

Providing feedback to online students: A new approach

Cristina Poyatos-Matas

Griffith University, Australia

c.matas@griffith.edu.au

Cameron Allan

Griffith University, Australia

c.allan@mailbox.gu.edu.au

Abstract: *Feedback is the most important feature of assessment as it provides students with a statement of their learning and advice about how to improve. In the on-line environment, the provision of effective assignment feedback is particularly important because online students generally receive far less informal feedback from teachers than students in face-to-face classes. However, the provision of extensive formal written feedback to on-line students can be a very time consuming for teachers. This paper examines a pilot study to provide group feedback to on-line students that reduces teacher workload while improving the quality of feedback to students.*

Keywords: *formative assessment, student centred assessment, online student assessment*

Introduction

While students can escape the effects of poor teaching, they cannot, as Boud (1995) reminds us, escape the consequence of poor assessment. This paper explores the importance of feedback in assessment and examines the use of a new online approach for providing group feedback to students. This improves student learning while reducing teacher workload. The approach was trialled in an on-line course in 2003 and students were interviewed at the end of the course to assess their reaction to this on-line group feedback approach. Students endorsed it. The paper commences with a review of the literature on assessment, formative feedback and on-line learning then reports on the current study. The paper concludes that on-line group feedback is potentially a powerful way of communicating to students about their learning and about the standards expected of them in their work.

Assessment

New teaching and learning paradigms have appeared in the last one hundred years as our societies have changed (Cheng, 2004). The higher education sector in Australia is currently engaged in the promotion of student-centred learning to promote lifelong independent learning. This approach influence how students engage with learning and place an important focus on student outcomes as well as learning procedures. There has been a conceptual shift in education from “Assessment of learning” to “assessment for learning” (Ramsden, 1992). The second one is a constructive part of the learning process because it has been devised to support learning. While assessment has a summative function (awarding of a grade)

its primary aim is to provide feedback and guidance to the learner (formative) and to report on their achievements (Ramsden, 1992, p.193).

From the students' perspective, 'assessment always defines the actual curriculum' (Ramsden, 1992, p.182). As such, 'assessment related tasks attract student attention at the expense of non-assessed tasks' (Macdonald, 2003, p. 378). Assessment is thus the most important prompt for learning (Boud, 1995, p. 44). From the teachers' perspective, assessment is primarily a means to direct student learning towards desired learning objectives via assessment items. Assessment is, as Brown et al. (1998, p. 2) comment, 'the process of making judgements about the quality of a student's work and expressing those judgements in ways that will be helpful to student learning'. As such, it provides a primary focus for student learning (Brown et al., 1998, p.1). Learning, though, is relational. It is a function of not only of student activity but also of teaching and the context in which it occurs (Boud, 1995, p.44). Assessment is thus a reflection of the quality of the teaching as well as the quality of the learning (Ramsden, 1992, p.182).

The basic principle of good assessment is that it is aligned to the curriculum (Biggs, 1999, p.141). Where assessment tasks are linked to learning standards in the curriculum then, in preparing for assessment, students will be learning curriculum (Biggs, 1999, p.142). Assessment can 'encourage interest, commitment and intellectual challenge make learning expectations unequivocal and enhancing independence and responsibility' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 185). The most important function of formative assessment is the provision of feedback to students that can help them to learn effectively.

Formative feedback

The feedback process in the learning cycle commences with the production of student work. The teacher assesses the work, interprets it and provides feedback to the student. The student then interprets the feedback that influences their learning development. 'The importance of the students' reception of feedback cannot be overstated' (Yorke, 2003, p. 487). Some students have a positive orientation to learning challenges and see feedback as information to be assimilated and accommodated. Other students have a negative orientation to learning and perceive low grades as a 'crushing blow' and reflection of their poor ability. These students give up easily (Yorke, 2003). Nevertheless, the object of education is to develop the 'educated person'; the self-determining person who can set their own learning objectives, performance criteria and assess their own performance (Light and Cox, 2001, p. 175). Thus the eventual aim in providing feedback is to allow students to take over the function of assessing themselves and others (Light and Cox, 2001, p.176).

