., 2021). By evaluating the work of others, students are prompted to apply the same critical lens to their own efforts and understanding.

Consistent with other studies, student feedback on reflection often centred around the perceived benefits and the challenges they encountered with the peer evaluation process (Kaminski et al., 2024).

5.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1 Perceived benefits of peer evaluation

Peer evaluation enhances group work and group performance

Students frequently commented that the peer evaluation had a positive impact on how their groups functioned. One student noted, *“With my group, everyone improved on their teamwork skills after seeing the peer reviews.”*

Many felt that peer evaluation helped improve work ethic and collaboration within their groups. As this student notes, *“The peer review keeps members from slacking and thus creating a better work ethic”*. Another explained: Peer reviews are a great way to push one to the right direction and learn to work collaboratively with one another, it pushes one to want to change and do better. Another mentioned *“The peer reviews helped the team to get better with each task because we could always reflect on what we were lacking on and we worked on it together as a team”*.

Linn et al. (2022) found that good academic achievement can be expected from students who worked collaboratively within their groups. From the findings it is clear that the peer evaluation not only contributed to effective group performance, but also led to better cooperation from group members.

Peer evaluation makes group work more fair

Kaminski et al. (2024) mentions that it is a primary concern for educators to ensure equal contribution from students in group work. Fellenz (2006) and Stenberg et al. (2021) agree that for them, the perception of fairness is crucial in promoting student learning. Adding peer evaluation to the interprofessional group work activities in this study added transparency that made the group work experience feel more just and balanced. Allowing group members to assign marks based on individual contributions positively affected students' perception of fairness. One student explained, *“The peer reviews allow each team member to be marked according to their participation and contribution within the group, which creates more fairness in the marking system.”* Other students echoed this, saying that it helped prevent free-riding and ensured that everyone's effort was visible. A few students mentioned that it was an added benefit for them to be able to recognise those who went above and beyond. As one student reflected, *“All my group members contributed to the activities, but some did give more time and effort and deserve to get good marks. I feel the evaluation helped to award credit where needed but also let members know if their contributions and work is enough.”*

Peer evaluation provides a platform for feedback that is less confrontational and structured

According to Fellenz (2006), the full potential of group work can only be reached when problems such as intragroup conflict can be successfully managed. From the student feedback, it appears that the carefully planned and structured peer evaluation activities, have provided a platform for dealing with group issues resulting in less conflict within the groups.

Students valued the anonymous peer evaluation process as a structured way to share feedback that felt less confrontational than addressing group issues directly. Although anonymity was somewhat limited within the small group setting, many still felt that the format created a safer space for honest communication and helped to minimise the risk of conflict. One student explained, *“I think it is a very valuable way of anonymously making people aware of the aspects that they are lacking in, and also to have people tell me where I am lacking. It avoids direct and offensive confrontation, and still produces self-improvement.”* Others echoed this, saying that the process made it easier to give and receive honest input without damaging group relationships. As one participant put it, *“The fact that its anonymous gives the chance to give honest feedback without causing tension between teammates.”* Others agreed that the anonymous format ensures that *“feelings won’t be hurt”* and that the anonymity *“decreases any bad vibes”*.

The structured, anonymous format not only encouraged honesty but also helped students focus on growth, rather than defensiveness. As this student reflects, *“This was a very upbuilding activity as you could express your honest opinion to try and help another person improve their teamwork abilities. It also helped me to realise that I can improve in certain aspects, without feeling attacked by other members.”* Another echoed this sentiment, *“It was nice to get an honest opinion about my group work without getting offended, so that I can work on my weaknesses.”*

