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Consistency v autonomy: effective feedback to a very large cohort

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CONSISTENCY V AUTONOMY: EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK TO A VERY LARGE COHORT

Frances Chetwynd
The Open University
Faculty of Maths, Computing and Technology
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, UK
f.d.chetwynd@open.ac.uk

Chris Dobbyn
The Open University
Faculty of Maths Computing and Technology
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, UK
c.h.dobbyn@open.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we report on an on-going project to change the culture of tutor feedback at the Open University, based on a new Level 1 Computing and IT module, My Digital Life, which currently has 4000 students enrolled, supported and assessed by a network of over 200 regional tutors.

At Level 1, effective feedback on assessment is essential for students' retention and progression. However, the OU's need to deal with such large cohorts has led to an assessment culture that tends towards consistency across multiple markers, with highly prescriptive marking guides, heavily geared to the allocation of marks, rather than encouraging tutors to provide focussed and constructive feedback. The project attempts to redress the balance towards tutor autonomy with a new style of assessment material, intended to develop students' core skills and self-directed, reflective learning, and a new style of marking guides, focussed on promoting future-altering feedback. This new strategy is being evaluated through structured interviews with a group of tutors.

Keywords
Assessment; feedback; retention; marking guides; large cohorts; computing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we report on an ongoing project to change the culture of assessment and feedback at the Open University (OU), centred on a new Level 1 Computing and IT module, *My digital life* (TU100), an innovative new, distance learning course providing a pathway into degrees in Computing or Information Technology. In any Level 1 course, effective feedback is essential for students' retention and progression. With some exceptions, however, there exists a culture of feedback within the OU biased towards affording consistency across multiple markers, based on highly prescriptive assessment guidance geared to the allocation of marks. This, we believe, is at the expense of tutors' freedom to provide focussed and constructive feedback, and the time to do so.

In this paper we describe an experiment in moving towards a culture that foregrounds feedback and the development of core skills, and promotes tutor autonomy. The project has three components: firstly, a new style of assessment material, intended to test and develop students' core skills; and secondly, the replacement of old-style marking guides with new *tutor guides* that aim to promote varied and effective feedback. Thirdly, we are evaluating the new strategy in a sequence of interviews with a randomly-selected group of tutors, and are using the results to enable us to refine the assessment and feedback system in future presentations of the module.

Many of the problems associated with the OU's culture of assessment stem, of course, from its role as a provider of distance learning to very large cohorts of students. However, in an era of ever-larger

class sizes in Higher Education, and with the increasing distance between teacher and learner that this brings, we hope the work presented here may be relevant to teachers in conventional institutions.

2. ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

In the past, feedback in university teaching may have been relatively unproblematic. Tutors would set assignments for a small group of students, mark these themselves, and provide targeted feedback, either in writing or in direct discussion with their students. However, the advent of mass higher education has generally meant much larger classes and increasing distance between teacher and taught, rendering such a strategy impossible. The problem is particularly severe in distance education, but is being felt across the entire sector.

Furthermore, with increasing numbers, student retention and progression have become serious issues for many institutions. Educationalists have long accepted that timely and effective feedback on assessment is essential for learning, and thus for retention. However, studies indicate that students value feedback [14], but that it is often ineffective [14] [2]. Several possible reasons have been suggested for this: failure to understand the discourse of the discipline, or academic language generally [8] [7] [6]; inappropriate understanding of the nature of learning [5]; and, perhaps commonly, an inability to apply feedback on a current assignment successfully to future work. Students often simply do not find tutor feedback usable [13].