Formative feedback is concerned with how judgements about the quality of students' learning work can be used to shape and improve the student's competence and to help them to learn more efficiently (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). This type of feedback is diagnostic and feeds into the next level of learning and growth. Feedback 'confronts the participant in the learning process with the effect of their work' (Jurkowitz, 2003, p. 65). When learners are provided with formative feedback, assessment becomes a learning opportunity. Lack of feedback can often lead to poor student performance. However, improvement does not necessarily follow teacher feedback (Sadler, 1989). Beneficial feedback is valued highly by students; even more than clear explanation and stimulation of interest. 'It is impossible to overstate the role of effective feedback on students' progress' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 193). The most important question on student evaluation forms is the 'teacher gave helpful feedback' (Ramsden, 1992, p.193). Feedback creates a two-way communication.

Students can use formative feedback to alter the gap between their actual knowledge and reference level of a system parameter (Ramaprasad, 1983), therefore to improve their learning outcomes. The teacher needs to have a clear concept of quality appropriate to the task to be able to judge the learner's work

in relation to that concept (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). There are three conditions that can promote student improvement (Sadler, p.1989):

- the student needs to possess a concept of the standard (goal or reference level) roughly similar to that held by the teacher,
- the student needs to be able to compare her actual or current level with the standard during the act of production itself, and
- the student needs to be able to engage in appropriate action to close the gap between his actual knowledge and the standard.

An important part of the formative feedback process is making students aware of and responsible for the attainment of appropriate standards of work (Sadler, 1987; 1989). The use of exemplars or model answers is an excellent form of feedback (Ramsden, 1992, p.193). Exemplars are chosen which are typical of a designated standard of work (Orsmond et al., 2002, p. 310). It is important for students to see examples of good and bad work so they can develop skills in assessing the quality of work. Being exposed to a range of work gives students a wider perspective of the possible range of solutions (Light and Cox, 2001, p.182). Exemplars give students a greater understanding of the criterion used to assess performance and course standards. Exemplars can help contextual feedback and encourage students to reflect more deeply on the assessment process (Orsmond et al., 2002, p. 310).

Nowadays, the use of technology makes available to students options that we never dreamt of before (Rosenberg, 2001). It allows learners the ability to access online learning resources and technology-mediated interaction (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2003). These can be made available to them using educational electronic systems like Blackboard (Larson, 2002).

In the remainder of this paper, we examine the operation of an on-line group feedback model which provides students with examples of good and poor student work in a group-setting. In the following section we provide the background and rationale for the current study. This section is followed by a report of an evaluation of student views about the efficacy of the group feedback approach. A final section concludes the paper.

This paper reports on the second phase of an action research study about on-line learning portfolios and student centred assessment. To provide some background to this current paper, we outline some of the key findings and issues from the first phase of the research that influenced the re-designed of the second phase.

First phase: using learning portfolios

In the first phase of the study (see Poyatos Matas and Allan, 2004a), a learning portfolio was used for industrial relations students learning in an on-line environment in the course Australian Labour Relations. This pre-existing second year Griffith University course was offered on-line for the first time in 2003. This course introduces students to the main actors and institutional features of Australian industrial relations in a 13 week semester.

The undergraduate on-campus course, Australian Labour Relations was designed as the introductory course to the field of industrial relations as part of the Bachelor of Commerce. Commencing on-line students were advised to take this course as their first option. When designing the on-line version of the course, it was recognised that many of the commencing students would be mature-aged, have low levels of literacy and little experience with information and communication technology. As a result, many of

the course resources were provided in hard copy – a study guide, text book and reading kit. Students were also provided with detailed advice on how to write in plain English, how to write an essay and how to reference correctly.

For the first cohort of on-line students, a learning portfolio was used as the first assessment item to introduce them to the process of writing academic essays. Students had to undertake three short answer exercises. Each exercise involved the following steps: write a short answer essay; provide feedback to a study peer on their short answer essay; receive feedback from a study peer and their teacher about their own work; and revise and resubmit their short answer essay based on the feedback they had received from their study peer and teacher.

These portfolio activities were designed as above for a number of reasons. As it was expected that students were unlikely to be experienced with essay writing, we designed the activities so that students would have several opportunities to practice and revise their essay writing skills. The provision of formative feedback to students and the expectation that student revise and resubmit their work, gave them an opportunity to reflect on their first attempts and revise their essay in light of feedback received. The emphasis of the learning activities then was feedback, reflection and revision.

We include peer feedback in the assessment design for three reasons. First, we wanted to give students the opportunity to see the work of other students. Second, we wanted students to reflect more deeply on the assessment criteria and we expected that this would take place as student provided critical feedback to their study peer. Third, by making student work with another student, by providing feedback to them and receiving feedback from them, we hoped that students would continue to informally work with one another through peer-assisted learning.