Peer evaluation keeps members accountable

According to Yang et al. (2022) peer evaluation reduces what they call *“social loafing”*. This term refers to the concept that people are more likely to put in less effort when working in a group compared to working individually. They mention that peer evaluation keeps members accountable for their individual contribution and the awareness of impending peer evaluation can affect their group work behaviour and communication. This is in line with the findings of this study, where many students felt that peer evaluation helped promote accountability within their groups. Knowing that their contributions would be evaluated by their peers encouraged group members to participate more actively and share

the workload more equally. As one student noted, “It did help change a lot of things in the group - everyone shared work equally, and it made it easy for us all because we knew that we will be evaluated for it.” Another put it simply: *“Peer reviews made students accountable as an added measure to ensure no one slacked off.”* Supporting this, another student stated, *“I think it was very effective, because you will do your part because nobody wants a bad peer review.”*

In addition to keeping others accountable, several students reflected that the process also made them more responsible for their own efforts within the group. *“They were helpful in my view because in a way they pushed me to do the things that needed to be done.”*

Peer evaluation motivates group members to work harder

In addition to encouraging accountability, peer evaluation also served as a strong motivator for many students. Knowing that their peers would review their contributions created a sense of ongoing focus and encouraged them to maintain a high standard of participation. As this student reflected, *“I think this is a great way of encouraging group members to not lose focus”*. Another stated that, *“It is a great tool to motivate team members as well as yourself to push harder and to fully own up to your role in each activity”*. Some students expressed that they wanted to perform well not only to contribute to the group, but also to receive positive feedback. One student reflected, *“It was motivating - I wanted to be rated best.”*

Others described peer evaluation as a push to take initiative and give their best effort, with one noting, *“Peer reviews are a great way to push one in the right direction and learn to work collaboratively... it pushes one to want to change and do better.”* Another student wrote *“Peer reviews encourages us to strive to produce high quality work.”*. For some, this sense of motivation was ongoing, as one student put it: *“Peer reviews are a beautiful initiative as they teach us to always pull up our socks.”*

Peer evaluation shows you what and how to improve

One of the strongest perceived benefits of the peer evaluation process was that it showed students both what they needed to improve and how they need to do it. Many participants said the feedback they received gave them clear, practical direction. One student wrote, *“After the reviews you know what points you need to focus and what you should do differently.”* This is in line with the findings from a scoping review done by Stenberg et al. (2021). The authors confirm that peer evaluation help students to identify gaps leading to improvement in their group performance.

Several students described the process as useful for self-assessment and growth. As this student explains, *“It is good to receive both positive and negative feedback about my leadership skills to encourage me and to show me in which areas there is room for growth.”* Another noted, *“I feel that the peer review is a good way of expressing how one feels towards the group members without being judgemental and over critical, thus giving each person an opportunity for personal growth.”* Many described the process as an opportunity for introspection and noted that it encouraged them to reflect more honestly on their own role within the group. As one student put it, *“It helped me to learn more about myself as a team player”*. Others reflected on the importance of self-reflection, with one noting, *“I really think its a good idea because you always first need to look at yourself and then at others.”* For some students, the experience was eye-opening because it revealed aspects of their group work behaviour they had not previously been aware of. *“They did help me to see my wrongs, the things that I am not aware of, and to correct them and work well with others,”* one student explained. Another noted, *“Sometimes we do not realise that we are doing something wrong until it is pointed out to us. It is an excellent way to help each other to reach their fullest potential when working with others.”* These comments suggest that the peer evaluation process prompted genuine self-reflection and a willingness to take responsibility for personal development.

In addition to personal insight, students commented that the process clarified what was expected of them within the group. Peer feedback helped

make roles, responsibilities, and standards more explicit – particularly for those who had initially struggled to understand how to contribute. This student explained, *“I definitely saw what it really means to work in a group and what people expect of you when you are working in a group.”* Another echoed this by saying *“we had time to explain what is expected from us and made sure we all understand.”* Once expectations were clearer, students reported that it was easier to engage with the task and participate more meaningfully.

