

Can technology offer a solution to providing large numbers of students with effective assessment feedback? An invitation to create and join a network of critical friends to provide feedback on feedback.

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Abstract: The aim of this roundtable discussion is to share good practice in using technology to provide holistic feedback to student-teachers between higher education institutions. It is envisaged that the resulting discussions would encourage international collaborative communication and research opportunities, by creating a critical network of friends, to address the issues, practices and solutions that arise in providing large numbers of students with effective assessment feedback.

Keywords: Feedback, assessment, research, virtual learning environment, communities of practice, critical friend research, international, holistic feedback, evaluation.

Introduction

The author's university is continuously striving to improve its educational practice, which leads to the rationale for this roundtable discussion proposal - to share good practice in using technology to provide course-based assessment feedback to student-teachers. It is hoped that the resulting roundtable discussions would lead to international collaborative communication and research opportunities, to explore and examine the purposes, practices and solutions in providing effective feedback to students.

An overview of the developing feedback strategy used in the author's university will be shared with visitors to the roundtable, in a diagrammatic form, to prompt discussions and questions and to encourage the participants to share their own experiences and practices. The resulting conversations could instigate ideas and suggestions for improvements in the practice and procedures of student assessment feedback in the participants' universities, and lead to international collaborative research projects.

In this proposal, some of the practices in providing feedback to students on higher education courses are placed into context and discussed. A brief description is given to explain how the author's institution has begun to tackle these difficulties and access opportunities associated with using technology. Research and roundtable discussion questions are identified and possible outcomes predicted.

Context

Information will be included here that provides a brief overview of the author's college, the type of courses presented, the numbers of student-teachers involved and the framework of course engagements.

The term 'effective feedback' has a wide variety of interpretations in higher education, ranging from simple and perfunctory to complex and multi-level. Colleges are increasingly seeking to improve their student feedback processes and a frequently cited description of 'effective feedback' is provided by Nicol and Mulligan's (2006) 'seven principles of giving good feedback'. During this research project a holistic approach is adopted and a belief that 'effective feedback' should be:

- Timely, actionable and useful to students to improve their learning;
- Empowering - facilitating students to self-regulate their learning and evaluate their own performance;
- Reciprocal - providing feedback to staff to improve their teaching;

- Affirming - promoting a relational dimension of mutual trust and respect;
- Responsive - the nature of the feedback should change to meet the needs of the student-teachers, as they progress and develop through the course.

Literature Review

It is widely accepted in higher education that individualized and planned feedback is essential for the students' development (Sambell *et al.*, 2013), and feedback is recognized as a crucial means of improving and enhancing the student's learning (Brown, Bull and Pendleberry, 1997; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). However, difficulties arise in the methods universities use to provide feedback. For example, two common methods of providing feedback in higher education are when academic staff write comments on marked assignments that are then returned to students, and through academic staff-led group feedback discussions in tutorials following an assignment's submission (Hyland, 2000; McDowell, *et al.*, 2008). Both of these methods are often described by students as being very unsatisfactory, as they feel they are receiving the feedback too late (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002). Ideally, feedback for the student needs to be actionable and arrive in time for them to make improvements to their work and not after they have finished it.

Providing feedback to students whilst they are working on assignments, when they have time to act on it, is referred to as 'feed forward' (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008), but this approach can present difficulties for academic staff. For instance, student-teacher numbers on courses have grown considerably in recent times, and providing written, or verbal feedback, which the student can 'feed forward', as part of a coordinated academic staff-student communication response, is not a realistic option for academic staff on most higher education courses.

The literature reveals that difficulties can also arise when academic staff are the sole source of feedback for the student. Orsmond and Merry (2009) found that low-achieving undergraduate students focused on the exact interpretation of feedback comments, as opposed to high-achieving students who tried to identify a deeper and broader understanding of the feedback. They also noted that low-achieving students had a greater dependency on the academic staff's feedback, as they concentrated on addressing the feedback comments and working towards producing what they believed the academic staff were looking for. This suggests that staff should try and help low-achieving students to become less dependent and more reflective and self-reliant when processing feedback.

Academic staff could adopt various strategies to develop self-reliance; one of the more common approaches is to encourage peer feedback. Peer feedback is where students receive comments on their written work from the other students studying their module. This feedback provides not only a rich source of information on multiple levels, but also benefits the students cognitively as they engage in reflective analysis and evaluation in writing feedback comments on other students' work. Sadler (2010) believes that the goal of higher education is develop the students' ability to evaluate the quality of their own work, and argues that students' analysis of peer work should form part of the courses main pedagogical strategy.

