Assessment Feedback Using Comment Banks: A Useful Approach?

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The workload of any academic can be challenging, with a plethora of activities and conflicting priorities. This paper provides an analysis of one of the most time-consuming of teaching roles; the assessment of student work. It begins with a literature review identifying the role of assessment and assessment feedback, and identifies best-practice in assessment feedback. A method of generating high quality feedback efficiently through the use of IT and comment banks has then been critiqued. The method proposed here has been trialled on a large cohort of students and feedback gleaned through two focus groups. Students demonstrated clear preference for feedback generated through the proposed method, and the time savings to academics are dramatic.

Introduction

Academics in Higher Education face a wide range of conflicts of interests. The passion for delivering the highest quality of learning for students is often compromised by the growing needs to conduct publishable research, Knowledge Transfer, and complete the not insignificant amounts of 'academic admin' and management. It is increasingly clear that academics need to seek the most efficient way of navigating through this workload without compromising on the quality of delivery. This paper seeks to discuss the role and purpose of student assessment, and more specifically the role of feedback in this context.

The seminal literature focusing on assessment feedback has been discussed along with information gleaned through numerous informal discussions among academics and two formal focus groups with students at different stages in their studies. This discussion has led to the creation and piloting of a new and innovative method of generating enriched feedback to the students in a more efficient way than traditional methods.

Student Assessment

It is clear that the assessment of student work performs many roles. These roles can be categorised into two broad groups; firstly those which focus upon the development and learning of the students, and those which impact primarily on the Tutor, providing feedback on students learning enabling improvements to be made.

While Table 1 does not purport to be comprehensive it does highlight the diversity of function that assessment has to deliver. When one tool is asked to perform so many tasks its design must be done very carefully to avoid possible conflict and ensure that it really is delivering the quality of learning that is being strived for.

Formative or Summative Assessment

The terms Formative and Summative assessment are widely used in the Educational environment; Formative assessment usually pertains to work that is assessed primarily as a learning process for the student to provide feedback and support to aid students further studies, whereas Summative assessment primarily aims to 'measure' student achievement for the purposes of grading. It is common place for any submission that is used for grading to be described as Summative however this is thought to belittle its role. If designed appropriately *every* assessment provides formative learning opportunities through the process of its compilation, the subject knowledge gained and the feedback received. Even assessment that is completed at the end of a students programme will contain formative learning as each work should build the individuals capabilities in the workplace they are likely to enter.

Table 1. The Functions of Assessment

Student focused functions	Enhance Learning and Achievement. Provides a framework for sharing educational objectives. Identifies landmarks to study toward. Receive feedback on their work. Demonstrate progression.
Tutor focused functions	Provides feedback to help teachers realign their teaching in response to learners' needs. Evaluate own performance and inform future changes. Diagnose remedial support needs for students. Enables the 'measurement' of student ability. Justification of mark.

Compiled from: Nicol and Macfarland-Dick (2004); Biggs (2003); Klenowski (2003)

Self Assessment

Assessment is a necessary and important part of Higher Education however a number of authors do highlight weaknesses with assessment. The most universal concern is that assessment can encourage surface rather than deep learning (Marton and Säljö 1976; Ramsden 1992). Numerous authors have suggested that students will engage in deeper learning if they conduct some appraisal of their own work (e.g. Taras, 2003; Boud, 1986). It is likely that students will always reflect upon their work to some degree however encouraging students to conduct this reflection more thoroughly is thought to enhance the learning gained. A number of authors go further suggesting that teachers have a key role in strengthening the skills of self assessment in their students (Yorke, 2003; Boud, 2000). A variety of methods are proposed in the literature which aim to support this; most focusing upon a form that students should fill out and submit with the work that is to be assessed.

This form should provide students with the opportunity to fully reflect on the work that they have done, asking them to identify the areas they are particularly happy or unhappy with and estimate a grade for their own work. It should also provide invaluable feedback to tutors who can use the completed forms to identify common areas in which students are struggling, common

misconceptions, and the specific areas that the student would like to receive feedback in. See Nicol et al. (2004) for full analysis of the design of self assessment forms.