Students were also eager to give feedback so that others can also see what and how to improve themselves. The reason that they may feel so positive about the feedback is because prior to round one of the peer review we had a session to explain to them what constructive feedback looks like and how it is different from criticism. The session also included how receiving constructive feedback should be approached. As this student summarised, *“I think it is a great platform... I think most people would like to know how to better themselves. For this reason I like the peer reviews so that I can improve my teamwork skills, but also help other to improve theirs.”*

Peer evaluation gives students a voice

According to Yang et al. (2022), adding a component to peer evaluation that allows students to express their opinion rather than only assigning a score, can lead to better motivation and engagement. In this study, the data showed that students indeed felt empowered and that their voices were heard.

Many students felt that the peer evaluation gave them a chance to share their experience of how the group worked together and how each member contributed. Several students said it made them feel that their opinions were valued. One student explained, *“This is a way for us to feel that our voice is heard and that our opinions matter.”* Others mentioned that it allowed them to raise issues or offer support when needed. As one student put it, *“It gives us a chance to voice if one peer needs help - academically or not.”* Some also appreciated being able to speak honestly about how they felt in the group, with one noting, *“The peer reviews were great because we*

were all able to speak our thoughts about how we feel in regards to students and group work.” Overall, students valued having a space where they could express their thoughts and be heard.

Students feel validated through peer feedback

Another benefit that emerged strongly was the sense of validation students felt through receiving peer feedback. Many described how the comments boosted their confidence and made them feel seen and appreciated for their efforts. One student reflected, *“It lets you see yourself in someone else's eyes and you can learn from constructive criticism – and also get a boost from the positive feedback.”* For some, the feedback served as recognition of the hard work they had put into the group. A student wrote, *“It was quite special to hear all of the compliments as well as everyone's gratitude towards me. I was the group facilitator and I really worked hard to guide my group, and it was nice to see that they saw that and appreciated it.”*

In addition to feeling validated themselves, several students also valued the opportunity to encourage and build up their peers. As this student noted, *“I think it's a good way to build others up”*. They appreciated having a structured way to recognise good effort and acknowledge the contributions of others, something that may not always happen in typical group work settings. As this student mentions, *“peer reviews are a good idea as it is a platform to appreciate members”*. Another agreed and stated *“I learned to...appreciate and commend others for their good ideas, that I did not think of before.”* This sentiment was also echoed in a study done by Kaminski et al (2024) where they mentioned that students appreciated giving recognition to high-performing members.

5.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2 Perceived challenges of peer evaluation

Difficulty evaluating peers

While most students responded positively to the peer evaluation process, a few expressed discomfort with having to evaluate their peers, especially when it came to assigning marks. Some described feeling uneasy or even

guilty about giving low scores to group members, even when those members had not contributed equally. One student noted, *“It is a good idea, but most of the time we are not comfortable pointing out the negative side of things or a person - even if it is set in a positive way.”* Another reflected that it simply *“wasn’t easy”* to rate their group members, particularly when it could affect someone’s marks, *“It is not always easy to review your peer’s work. If the review does not affect his module mark, it would be easier to be honest.”*

These findings echo the literature which identifies discomfort and feelings of unease as common challenges in peer evaluation (Senden & Coertjens, 2024; Stenberg et al., 2021; Topping, 2009; Yang et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2022).

Concerns about bias and subjectivity

Some students raised concerns about the influence of bias and subjectivity in the peer evaluation process. They felt that feedback and marks were sometimes shaped more by personal feelings than by an objective assessment of contribution. One student noted, *“People rate you according to how they feel about you,”* while another commented, *“Some team members use favouritism when reviewing other students.”* According to Linn et al. (2022), anonymity of the peer evaluation process can help reduce the bias caused by the social relationship between group members.

A few students also worried that disagreement or interpersonal tension could negatively affect their scores. As one reflected, *“it’s a subjective way of scoring – one person doesn’t agree with you, gives you a bad mark, and negatively influences all of your marks.”* Another expressed a similar concern: *“I feel like group members could use this intentionally against you if they do not like you or agree with your ideas and opinions.”* These comments highlight the challenge of ensuring fairness when implementing group work and peer evaluation. Yang et al. (2022) cautions that the design of peer evaluation activities should be preceded by careful strategies to mitigate bias like policies, peer evaluation training, penalties and rewards.