Much work has gone into defining feedback [12], developing possible feedback taxonomies [1], and characterising the features of effective feedback [10]. In later work by Nicol [9], principles of good assessment and feedback practice are laid down, which have become foundations of current thinking. Sadler sees 'altering the gap' between a student's actual performance and a 'reference' level as central to the concept. But, as Walker [13] argues, feedback may either address the gap between the student's performance and the ideal for a particular assignment (retrospective feedback), or relate to more generic themes, applicable to future work (future-altering feedback). In Brown and Glover's classification, comments may refer either to the content of the student's work or to more general skills. This, together with Walker's distinction, suggests a four-category taxonomy of feedback: retrospective-on-content; future-altering-on-content; retrospective-on-skills; and future-altering-on-skills [3], as illustrated in Figure 1.
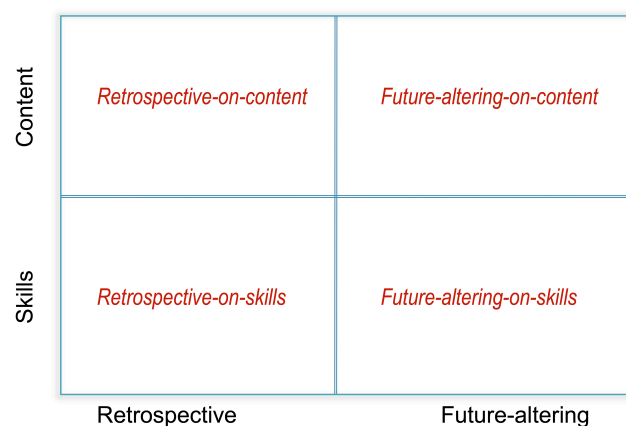

Figure 1. Four quadrant taxonomy of feedback

Price et al [11] look critically at the current state of assessment practices in HE, stressing that assessment should focus on stimulating learning, rather than on measurement, and asserting that it is ineffective feedback that causes assessment to fail in this. Gibbs [4] considers whether assessment in open learning supports students, commenting that OU students frequently struggle to understand criteria and learning outcome statements, and that they learn through a repeated cycle of practice and feedback.

3. MY DIGITAL LIFE

TU100 – *My Digital Life* is a new Open University 60 credit Level 1 course, providing a pathway into degrees in Computing or Information Technology. Among its many innovations are a specially-designed computing language, *Sense* (based on MIT's *Scratch*) which enables students to control the sensors and actuators of an external *Sense Board*. Teaching material is delivered in a mix of printed and electronic form, with considerable use of web-based material, video, cloud-based

applications, and interactive exercises. Currently, 4500 students are enrolled, with their work assessed by over 200 regional tutors, who also support students through face-to-face and online (Elluminate and forum based) tutorials.

A course catering for such large numbers, and with such a variety of material, will inevitably pose many problems. In addition to their hardware kit, students use a range of services and applications to study the course material and to write assignments, which tutors are then required to assess and feed back on. Each student and tutor will probably have a unique hardware and software combination – computer, operating system, browser and application suite – and will be using software and services – Sense, Google Apps, Elluminate, Moodle, with proprietary software such as Audacity and Picasa – in different builds for different operating systems. The use of such a plethora of systems and services has mean that the detail of assessment guidance to tutors had to change.

To further complicate matters, *My Digital Life* is the first new product of two recently combined faculties, which have had markedly different approaches to assessment, feedback, and tutor guidance. A majority of the tutors on the module are experienced OU staff, and for them the new regime represents a major culture shift. The central course team also needed to be convinced of the necessity of such a change. Sensitive to any possible charge that tutors' prior hard work was being disparaged, we put significant effort into providing background and justification to tutors, and to convincing them that the investment of their own energy in understanding and implementing the new feedback scheme would benefit not only their students, but also – through better retention – the OU as a whole. After the tutor briefing we provided additional FAQ notes and discussion, and encouraged tutors to share experiences and worries in an online forum, answering every query and discussion point as best we could.

Tutors come from a range of backgrounds and some may have deeply-ingrained, and not necessarily effective, marking styles. Certainly, to be effective, feedback has to be targeted at the individual, but aside from the sheer labour entailed in achieving this for such a huge cohort, the question of consistency arises. With so many markers, with such a range of styles and prejudices, it is important that students receive equal treatment from their assessors. Therefore, a particular difficulty is to write assessments and marking guidance that promote a new culture of assessment, and allow 200+ tutors the autonomy to offer feedback focussed on the individual student, while at the same time maintaining consistency of assessment across the entire cohort. If this difficulty can be overcome, then it may be possible for other institutions to adopt similar multiple-marker strategies in their large Level 1 modules.

4. THE PROJECT

As stated in the Introduction, to address some of these problems, and to give *My Digital Life* a fresh start, a project was instituted with three components, which we now discuss.

4.1 The assessments

On nearly all OU courses, students' work is assessed on a number of tutor-marked assignments (TMAs). In *My Digital Life*, assessment is based on six TMAs and an end of module assignment (EMA); there is no examination. All these assessments are both formative, in that written feedback is given within 14 days, and summative in that they count towards the final module grade.