Role and Use of Assessment Feedback

It is through the feedback of assessment that many of its functions are performed. As highlighted in Nicol et al.'s model, external feedback forms a vital part in the students learning (Nicol et al. 1994). Black and Wiliam's work (1998) further support this; they reviewed over 250 studies into assessment feedback conducted between 1988 and 1998 and concluded that feedback resulted in positive benefits on learning and achievement across all areas.

For students to gain full benefit from feedback however, they need to engage in the process of reading and reflecting upon the comments made. While this may seem like an obvious statement focus group research suggested that many students don't read the feedback given at all, some only skim read the comments, while very few fully analyse and reflect upon the comments and use them constructively for future reference. This finding is likely to be not a little disheartening for the practitioner who spends many hours assessing work and providing good quality of feedback. There is however hope; students also commented that they are more likely to read feedback if it is presented in a clear fashion, is easy to read, and they can appreciate the relevance of the comments made to their work. This serves to highlight the fact that the provision of feedback is not a simple piece of 'academic admin', but rather a sophisticated learning tool that must be used with care to ensure the opportunity for learning is attained. One seminal writer in this area (Sadler 1989) identified three conditions necessary for students to fully benefit from feedback. The student must:
   a) Have a good idea of the goal or standard which is sought
   b) Be able to compare their performance with this 'standard'
   c) Engage in appropriate action to close the gap between their performance and the 'standard'

Sadler (1989)

Nicol et al. extend this work proposing '7 Principle of Good Feedback Practice' (Nicol et al. 1994). Good feedback practice:
   1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
   2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
   3. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, and expected standards).
   4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
   5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
   6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
   7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Nicol et al. (1994)

Both of these checklists have been compiled by academics through the reviewing of pedagogic theory, and while their contentions are not questioned it

is interesting to note that neither author conducted primary research with students. The focus groups conducted here sought to gain an understanding of what students thought would be valuable in feedback. While it is recognised that students may not have the pedagogic understanding to fully critique this, their opinions are surely invaluable; if we can meet the expectations of student then they are more likely to engage in the process: learning can only be done with the engagement of students.

The focus groups highlighted a number of rather practical points which they felt would improve feedback quality. Feedback should:
1. Be legible. Feedback is often handwritten causing students problems to understand.
2. Highlight positive areas rather than simply outline what was done right. Balanced feedback is more motivational and will be taken more seriously.
3. Be clear, concise and well articulated sentences to ensure that it can be easily digested and interpreted.
4. Be easily applicable to future assignments, not too specific to the particular piece of work in question
5. Be individual to have clear relevance to each student in tern.

While each of the above comments appears entirely reasonable they do place significant demands on the tutor with a large cohort.

Methods of Constructing Feedback

Through discussion with students and staff it is apparent that a wide range of different feedback mechanisms are used. The key issue appears to be the extent to which students receive individualised feedback on their work as apposed to the cohort being given generic feedback. It appears that most academics currently adopt a hybrid approach, providing a mix of generic and individualised feedback. Generic feedback is very efficient to create as it eliminates the need for repetition and can be effective in communicating general points, where individualised feedback clearly requires more time and thought per student. Interestingly students were quite vociferously opposed to the over-use of generic feedback posting a number of objections to its use, commenting that they were less likely to take generic feedback serious as it may not pertain particularly to their work. While recognising that the use of generic feedback can be useful for the communication of common mistakes, the discussions made it clear that students' learning is best served through feedback being balanced in favour of individualised comments.

Our attentions should therefore turn to mechanisms which can aid our provision of individualised feedback.

Tick Box Approaches

Many staff across the school have adopted some quite radical mechanisms which allow them to provide students with a small degree of individualised feedback, but which dramatically reduce the time taken to assess each piece of

work. These approaches comprise of one form which contain a small number of graded statements for each of the assessment criteria laid out in the assignment brief. In order to communicate a students performance against each criterion one box is ticked. Some limited individualised comment can be added if necessary at the bottom of the form. This method of assessing has a number of benefits:

1. Completion is highly time **efficient**.
2. Provides a high degree of **objectivity** to the awarding of marks.
3. Students can clearly see what they would need to do in order to **progress**.
4. Provides very clear **justification** for the mark.

It appears that such feedback forms are broadly 'fit-for-purpose'. Their use does however mean that the student does not gain much comment on exactly how they can improve, and does not leave much scope for individual comment of the students work.