Concerns about fairness

In addition to concerns about bias, a number of students questioned the fairness of the peer evaluation. Some felt that their efforts were not fully recognised, especially when much of their work happened behind the scenes or wasn't visible to the group. As one student explained, *"Many people do not realise how much work is being done and not necessarily talked about. People rate their team on how hard they think the person worked, while in actual fact a lot more is done than realised."* Others felt that marks were sometimes too evenly distributed, regardless of individual contribution: *"You sometimes did more than another person, but the group gives you the same mark."* There were also comments about the accuracy of evaluations, with one student sharing, *"I almost did all the work and submitted the assignment, and some students rated me a 6 for workload. I just feel that it's not accurate."*

Fellenz (2006) emphasised the importance and complexity of fairness perception in assessment, describing it as a necessary condition for student learning. This complexity is further illustrated in a review by Senden and Coertjens (2024), which highlights that the literature presents mixed findings. Some studies suggest that anonymity reduces students' perceptions of fairness, whereas others report no significant difference.

Even though fairness remained a recurring concern for a small but vocal group, some students were able to take constructive value from the process despite these frustrations, *"Personally I feel that the marks given were unfair, but through the constructive feedback it helped me to be an active listener and helped with group coordination"*.

Doubting the impact of peer evaluation

While the majority of students found value in the peer evaluation process, a small number questioned whether it led to any real improvement. One student commented that their peers seemed demotivated by criticism rather than encouraged to grow. *"The peer review process does little to enhance skills, as the continual reviews mean that group members are demotivated by criticism."* Others noted that the process lacked seriousness

and follow through within their groups, as illustrated by this response *“I don't think it enhanced my group members team work. I still had to do all the work. They did not take it seriously.”* Another noted, *“I think it's of no use if the team members are not willing to talk about the feedback and improve of them”*.

A few felt the feedback they received was too positive to be helpful, *“The peer reviews didn't have any effect on the group because only good feedback was given so no one received critique”*. Some doubted whether those who needed to change would actually do so. As one student put it, *“Peer evaluations won't make stubborn people change their views.”* Although these views were in the minority, they highlight that the impact of peer evaluation can vary depending on group dynamics and individual attitudes.

A small number of students also seemed unsure about the purpose of the peer review, viewing it more as a way to inform lecturers about group issues rather than as a learning tool. For them, it functioned more as a kind of *“whistle-blowing”* mechanism to highlight non-participation than as an opportunity for constructive feedback as this response illustrates, *“Absolute best thing ever, so it can be made clear to the 'teachers' for who is doing what and who is actually contributing to the team”*.

5.3 Theme 3: Abstract Conceptualisation – Learning from the experience

This theme relates to the third stage of Kolb's learning cycle (abstract conceptualisation) and explores how students made sense of their experiences, identified lessons learned, and began to develop ideas for how to approach group work differently in the future. Schellhase (2006) describes it as the *“thinking”* stage where meaning is made from experience, distinct from simply *“feeling”*.

5.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1 Learning from constructive feedback

A strong theme that emerged in students' reflections was the value of constructive feedback as a tool for self-improvement and personal growth.

The majority of students described how the feedback they received from their peers helped them to reflect on their skills, attitudes, and performance, and led to meaningful changes in how they approached their work. One student explained, *"It helps a lot because you can read the constructive criticisms that others have on you, and you can then take that criticism and work on yourself and improve yourself."* For some students, the experience extended beyond practical skills to deeper personal development: *"It helped me to work on the things I'm not good at. This developed my personal growth as well."* Another simply stated, *"Reflection is key to better yourself"*.