Traditionally, OU TMAs have been heavily based on the *content* of the module they assess: the concepts, theories and paradigms of the discipline in which the module is grounded. Generally, members of the course team would each write one assignment, usually focussed on the content of one area of the module, and with little connection to other areas and no formal progression of skills between assignments. But as Gibbs [4] points out, if assignments keep changing in their format and demands, and have different criteria, the cycle of learning and feedback may be broken.

For My Digital Life, an early decision was taken that the TMA questions would, whilst still testing knowledge and understanding, more explicitly test skills – skills in various strands: numeracy, programming, note taking, summarising, etc. – and that it would be made clear to students the skills that every question aimed to assess. We argued that an assessment focussed on skills would enable feedback that was personalised, but applied to most students. Course team members each took on one skill strand and wrote questions on it for each assignment. This ensured that both questions and tutor guidance showed clear progression through the year, referring backwards to work already covered and forwards to future questions.

4.2 The tutor guides

Typically, OU marking guides have been oriented simply towards marks: the new tutor guides focus on clear and consistent feedback, sometimes dictating the award of marks down to the level of the

half mark. In the new tutor guides, tutors are empowered to use their discretion to award marks in bigger chunks. For each question, the new guides offer advice on the skills being developed, highlighting the main points to focus feedback on. An earlier survey [3] identified a tendency among tutors to repeat the same feedback in different places. Under the new regime, the four categories of feedback identified above are strictly separated: retrospective-on-content *passim* on the student's script; retrospective-on-skills in a detailed commentary, at the end of the script, on the student's performance on the skills assessed by the assignment; future-altering-on-skills and content (with the marks awarded) on a separate summary sheet. Looking forward, the guides also contain advice about where and when skills will be used next. Tutors are further supported by additional specialised guides – on English language and on programming – which they can refer to at their discretion.

As with the writing of the assessments themselves, one member of the course team oversaw the production of each tutor guide, to ensure the consistency of the advice and its separation into categories, as described above.

4.3 Evaluation

Before the course started, tutors attended a mass briefing, the afternoon of which was spent discussing the new assessment regime in small groups. Sample student answers were discussed and tutors were given an opportunity to air their reactions to the intended culture shift.

A group of fifteen tutors was selected for a set of three 15 – 20 minutes Skype follow-up interviews, to be spaced out through the presentation. The first round of discussions was held in the first month of the course, before tutors had marked the first TMA. The discussions covered the following issues:

- background and length of experience with OU, first impressions of the module;
- changes in the new tutor guide, with impressions of its usability and value;
- TMAs: clarity in what is being assessed and the feedback possibilities they afford;
- Tutors' individual concept of feedback;
- Autonomy and professional judgement.

The first round of interviews demonstrated that tutors were very positive about the module. The interviewees welcomed the wide range of background and experience of registered students, ranging from IT professionals looking for a formal qualification, to students completely new to IT and Computing. Most interviewees reported that they had received few queries from students on matters of understanding the requirements of the assignment questions – a marked improvement on predecessor courses.

On the tutor guides, which at the time of the first round of discussions most tutors had read but not yet had to use, all the interviewees commented on the reduced degree of direction on how to award marks, and the increased emphasis on feed back. Not all viewed these changes favourably, however, suggesting that it would be more difficult to award marks under the new scheme. All tutors agreed that the increased focus on skills was worthwhile, but were not agreed on how best to provide retrospective-on-skills feedback.

When asked what they hoped to achieve when offering feedback on assignments, many tutors mentioned 'helping the student to do better next time'. There was general recognition that providing future-altering advice separately would be helpful to students, and that the tutor guide would aid them in providing such advice.

5. CONCLUSION

The changes to assessment and feedback discussed in this paper were viewed by tutors on the first presentation of *My Digital Life* with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The evaluation we report here is preliminary and tentative. By the end of the presentation of the module, three detailed interviews with the selected tutors will have been carried out. The transcripts of these will be subjected to formal discourse analysis, which will then, we anticipate, present us with a clearer picture of the reception, and of the effects, of the changes on *My Digital Life*. We would expect, also, that the results will enable us to refine the assessment and feedback strategy in future presentations, and put forward further recommendations to interested practitioners.

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