Academics who provide feedback in this manner anecdotally report high levels of student satisfaction with the process, however when students were shown examples of these forms in the focus groups their views were unanimously negative toward them, intimating that they would not provide the learning opportunities that a greater depth of feedback would. While highlighting weaker and stronger areas students felt that they needed further comment to demonstrate specifically how they can improve their performance.

Comment Banks

Through reviewing the comments the author had made on work from previous cohorts it became clear that most comments were repeated a large number of times and were applicable to a number of students. While generic feedback is viewed to be too impersonal over a large cohort it is likely that each comment made will apply to a number of students.

The author collated the comments made under each assessment criteria and found that between 10 and 20 comments could be written to effectively encapsulate the content from all feedback forms. If these comments could be typed into a 'comment bank' and selected when appropriate then students would receive the same quality of feedback but once a system had been set up significant time savings would be unlocked. Furthermore each comment input into the comment bank can be very carefully thought through to ensure it is completely clear, articulate and identifies the key improvements, something that is simply not realistic when writing a wealth of individualised comment on each assignment.

The author could find only one published work that critiqued the use of comment banks in this way. A similar mechanism to that described above had been piloted on a cohort of 55 Accounting students (Hornby 2004). Hornby reports significant time savings and positive student feedback.

Trial of Comment Bank Feedback

Comment Bank Feedback has been piloted on a cohort of 30 Level H students and 68 Level C students. The construction of the comment bank required approximately four hours of staff time; this is a one-off set up cost. This process was aided not insignificantly by the author having access to the comments given in previous years. These comments were collated against four assessment criteria identified in the assignment brief, numbered and input into an excel spreadsheet. This Excel document was then used as a look-up table automatically inserting comments into student feedback forms when the simple numeric code was input. A second spreadsheet collated all the students' names and marks and automatically calculated the average mark, standard deviation, count per classification and produced a graph of the mark spread. This second element not only provided a simple check, but reduced the time spent on 'academic admin' with the programme collating the information required in the format preferred by administrators.

It is estimated that the construction of fully individual feedback forms as previously used took, on average, 15 minutes per student. Through the use of this system re-typing was eliminated and the process of identifying and inputting the relevant codes took on average 2 minutes, a saving of over 43 hours when assessing 200 students, or over a year of working time over an academics career!

The form retained the opportunity for comments to be typed in individually allowing specific issues to be addressed when relevant comments did not exist in the comment bank. Additions to the comment bank could be quickly and easily made while marking if new common issues arose, allowing the comment bank to build over time. It is thought that once such a bank of comments have been constructed and tested it is likely that they would only require slight revision from one year to the next.

The feedback was presented to students in the familiar way. Students could not discern that comments had come from a comment bank and assumed that each comment pertained individually to their work.

Reflections and Feedback

It was clear that the assessing of the work was made easier and significantly quicker through the use of this programme. A number of additions to the comment bank were made while marking early assignments but overall the time saving was significant. On all work an individual summary comment was added, and on approximately one third of assignments individualised comments were added under the assessment criteria to cover specific issues. It is estimated that the time saved through the use of this process did equate to approximately 13 minutes per assignment.

Both focus groups were asked to review feedback constructed individually and that constructed using the comment banks. Students were not initially briefed on the difference between the two, and were simply asked which they though was more beneficial. The general view from both focus groups was that the

quality of feedback was clearer and more constructive in the second set of samples (those constructed through question banks). When questioned further students felt that the comments were easier to understand, more positive and focused more on what could be done than simply what was wrong. This is due to the fact that the marker has more time to reflect upon the wording of each statement when they are to be used numerous times than if they are individually written.

No student identified the fact that these forms were created from question banks and assumed that they were individually created. This is an important finding in light of earlier discussions which identified that students will take feedback most seriously when they believe that it pertains to them individually rather than having any generic elements.

Key Recommendations

- The use of Question Banks can significantly shorten the time required to provide assessment feedback.
- Widely familiar software packages can be used to aid the process.
- Students find feedback constructed through question banks preferable as each point is more carefully articulated.
- Feedback should be more positively focused: what could be done rather than what was not done.
- Typed feedback is more accessible and used more widely by students. This finding is probably antecedent to the use of question banks.

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