Several students emphasised that the value of feedback depends on how it is received. The ability to approach feedback with an open mind was seen as key to using it productively. As this student explained, *"The only issue I had with this is that not every person accepts constructive criticism. Some take it as an attack on their self worth, even if it wasn't meant as an attack or insult. So, the only thing that I felt is important is that students should really be reminded that the criticism is there to help, not to question their character."* Those who viewed critique as a learning opportunity described how it helped them to improve both their work and their mindset. As one student put it, *"Some critique that you receive on your own work can be good if you look at it in a way that you can better yourself."*

Students also highlighted that the structured peer evaluation allowed for feedback that was constructive, rather than just critical. As one student noted, *"I think the peer reviews allow a medium for constructive criticism among group members in a way that is kind yet still professional and helpful."* Interestingly, most did not experience the feedback as negative or hurtful. The positive responses from this study may be linked to the guidance provided before the peer evaluation, as advocated by Kaminski et al. (2024) and Topping (2009). This guidance gave students the language and tools to engage with feedback more effectively. As one student noted, *"I found it helpful, because the criticism was always constructive."*

5.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2 Learning from peers

Double et al. (2019) found in their study that peer evaluation can have a greater impact on academic performance than teacher assessment. They therefore recommend that activities should be structured to utilise and promote peer learning. In this study, students reflected on how peer evaluation enabled them to learn from each other. As one student explained, *“I think it is very good to evaluate each other because that means that we are learning from each other.”*

Many students expressed their appreciation for their peers’ different perspectives and saw them as valuable learning opportunities. As this student noted, *“The peer reviews is an excellent way to better your teamwork skills. You learn from another person point of view what you can better within your skills.”* This was echoed by other students, who said, *“It was a way for me to express what I have experienced and to learn from others perspective on what I can do better”* and *“Peer reviews helped me realise my faults and pushed me to want to be better as I drew courage from my peers.”*

Because the groups were intentionally diverse, made up of students from different campuses, disciplines, backgrounds, and ethnicities some challenges were anticipated. However, many students came to see the diversity in their groups as a valuable learning opportunity. One student reflected, *“I think that my teamwork skill got enhanced by teaching me how to work better with others that has other problems that i have and to still be able to work with these individuals despite our differences.”* Others echoed this sentiment, saying, *“We got a chance to learn about one another,”* For some, the experience helped build confidence in navigating group dynamics with unfamiliar people: *“it helped me alot because it taught me how to deal with different people especially those you don't know.”*

5.3.3 Sub-theme 3.3 Learning what group work is all about - Identifying key group work competencies

In their reflections, the students described how the peer evaluation helped them to develop a clearer understanding of what group work entails. As one

student came to understand, *“I definitely saw what it really means to work in a group and what people expect of you when you are working in a group.”*

Fellenz (2006) emphasises the importance of interpersonal skills for effective group work. In this study, the peer evaluation activities were designed with a focus on interprofessional competencies such as cooperation, communication, contribution, attitude, and accountability. In reflecting on the peer evaluation process, students identified what they saw as crucial group work competencies, which closely aligned with those emphasised by the researchers.

According to Kaminski et al. (2024) group cooperation is one of the core competencies in interprofessional education. For them high-performing groups often have a strong sense of mutual respect, trust and a shared purpose. The data revealed that peer evaluation assisted students to recognise that group work requires working together towards a shared goal. One student reflected, *“I found it interesting to tell my group members what to improve so we can work together with respect.”* Others mention they learned to *“Work together not against each other,”* and that *“we are all here for the same reason.”* Many noted the importance of respecting and trusting one another. Several students reflected on the need to let go of control and rely on others to do their part: *“you need to trust your teammates”* and *“I should trust people more in doing their part.”* Others spoke more broadly about group relationships, saying *“It is important to be understanding of each other and respectful,”* and *“Group members should cooperate, respect one another.”*

