JISC

Case study 8: Reflecting on feedback
University of Westminster

What this case study covers

- **Subject, mode and level:** Cross-disciplinary with a focus on first-year undergraduate courses in life sciences
- **Assessment topic:** Promoting active reflection and dialogue around feedback
- **Technologies:** Blackboard®; Google™ Apps; Microsoft® SQL Server® Reporting Services server-based report-generation system; RSSBus Data Provider™ tool for connecting applications to other data sources

Background

The School of Life Sciences at the University of Westminster offers foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate courses to more than 2,000 students. In 2008, the School (then known as the School of Biosciences) gained JISC funding under the Transforming Curriculum Delivery programme to embed technology-supported reflection into assessment and feedback processes. The scope of the project, known as Making Assessment Count, widened during 2009–2010 to include students and staff in other schools in the university.

At the heart of the Making Assessment Count project is the development and implementation of an innovative feedback system, known as e-Reflect. The process, initiated and owned by the student, is triggered by the receipt of a marked assignment. The student refers to the subject tutor's feedback on the assignment when completing an online self-assessment questionnaire, then reflects on the outcomes of the exercise in a learning journal, which in turn prompts tutor–student dialogue during face-to-face or online personal tutorials.

All full-time undergraduates in the School have the opportunity to take part in personal academic tutorials once a fortnight (once a week at the start of semester 1), during which they explore strategies for effective learning and draw up personal learning plans. An important aspect of full-time course delivery, this process is known as the undergraduate Academic Tutoring System (ATS). The e-Reflect system is designed to link into the ATS process.

Students taking part in the initial pilot of the e-Reflect system in 2009 were undergraduates in the second semester of their first year. A second group of students was introduced to the new system at the start of their first year of study in the academic year 2009–2010. In total, some 400 students have taken part in the pilot of the e-Reflect system.

Rationale

Feedback in an ideal world bridges the gap between 'current and desired understanding' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) yet evidence suggests a mismatch between learner and tutor perceptions of feedback. The National Student Surveys of recent years, for example, have consistently highlighted assessment and feedback as the least satisfactory aspects of higher education from a learner's perspective (Surridge, 2009). Tutors, on the other hand, claim that learners receive feedback but fail to act on it. While the picture is necessarily a complex one, this contradiction raises important questions about whether learners and academic tutors share a common understanding of the nature of feedback, how it should be delivered and what response it should elicit.

Studies have suggested a number of causes for the failure of learners to act on feedback, ranging from the basic (unable to read a tutor's handwriting) to the metacognitive (unable to decode the comments made by subject tutors). An additional problem is that both learners and tutors tend to view formative feedback as a simple transmission process in which comments given by tutors are readily translated into improved learner performance. This one-way view of feedback suggests little evidence of the changes that have taken place in approaches to learning and teaching:

'*Despite [changes to] conceptions of teaching and learning, a parallel shift in relation to formative assessment and feedback has been slower to emerge. In HE, formative assessment and feedback are still largely controlled by and seen as the responsibility of teachers.' Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006)*

Learners also tend to take a passive stance on feedback, many assuming that reading their tutors' comments is all they need to do. Students in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Westminster, for example, believed they *had* engaged with tutor feedback, but on closer analysis it was apparent that they were:

- Recalling their tutors' comments rather than responding constructively to the feedback given
- Compartmentalising feedback as relevant only to that particular assignment or module, thus failing to identify trends in their performance across different modules

In addition, there were failings in the ATS process which made it difficult to close the feedback loop. Personal academic tutors rarely saw the feedback given by subject tutors and depended on their tutees to pass on information. The personal tutorial system was, as a result, likely to disseminate generalised rather than tailored advice, leaving tutors unable to fully empower students to take responsibility for their own learning. The increasing size of student cohorts and the modular structure of courses at the University of Westminster tended to exacerbate these problems:

'Compounded by modular systems, students often find themselves in classes where they are "one in hundreds" and the structured flow of information between the module teaching team and that of the personal tutor is limited; if existent at all. This, therefore, places the emphasis on the student to relay key performance/feedback information to their tutor, leaving the tutor at a distinct disadvantage in helping the student to develop a learning strategy.' Mark Kerrigan, Senior Lecturer and Teaching Fellow, School of Life Sciences, University of Westminster

Before commencing work on Making Assessment Count, the project team conducted questionnaire research with 125 first-year students during the middle of the first semester in 2008. Thirty-five members of the teaching team were asked the same questions in order to compare their perceptions of the role and value of feedback with those of their students.

Results from the student questionnaire revealed that the majority claimed to read *and* value comments from subject tutors. However, data from the tutor questionnaire showed little evidence that students had used feedback to improve their performance. While students' inability to decode tutors' feedback may have been a factor, the proportion of marked assignments that were never collected – ranging from 21% to 36% during the academic years 2006–2008 – indicated a significant lack of engagement with feedback.

