

Transforming feedback (Panel review session)

Joint 'Transforming Assessment' & 'AHE' webinar, 11 July 2018



Chair: Sally Jordan (Open University, UK)

Host: Mathew Hillier (Monash University, Australia)

Three selected speakers from *Assessment in Higher Education* conference, 28 June 2018, Manchester, UK

1) Frequent rapid feedback, feed-forward, and peer learning, for enhancing student engagement in an online portfolio assessment

Speaker: Theresa Nicholson, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

This paper presents outcomes from a 3-year initiative to enhance student engagement through weekly summative and formative feedback. The research concerns a first year undergraduate, tutorials-supported, academic skills module, with an assessed online portfolio. In phases 1 and 2, half the student cohort submitted a printed portfolio, while half completed an online portfolio. In the final phase, all students completed an online portfolio (c.190 students). The research design has enabled a robust comparison of the influence of assignment mode on the efficacy of marking and feedback, attainment, student engagement, and tutorial management. The aims were to enhance student engagement, improve digital literacy among staff and students (Clarke and Boud 2016), and to raise employability awareness by developing a showcase of skills for prospective employers (Simatele 2015). The online mode challenges the orthodox approach where the classroom is the focus of learning, to a student-regulated mode, where learning is facilitated by tutors' regular, individual, written feedback. Thus frequent and interactive feedback, including elements of feed-forward and peer learning, help develop students' thinking and learning skills (Clark 2012). Qualitative analysis reveals that the provision of rapid and regular feedback on work is the aspect most valued by students. Tutors valued the ability to track students' progress by accessing online portfolios and providing rapid feedback on completed work. Feedback and progress tracking is easy to give and to receive online (Heinrich et al., 2007), but also creates accountability that is often absent in relatively remote institutional monitoring systems (Stork and Walker, 2015). Some tutors found the marking and feedback process easier online and that there was a positive impact on tutorials, while others found the process more challenging. The online approach had an adverse effect on face-to-face meetings for some, highlighting the need for guidance on tutorial management. Quantitative analysis of student grades tentatively indicates higher attainment levels in the online mode, where progress tracking and regular feedback occur. There are some tensions between meeting the desire to provide very regular, rapid feedback, and associated practical constraints. Barriers sometimes presented through non-engagement of learners, likely influenced by an array of external as well as internal pressures. Nevertheless, engagement on the whole was much improved. There were also constraints due to limited digital literacy, and tutors' workload pressures. The findings suggest that personalised progress tracking, prompt, regular feedback on tasks, and multiple opportunities for group-based discussion of feedback, can promote student engagement in both self-regulated and face-to-face learning activities.

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2) Hearing Voices: First Year Undergraduate Experience of Audio Feedback

Speaker: Stephen Dixon, Newman University, UK

Recent changes to the UK higher education sector, including the growth and diversification of the student body, greater modularisation with fewer coursework assignments, and less staff-student contact time, have presented numerous challenges. The parallel rise in the use of digital technologies in professional practice can often be seen to exacerbate the perceived dehumanising effect of this massification. The focus of this short presentation centres on the use of one such technology – that of digital audio feedback with first year undergraduates at Newman University, Birmingham. Drawing on the findings of a longitudinal phenomenological study conducted for a doctorate, the presentation will stress the importance of moving beyond any technologically deterministic view, and the need to set any understanding in the wider context of students’ own interpretation of the feedback process. Whilst the use of audio feedback is seen to alleviate the failures of communication often identified in feedback, the findings are also seen to be significant in terms of means of access, use of learning technologies, dialogic perception and studentship and engagement. In particular, the use of audio feedback is seen as facilitating a shift from statement to discourse and the possibility of establishing more meaningful learning relationships with students.

3) Feedback Footprints: Using Learning Analytics to support student engagement with, and learning from, feedback

Speaker: Naomi Winstone & Emma Medland, University of Surrey, UK

Student satisfaction with assessment and feedback has been described as the sector’s “Achilles’ Heel” (Knight, 2002, p. 107). Many students express dissatisfaction with the utility of feedback (Medland, 2016), citing difficulties understanding comments, knowing how to take action, and how to connect feedback from different modules and assignments (Jonsson, 2013; Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Parker, 2017). In the ‘new paradigm’ of feedback practice (Carless, 2015), emphasis is placed not on feedback as comments (i.e. the ‘old paradigm’), but on feedback as dialogue, where the impact of feedback on students’ learning is of key concern. This approach should lead educators to reflect on where students are enabled to enact feedback in a dialogic cycle, and to find ways of supporting students’ self-regulatory development by providing opportunities for them to experience the impact of implementing feedback. As researchers and practitioners, a key difficulty in understanding students’ engagement with feedback is that once marked work is returned, we know very little about what students actually do with feedback information. There is a real, but largely untapped, potential for learning analytics to illuminate this ‘hidden reciprocity’. Where feedback is given to students via Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), learning analytics can provide insight into when and how students engage with feedback (e.g. Zimbardi et al., 2017). Furthermore, student-facing analytics can inform students about their own engagement, thus supporting the development of self-regulated learning. Here, we report on an evaluation of a HEFCE-funded project through which we worked in partnership with students to develop a VLE-embedded feedback portfolio to support students to synthesise and act upon feedback (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1eqx09MUhok3O-PDHvKPfVB7cM19gA8Y>). The portfolio first includes a ‘feedback review’ tool through which students can extract key messages from feedback, which they can then categorise into a comprehensive set of academic skills. Also housed within the portfolio is a large resource bank, aligned with each of these identified academic skills. The tool synthesises feedback from multiple assignments so that students can see a visual representation of the areas in which they are performing well, and the areas that may need some development. Finally, students can use an action-planning tool to set goals for their use of the resources, and engage in dialogue with their personal tutor. The portfolio incorporates a student-facing analytics dashboard to enable them to track their engagement with feedback, and the impact of this engagement. In this project, we employed a co-design method through which students, researchers, and learning technologists worked in partnership to develop the feedback portfolio. We will present the key messages emerging from our evaluation, which employed self-report measures (e.g. orientation to feedback, assessment literacy, academic self-efficacy), quantitative analysis of learning gain and learning analytics, and qualitative analysis of user experience. Crucially, our data demonstrate disciplinary differences in engagement

with the portfolio and also provide further insight into the challenges students face when using feedback to develop as autonomous, self-regulated learners. The evaluation also demonstrates that students see digital tools as possessing great potential in bringing meaningful dialogue into the feedback process.

References

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