When we evaluated phase one of the study we reached two major conclusions. First we found that learning portfolio did improve student learning outcomes. By breaking complex learning activities into smaller learning tasks, the portfolio made learning objectives more achievable and effectively developed generic essay writing skills (Poyatos Matas and Allan, 2004b). Second, however, we found that the portfolio approach was ineffective in promoting on-line peer assisted learning. Some students did benefit from observing the work of another student. However, the peer feedback process was unproductive in fostering on line peer-assisted learning as students tended to react badly to receiving criticism from another student. While peer assessment can provide valuable feedback to students, it does take considerable skill to give and take criticism well (Light and Cox, 2001, p. 183). This was especially so in an on-line environment where students rely heavily on written communication in the absence of visual and audio clues. In our study, students remained highly dependent on the teacher and online students did not develop effective learning partnerships with other students (Poyatos Matas and Allan, 2004b).

One of the weaknesses of the original design of the portfolio assessment was that students were heavily dependent on the teacher. Students tended to disregard the feedback from other students and placed great value on the feedback, advice and guidance from the teacher. For the teacher, this represented a huge workload. In the 2003 class of some 21 students, the teacher dealt with hundreds of emails during the semester. The teacher also had to provide each student with several pieces of formal written feedback plus many other written emails of clarification, further elaboration, support and guidance. The teacher commented that it was very time consuming writing assignment feedback. In addition, to further exacerbate the workload, the teacher also fielded around 5 to 10 telephone calls per week from students about aspects of their assessment or for social or learning support. The problems of excessive teacher workload and heavy student dependence on the teacher were the main issues to be addressed in the redesign of the course for Phase Two, in 2004.

Second phase: a focus on formative group feedback

In phase 1, there was a high level of communication between students and teacher leading to excessive workload for the teacher. There was very little communication between students. The major change to the assessment regime in phase 2 was to introduce group rather than individual feedback. In 2004, there were seven students enrolled in the on-line version of Australian Labour Relations. Most of these students had previous higher education experience, were mature aged and working. Some had experience with distance education at other universities. Most of them had not had very positive experiences with external study.

In phase one, a good deal of teacher time was spent drafting written feedback to email to each student. This was very time consuming as the teacher needed to provide careful feedback that would not be misunderstood. The provision of detailed feedback was seen as essential as the on-line students received considerably less communication from the teacher compared to on-campus students who had the benefit of tutorial and lectures.

To reduce the teacher workload, it was decided to use a group feedback process as follows. Students emailed their essays to the teacher. The teacher removed the students name from the essay and from their Word document and relabelled as of the essays documents as: 'Essay 1', 'Essay 2' and so on. The teacher kept a record of which essay number related to each student. When the essays were all graded, each essay was placed on a web discussion forum using the labels 'Essay 1' and so on to ensure confidentiality. Once placed on the web, every student could examine other students' work.

Also placed on the web was feedback to the whole class. Students did not receive separate individual feedback. The teacher provided one piece of general feedback to the class about each of the assessment criteria. However, the general feedback also included specific comments about essays that student were directed to consult either because they were particular good or poor examples. For instance, on the criteria for 'correct structure – (introduction, body and conclusion)', the teacher provided the following feedback:

Essay 1 would have been improved with the inclusion of an introduction and a tighter conclusion. You will notice that people tried different approaches to starting their essay such as using a quote or definition to spark interest (Essay 2, 4); being as brief and direct as possible (Essays, 3,5, 7) or by moving from the general to the specific (Essay 6). Most people opted for a short conclusion. Starting the conclusion with the words 'In conclusion' is a very clear way of signposting where you are taking the reader.

By providing feedback that referred to specific essays, each student was able to receive some feedback about their own work. In addition, though they also got to view the feedback that the teacher provided to every other student as well. Students could also view the other students' work so that they could see first hand what the teacher was referring to when discussing other students' work. By this process of group feedback, each student was thus able to receive far more feedback than they would have done had they received only individual feedback about their own work. Interviews were conducted with six of the seven students in the class at the end of the semester to evaluate students' students learning experiences receiving group feedback.

Findings: students views on group feedback

Overwhelmingly, students were very supportive of the on line group feedback and reported five advantages, which are:

Receiving a broader range of feedback than individual feedback

During interviews, all students stated that they had never experienced group feedback in the past. They all felt that group feedback was very effective and all of them recommended that this feedback system be retained for next year instead of individual feedback. Most interviewees commented that the advantage of group feedback was that it provided them with a broader range of feedback than they would normally have received with individual assessment. Being able to look at other classmates' essays along with the teacher feedback also opened student eyes to the efficacy of different approaches to answering the set question.