Transforming assessment practice

In the light of their preliminary research, the Making Assessment Count project team set out to make feedback the central component in an active cycle of reflection and dialogue. The model devised for

the project, the SOS (Subject, Operational and Strategic) model, forms the basis of the e-Reflect system and is initiated by subject tutors returning marked coursework. The process is as follows:

1. **Subject:** Students receive a grade and feedback from subject experts, indicating their level of performance from a disciplinary perspective and giving suggestions on how to improve.

2. **Operational:** After collecting their coursework, students fill out an online questionnaire, created in Google Apps and accessed via the VLE, Blackboard. The questionnaire requires students to engage closely with the feedback they have been given and focuses on both the process and outcomes of learning – for example, students are asked how long they spent on the assignment, whether the guidance they had been given was appropriate and sufficient, how well they understood the feedback they had received, and what actions they had subsequently taken, as well as the grade given for the assignment. Data from the questionnaire is exported by Google Apps into a spreadsheet and fed into a SQL Server database via RSSBus Data Provider (a commercial application that facilitates transfer of data between systems). Individual reports are then generated and sent to students almost instantaneously via email. (Westminster has recently adopted Google™ Mail for its student accounts to cut costs and provide students with increased storage capacity.)

   The reports record the results of the questionnaire and prompt students to re-assess their study habits – for example, a student spending insufficient time on task will receive the comment: *'You have not spent the recommended amount of time when working on this assignment. Perhaps you should look again at the guidelines for the assignment.'* SQL Server Reporting Services can also generate, at the student's request, graphical representations of recent performance across all the modules studied that semester.

   In the next stage in the process, students use the report as a prompt to write short reflective entries in a learning journal, created with the help of the blogging tool in Blackboard.

3. **Strategic:** Personal tutors have immediate access to students' learning journals although not to the feedback received on the original assignments. Tutors can comment on and extend the reflections in the learning journals, and suggest further action. Once this stage is completed, both tutors and students can take better advantage of their face-to-face contact time: students enter the tutorial better able to articulate their difficulties, while tutors, who can refer to their tutees' learning journals both before and during the tutorial, are better prepared to give appropriate advice and guidance.

   Data from reflective questionnaires can also be mined for evidence of curriculum delivery issues, such as aspects of a module that have caused problems for the majority of students. Any issues emerging from the data can then be reported to course teams for monitoring, modification and/or enhancement.

The e-Reflect model thus places reflection on feedback at the heart of the student learning experience:

'The onus is on the student to think strategically about what went well or not so well. The tutor may not have the subject-specific knowledge to interpret the feedback the student has received; the tutor's job is to facilitate improvements in the student's performance. The e-Reflect process provides the information that both students and tutors need to identify where improvements might be made.'
Gunter Saunders, Director of Technology Enhanced Learning, University of Westminster

Lessons learnt

The e-Reflect system has introduced changes to the way tutors work: subject tutors have found they need to dedicate time to amending module design and delivery and personal tutors, if they are to gain the most from the new system, need to comment on students' learning journals. (A small time allocation for this purpose has been awarded to the ATS tutors during 2009–2010.)

Advantages gained

Although receiving feedback is still a private experience, it is no longer a passive one – the e-Reflect system invites students to act on the feedback they have received by entering into a dialogue with their personal tutors. Take-up has been encouraging: among the approximately 400 students participating in the pilot, over 300 completed the questionnaire and 230 went on to make entries in learning journals. The report, including the graphical representations of grades across all modules, has proved particularly popular.

The value gained from face-to-face tutorials has also increased. Through the learning journals, personal tutors have a clearer insight into the problems students are experiencing and can enter into a better-informed dialogue with students about the learning strategies they need to adopt. Students acquire confidence in judging their own performance and, with better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, gain greater autonomy as learners. Although adding to tutors' workload is undesirable, time may be saved in the long run by establishing good study habits, particularly in the early stages of an undergraduate course.

Key points for effective practice

- **An active response to feedback is at the heart of effective learning**
- **Interaction and dialogue around learning increase learners' capacity to respond to feedback**

Learner perspective

'... if someone is listening to us, we have the chance to improve or change the way we think.' Student, School of Life Sciences, University of Westminster

'It provides a good opportunity to think and reflect about the completed work. It's quick and easy to use and enables you to gauge the amount of effort/time you are putting into a piece of work and maybe what you should be putting in. You are also able to compare information from your different subjects.' Student, School of Life Sciences, University of Westminster

Tutor perspective

'I feel I understand my tutees' motivations and how they approach their work. I now feel I am better equipped to support them in meeting their aspirations.' Tutor, School of Life Sciences, University of Westminster

References

Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007) 'The power of feedback', *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), pp. 81–112

Nicol, D. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), pp. 199–218

Surridge, P. (2009) NSS Three years on

Further reading

Tan, K. (2009) Meanings and practices of power in academics' conceptions of student self-assessment, The Higher Education Academy

Key words

Feedback, formative assessment, autonomous learning

Links

JISC Transforming Curriculum Delivery programme
JISC Making Assessment Count project
University of Westminster School of Life Sciences

Reflect and discuss

How can learners make an active response to feedback in the context in which you teach? In what other ways can technology help to make feedback a live issue for learners?

See also the Effective Assessment in a Digital Age video case studies: University of Westminster Reflecting on feedback