The problem most frequently mentioned with peer feedback is in getting the students to engage with it in a meaningful way. Bloxham and West (2004) suggest that academic staff should encourage the practice of providing comments on the feedback provided by peers, and not on the assignment.

Consequently, providing students with feedback that allows them to learn, develop and improve has led to a great deal of dissatisfaction, by both students and academic staff, as can be seen in a number of surveys, research studies and reports (Nicol, 2010). To address some of these difficulties, colleges have begun to investigate how technology can be used to enhance feedback provision (Nicol and Milligan, 2006).

Use of technology to enhance feedback provision

Most universities now use virtual learning environments (VLEs) to provide platforms for communication and the management of their courses (Nicol and Milligan, 2006). Academic staff can use VLEs to share their lecture presentations and course readings with their students. Increasingly, student assignments are being submitted and

collected through VLEs, and such on-line management systems can significantly increase the speed of processing and distribution of feedback to large numbers of students (Denton, 2001).

VLEs have the capability to provide rapid and accessible feedback in a variety of formats. For example, the communication methods of discussion forums, instant messaging and emails can be added to VLE activities such as assignments, questionnaires, journals, to mention but a few, to provide varied opportunities to provide group and individualized communication and feedback. These capabilities enable the feedback to come from multiple sources and provide opportunities for both peer and academic staff feedback.

Example use of technology to provide student feedback

The author's university uses Moodle (www.moodle.org) as its VLE platform, and uses Turnitin (www.turnitin.com) for the students to electronically submit their coursework assignments, which although it is a separate off-site service it gives the appearance of being fully integrated into the colleges Moodle course pages. Turnitin is used to check for plagiarism and the originality of the students' assignments, and is also used to provide feedback from academic staff to the student. Some of the feedback features that have been used in the author's university include:

- Grading rubrics, set up by the tutor to mark and assess the students' assignments;
- Tutor comments, that are linked to the grade selected from the marking rubric;
- Pre-set general comments that are dragged and dropped onto the students' papers;
- Long text feedback, to address a particular issue and make a specific point.

Students collect their marked assignments from Turnitin on the Moodle course page on a specified date, and receive a percentage mark, calculated from the assessment rubric, and also an 'originality' percentage. They are able to see the point where they have been graded on the assessment rubric for each of the assessment criteria used and can read the feedback the tutor has inserted into their assignment.

In the author's university this type of feedback was given to seventy-eight first-year and sixty-four third-year students on a four year concurrent initial teacher education degree, who had electronically submitted their coursework for a core educational module assignment through Turnitin on their Moodle course page. Both these groups of students were given the option of face-to-face feedback in addition to feedback and comments on their assignments. After collecting their feedback online, ninety-two percent of first-year students opted for the additional face-to-face feedback. Whilst one hundred percent of third-year students accessed their grade online, only seventy-four percent read their online feedback and only ten percent of the third year students chose to access face-to-face feedback. These statistics highlight some of the problems we are trying to solve.

Providing feedback for students raises various other problems and academic staff in the author's college have made the following comments: students are only interested in their marks; feedback comments are not read by students; feedback is not acted upon by the students; it takes a lot of time to provide one-to-one feedback. Whilst the students identified the following problems: feedback not detailed enough; it doesn't identify or clarify problems; it doesn't show how to improve; feedback isn't relevant for future assignments; feedback is given after the event when it should be given before.

Summary

Using technology might not necessarily solve the problems inherent in providing feedback *per se*. Communication between academic staff and students needs to operate as part of a multi-layered process, and our investigations into this process are on-going. Investigations have begun in combining 'feed forward' approaches with peer-to-peer feedback; where students' assignments are circulated at student tutorial meetings, and students comment and provide feedback on their peers' efforts prior to the submission deadline. Other investigations include using an online archive of assignments, awarding marks to students for engaging in reflective feedback and the use of online student assignment discussion forums, to mention but a few.

To summarize, we believe we have a lot of experience to share and we are keen to communicate with other institutions who are working towards improving the feedback process and the learning experience of students.

This roundtable proposal is an invitation to participate in a communication and research activity that would involve a network of student-teacher educators who share common problems and are seeking to find solutions to address difficulties in providing effective holistic feedback for students. This network will use many of the technological options that academic staff use to provide feedback to students, and also provide feedback to each other using many of the pedagogical techniques that we use with students. The intention is to create a network of critical friends that provides feedback on feedback - as we listen, learn and share good practice across continents.

Roundtable discussion questions

How does your university/college use technology to enhance the provision of feedback to students?

What works, and what successes have you had in providing feedback?

What problems have you encountered, and how have you solved them?

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