Communication is consistently identified as a core competency essential for effective interprofessional collaboration in healthcare (Kaminski et al., 2024; Patel et al., 2025) The students in this study also mentioned communication repeatedly as a key competency for successful group work. As this student states, *“My thoughts on the peer reviews.. made my aware on effective communication as a key to a productive collaboration.”* Some students mentioned that good communication within a group can avoid misunderstandings and aid in resolving conflict. As this student explained: *“Communicating resolves what ignorance couldn't, communicating allows*

you to explore solutions to problems encountered." Another student added, *"communication is also an important aspect that can save a lot of misunderstandings."* Students also emphasised the importance of listening and sharing ideas. One participant reflected, *"We should always be able to listen to other people's opinions."* Several comments pointed to communication as essential not just for practical reasons but also for building mutual respect: *"The key points in group work is communication, respect for each other and each other's ideas, to listen and to give you opinion appropriately."* Others emphasised on staying in regular contact to avoid last-minute pressure: *"Communicating more frequently instead of only communicating when the due date is near."*

Several reflections highlighted that attendance and contribution were non-negotiables for successful group work. One participant wrote, *"It is the strongest aspect in ensuring teamwork, fairness and equal amount of contribution towards an activity."* Another shared, *"Everyone has to make time for the group activity, they have to put in the effort when doing the activities and show up. Lastly workload has to be divided equally."* Others echoed this sentiment: *"I think as a group member you should try your best to be there and contribute where necessary"*.

Time management and punctuality were also seen as essential. Many students spoke about the need to make time for meetings and to stick to agreed schedules. One wrote, *"In group work we should all agree on time chosen for the meeting and be available."* Another pointed out that, *"respecting time is crucial because that means people had to clear their schedule to meet each other."* Others highlighted the need to plan ahead and stay organised: *"do not leave things for last minute."*

Attitude in group work refers to a group member's overall approach to the group task, the process and the other members (Normandin et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2025). Several reflections from the data highlight that students realise the importance of having a positive attitude when working in a group. As this student notes, *"the best way to have a successful teamwork is communication and positive attitudes towards each other as a team."* Another simply states, *"[a] positive attitude is very crucial in a team work."*

Accountability was discussed earlier in this chapter, as students identified it as one of the key benefits of peer evaluation. Kaminski et al. (2024) describe accountability in group work as the process through which individual contributions are recognised and evaluated, with the potential to influence the outcomes. This then encourages members to meet their responsibilities and deter those students who would otherwise not have contributed equally. As this student noted, *“Peer reviews allow for students to mention if anyone did not pull their weight or behaved inappropriately. This made students accountable and as an added measure to ensure no one slacked off.”*

5.3.4 Sub-theme 3.4 Learning the importance of fairness and honesty in peer evaluation

Another lesson students reported on was the importance of fairness and honesty in the peer evaluation process. Several students acknowledged that peer feedback can only lead to improvement if it is given sincerely and without bias. As one student put it, *“Peer review should be honest review of each group member and shouldn't go with favouritism.”* Some students raised concerns about superficial or insincere feedback, suggesting that not everyone took the process seriously. One noted, *“In my group, it was something they simply did to get a mark. I was the only one that put some thought into my answer. The rest answered with one-liners.”* Another wrote, *“I think it is a good way for people to become aware and work on areas they lack in,... The only problem is this will only work if everyone's feedback is honest, and not based on personal feelings and pettiness.”* The value placed on honest input was clearly expressed: *“Honest answers are needed. Not answers to make your teammates like you.”* Others echoed this: *“It is important to be honest during the reviews.”*

5.4 Theme 4: Active Experimentation – Applying insights to future group work

This theme relates to the fourth stage of Kolb's learning cycle (active experimentation) and focuses on how students applied their new knowledge and skills to the remaining group work activities. Students also

discussed how they will adjust their approach to future group work and how they can see themselves transfer group work skills to real-world healthcare settings.

5.4.1 *Sub-theme 4.1 Applying new skills in the next group work activity*

According to Senden and Coertjens (2024) peer evaluation does not automatically enhance learning. They highlight that feedback is a complex process, influenced by multiple elements that can enhance or limit its effectiveness in supporting learning. The data showed that many students learned from the feedback they received to make changes in the next group activity. The careful planning of the structured peer evaluation process in this study may have contributed to the positive reaction that allowed students to apply the feedback effectively in future activities.