And having wide range of things to look at, because we had everyone else's. I think that helped. Rather than just looking at your own essay; because by the time you hand that in you could just about read it aloud without looking at it. So you've got pretty close to your own. Whereas when you can quickly look at someone else and then compare with what you said was good or bad. Yeah, I think it's better. (Student Interview 5)

Engaging in comparing, reflecting and applying

A number of students commented that they were intrigued to be able to compare their essays and marks directly with other students. Such comparisons are a novelty for our University students as the institution uses criterion-based marking and does not grade to a bell curve. Students do not receive class ranking and commonly don't know how well they have performed in relation to the other students in the class. As part of the group feedback process, though, students are able to gauge how well they are performing in comparison to their peers.

More importantly, though, the group feedback provides students with a means of comparing, reflecting on others work and learning from examples of good and poor work.

People who get a good mark can compare theirs with people who didn't get a very good mark and vice a versa. The people [performing poorly] ... can see how other people have got reasonably good marks, they can make a comparison. Make a direct comparison. They can print them out and they can make a direct comparison between their work and other peoples' work and they can see why this one here is a good introduction. The teacher said this one here is a good conclusion. This one here really hits the nail on the head in what they're saying. Really making comparisons I think that's the most important thing (Student Interview 4).

Being able to make comparisons, though, is only the first step. As some students noted, the most important step is reflecting and learning from the feedback process and applying that new learning to the next assignment. One student noted, the group feedback process provided an opportunity for learning directly from peers.

It ... gives you an opportunity to see how other people did it. Like how other people that got better marks, how they achieved those better marks. And that sometimes helps as well. If you're struggling, having problems with essays to see, well this student did this and this is why they got the marks. And then you can look at it and think: 'well if I had of done that in my essay'. (Student Interview 6)

One student in particular made excellent use of the group feedback process to improve their work. This student, 'Rex', received the lowest mark in the group for his first assignment and the highest mark for his second assignment. When asked why his grades had improved so markedly, he stated:

I put it down to two aspects. It was feedback from the teacher and also the peer sort of reflection and having a look at, and reflecting on everyone's papers and saying okay, take some positives out of almost everyone's really and then putting that into my second piece. So I was able to really learn and I think that was the benefit of having such an open class and ... sharing everyone else's information. I really benefited from it, from learning off other students. (Student Interview 3)

A student also emphasised the importance of being able to reflect on his learning and the applying that new learning in the next assignment. This can help them to compare their current level with quality standards in the course (Sadler, 1989).

Having the opportunity to learn about their performance in relation to the class

Each person interviewed said that they had learned something from the group feedback received. The better students, though, stated that they didn't learn as much as the less able students. Some of the better students noted that they had learned a minor skill, such as finetuning their referencing or the judicious use of headings. In other cases, though, the better students acknowledged that they had learnt or re-learnt an important lesson from the poorly graded essays, such as the importance of answering the essay question. When reflecting on the feedback process, most of the better students commented on usefulness of the group feedback process for the lesser performing students. They emphasised that students who were performing poorly, could learn a great deal from the work of the better students and the teacher feedback. These online examples of work encourage students to reflect more deeply on the assessment process (Orsmon et al., 2002).

Having a transparent assessment process

One student stated that one of the strengths of the group feedback process was that it was transparent. She commented

I much prefer; that way it's a lot more honest and nobody's hiding anything. Generally I think it's a good idea to do it that way. (Student Interview 2)

In the same way that teachers evaluate and scrutinise the efforts of students, the group feedback process allow students to more closely examine teachers' assessment practices and conclusions. Another student added that the transparency of the feedback process could be improved by encouraging students to seek further clarification from the teacher to improve the group feedback process.

I think the group based feedback is very good, perhaps an encouragement and I'm sure that you did, an encouragement for people if they want further explanation on their particular essay to contact with you. You know. They may feel that the group feedback may not have provided enough explanation on them specifically. And I would think that perhaps those people that got the lower marks would have picked up the phone and actually spoken with you regarding more direct feedback, be specific. Encouragement to do that I guess. (Student Interview 1)

By making the entire assessment process open to class scrutiny, the group feedback process has the potential not only to improve feedback to student, but also to help democratise the classroom. As Doherty and Mayer (2003) have observed, the traditional classroom is highly structured, with vast asymmetry in terms of rights between teachers and students. Teachers have traditionally had a near monopoly on the right to assess worth, make criticism and judge others. The main venue for student voice has been reserved for the end-of-semester student evaluations.