Knowing what to improve made it easier to take action, and several students said it helped them avoid repeating earlier mistakes. One student wrote, *“The peer reviews was a great idea to get to see if you were working effectively with your team and allows you the opportunity to see where you can improve and work on so that for the remaining activities you could truly put your best effort into being better.”* Another noted, *“Peer reviews are good as they give members opportunity to rate each other and know how they can improve if there are any mistakes that needs to be solves so that the group as a whole can function properly on the next group assignment.”* Others shared that the process helped them stay focused on getting better with each task: *“I think when every member reads through their reviews they can see what they need to work on and improve on. It helps to let every member want to do better every time they do a group task.”*

Students appreciated having the chance to put feedback into action and saw it as an opportunity to challenge themselves. For some, the goal of improving their peer reviews was a clear motivator. One student shared, *“It was motivating, I wanted to be rated best,”* while another wrote, *“i did strive to get a better review the second time which might have helped the teamwork.”* Several reflected on how the feedback pushed them to participate more actively: *“The peer review helped me because if a member mentioned that I didn’t fully participate, I made sure to fully participate on*

the next assessment,” As one student summed it up, “The peer reviews was a great idea to get to see if you were working effectively with your team and allows you the opportunity to see where you can improve and work on so that for the remaining activities you could truly put your best effort into being better.”

Ibarra-Sáiz et al. (2020) found in their studies that the process of evaluating their own and the work of their group members is a valuable tool for students to develop new group work skills. Students reported an eagerness to apply their newly acquired skills and made specific mention of time management, communication and overall group work competencies.

Students showed a strong commitment to improving their time management, especially in terms of being more available and punctual for group meetings. One student wrote, *“I know now that I should be on time,”* while another simply noted, *“[I need to] be punctual as well.”* Others observed the impact on their peers too, with one writing, *“It helped one of my teammates to be on time.”* In addition to showing up on time, students also reflected on managing deadlines more effectively so as not to let their groups down. As one student shared, *“I have learnt the importance of planning my work and managing my time correctly.”* There was also a growing awareness that good time management supports the whole group: *“We all learnt to keep to deadlines to not let the group down.”*

Many students reported improvements in their communication skills as a result of the peer evaluation process. They mentioned becoming more confident in expressing themselves during group tasks and discussions, and also recognised the value of listening. One student reflected, *“Through the constructive feedback it help me to be an active listener.”* Another simply noted, *“I improved my communication skills.”* Some expressed a renewed intention to communicate more effectively in future group work: *“I need to communicate a bit more,”* and *“I need to... pay more attention to other people’s opinions.”*

Students also reported that the peer evaluation process helped them develop stronger overall group work skills. Seeing how their peers experienced their contributions gave them specific ideas on how to improve

and motivated them to be better group members. One student noted, *"Many of us learned and developed teamwork skills from the reviews as we got to understand how others perceived our work ethics."* Their commitment to continued improvement was clearly expressed: *"It was well received and I can work on my group work to better it for the future,"* and *"I believe teamwork is not only about getting the work done. It also involves enhancing ones skills and the skills of fellow teammates."* Another said, *"I liked that we could get and give feedback, because this helped us learn what we can do better in the future when working in a group of people."*

5.4.2 Sub-theme 4.2 Adjusting approach to future group work

According to Linn et al. (2022) emphasising a cooperative group work attitude early in students' studies can support the development of skills needed by healthcare professionals. It is therefore encouraging that the data from this study show a shift in students' attitudes towards group work.