The group feedback process, on the other hand, has the potential to provide more balanced teacher/student relations by making teacher performance, in terms of fairness, balance and consistency, more visible to the class. Encouraging students to raise questions about teacher allocation of marks and comments, offers richer learning opportunities for students.

Learning from the work of others

One interviewee was a full-time on-campus student at Griffith University who had enrolled in the on-line course to obviate the need to attend lectures and tutorials due to time pressure. She stated that the group feedback process was very similar to an informal arrangement where her classmates in other courses swapped essays after they had been marked.

Maybe it was actually very similar because of the fact that I have a lot of friends that do the same classes as I do. So it's almost like getting group feedback anyway, because we like swap around papers and read each others comments and that kind of thing. So for me it was quite similar to that, because we do that quite often. So I actually like that idea. (Student Interview 2)

In this way, the group feedback approach is similar to the informal information sharing among members of well-established informal students groups. Unfortunately many students at university never develop a deep learning relationship with a group of students and thus never get to see the work of other students or the feedback provided by teachers to them. The group feedback system allows all students to participate in this information sharing process in the absence of well-developed student social networks. Group feedback is thus particularly useful in the online environment as students are physically isolated from their peers and thus less likely to form the deep learning bonds with other students.

A matter of concern

The only matter of some concern to students was the issue of public display of essays. Some students stated that they were initially somewhat taken back at the thought of having their work posted onto the web. One student said to be initially sensitive about the public display of their work if they felt that they had performed poorly in their essay. However, all the students said that once they got used to the idea, they were more comfortable with the concept. They recognised that their work was posted anonymously and that no other student would know which work was theirs. They also recognised that every other student was in the same position. They also said that the benefits of group feedback outweighed the issue of public display. Most students reported feeling much more comfortable about having their work on display in the second assignment.

Discussion and conclusion

This pilot study has found that on line group feedback described here is potentially a powerful way of providing formative feedback and communicating to students about their learning, while also educating them about the standards expected of them by teachers. By placing student work and teacher feedback about group performance on the web, students are able to evaluate their own learning in the context of what other students are doing. It is difficult to imagine how such a group feedback process could operate without the existence of the Internet. The use of information and communication technology for course delivery and support offers new possibilities for structuring learning activities that are not possible in traditional modes of instruction (Macdonald, 2003). While formative group feedback can benefit learners, it also has advantages for teachers.

Online group feedback reduces the amount of feedback that teacher needs to give. This is particularly important for on-line learning as text-based communication can be time-consuming. For an on-line class of say 15 to 20, the teacher need only write one piece of group feedback rather than 15 to 20 individual pieces of feedback. For larger classes, students could be allocated into small tutorial-sized groups for feedback purposes.

While the teacher needs only to provide one piece of feedback to the group, there are some extra matters that the teacher needs to consider that they would not do in traditional individual feedback. First, the teacher needs to ensure that each student (identified by a number) is mentioned positively in the group feedback to ensure that each student is receiving some individual feedback. Second, there is a much higher level of student scrutiny of the entire grading process. Students are able to directly compare their work with other students and make judgements about the appropriateness of the marks allocated by the teacher. Teachers need to consider very carefully how and why they grade student work as they do. For some teachers, this shift in the balance of power in teacher/ student relations may be very intimidating. These teachers may prefer to post student essays on the web and provide group feedback but not display the actual marks awarded to each student. As an alternative to displaying actual student marks, teachers may want to create a list showing anonymous essays in order of performance without attaching actual marks. This would enable students to identify the better essays from the poorer ones without knowing the actual marks awarded. These options are possible in the on line group feedback system.

Online group feedback creates an opportunity to extend the dialogue teachers have with students about academic standards and student performance. It provides “assessment for learning” (Ramsden, 1992) as it is a constructive part of the learning process because it has been devised to support learning. Once the essays, group feedback and results are posted, students can be encouraged to ask questions about why certain attributes of students’ work are rated highly by the teacher and others are not. The group feedback process may thus serve as the beginning of a more sustained conversation with students about learning. However, the current study is a pilot and more sustained research is needed to more fully evaluate the effectiveness of group feedback as an approach that could improve student learning and lower academic workloads. Both are laudable aims.

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