Some students explicitly reflected on how they plan to approach group work differently in the future. A key realisation for several was that being too controlling or taking over group tasks could undermine collaboration. They acknowledged the need to trust group members more and create space for everyone's input. As one student put it, *"I learned that I try to control other people and everything they do, I should trust people more in doing their part."* Another echoed this: *"To pay more attention to other people's opinions and learn to not take as much charge as I am use to."* Similarly, one student reflected, *"I think sometimes people think that I try to do everything and I learned that I should stop trying to make everything perfect and instead use something of everyone."*

Others shared how the peer feedback shifted their perspective, making them more aware of how their behaviour was experienced by group members. As one student noted, *"During my peer review evaluation I got lower marks then I thought I would get, but during this I realised that not everyone sees how you do things the same way as you see them, even though you thought you did your best, someone else might think you could have done more or communicated differently. This helps me to improve my teamworking skills for next year and in my field of study to approach*

teamwork in a different way, looking out of someone else's perspective a not my own.” Another shared, “I should not expect everyone to be like me because they aren’t me. I must learn that some people want to wait until the last minute before submitting the activity, although I don’t like it. My group was good and in the end we had much fun.”

Several students committed to being more constructive group members in the future by expressing their opinions more, showing greater patience, and improving their communication and time management. As one reflected, *“Someone from my teammates said I need to express my opinions more and that is what I will do in future with regards to group work.”* Another explained, *“The peer reviews are a great way of showing you where one needs to improve in terms of work, behaviour or personality. I had to be more positive and patient with my teammates.”*

5.4.3 Sub-theme 4.3 Transfer of group work skills to real-world contexts

Stenberg et al. (2021) and Linn et al. (2022) both highlight that peer evaluation play an important role in preparing students for the collaboration and group work required in real-world healthcare practice.

In this study, the data show that students planned to apply what they had learned to their future roles as healthcare professionals. One student noted, *“It helps us as you now know where you should pay attention to and what you should work on. As one day you will need these skills when working.”* Another explained, *“It was great to work as team, every task for us was easy cause we were working together to approach it. And I learned so many strategies to approach the world as health professionals.”*

Some students emphasised how peer feedback helped them reflect on their own growth and weaknesses in preparation for professional collaboration. *“By making use of the peer reviews I personally can see what my weaknesses is, and work on it to improve it, so that one day in the actual health care, where I must work in a group, I would be able to learn from my mistakes, and only try to be better.”* Others also recognised the value of feedback as a

transferable skill: *“It's good to work as team and evaluate each other's work, this can help for future purpose to evaluate at work.”*

6 Conclusion

Peer evaluation in group work may be commonly used in higher education, but its role as structured learning mechanism rather than just an assessment tool remains underexplored. By framing peer evaluation as an active learning process rather than merely an assessment tool, this study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how students engage with and learn from peer evaluation.

The data shows that students moved through each stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle in a meaningful way. They gained real experience through the group tasks, reflected on those experiences, drew out lessons about themselves and others, and made concrete plans to change their behaviour in future group work settings. The responses suggest that peer evaluation did not just assess performance, it became part of the learning itself. It helped students see more clearly what good group work looks like and gave them the chance to grow their own skills.

However, it is important that educators provide structured guidance to ensure constructive and unbiased feedback. Educators should also address concerns around fairness and facilitate discussion on self-reflection and professional growth. Anonymity and scoring mechanisms influenced the perceived fairness and must be carefully designed to support honest evaluations.

The study highlights the importance of students engaging meaningfully with feedback if peer evaluation is to be used as a tool for group work skills development. Therefore, further training on feedback literacy may improve students' ability to give and to receive actionable feedback that can strengthen their group work competencies in healthcare settings.

7 Limitations and recommendations

In this study, the authors relied only on an open-ended reflection activity as a data collection tool. Incorporating an additional data source, such as focus groups could have provided additional insights. In addition, this study only included the voices of students who consented to their reflections being used for research purposes. This implies that valuable feedback from non-consenting students may have been missed. Finally, the scope of this study was confined to the perspectives of students, leaving out the experiences of lecturers and instructional designers. It is therefore recommended that future studies should broaden their scope to include these voices.

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