

“It’s like fifty-fifty”: Using the Student Voice towards Enhancing Undergraduates’ Engagement with Online Feedback Provision

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Abstract: Reflecting the continuing change in higher education student experiences in light of the electronic age it is crucial to examine whether digital feedback provision approaches are seen as helpful in promoting self-regulated learning. In the present study students (N = 99) completed a survey examining preferences and gathering initial qualitative data. A sub-set (N = 18) took part in focus groups. In line with trends observed in previous research, a high proportion of students preferred submitting work and accessing feedback online. Attitudes towards the shift from hard copy to online feedback provision were largely positive, focusing on improved aspects of spatial and temporal distance. However, the student insight also highlighted concerns around communication and motivation to engage with feedback, indicating there is a need for appropriate training to support the access to feedback and how to engage in post-feedback communication beyond the computer screen.

Keywords: feedback, communication, student training, student voice.

Introduction

Echoing the range of literature currently in place, higher education institutions are in a constant state of flux. A key domain of such changes is the use of technology to support – among other aspects of higher education – teaching and learning. What gives this field particular credence is the rapid development in new digital resources (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). This transition is inevitable and growth is showing no signs of declining (Abrahams, 2010; Sarkar, 2012). However, it is not just technological innovation that needs to be considered – we are also seeing continual student body changes emerging alongside. The majority of young people entering higher education is now part of the so-called digital natives (Prensky, 2001) or the net generation (Manuguerra & Petocz, 2011). This influx of students who have more and wider experiences of using technology are looking for immediate, personalized and flexible learning (Bradwell, 2009; Lai, 2011; McLoughlin & Luca, 2006) – they want to “work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they want to” (Gosper, Malfroy, & McKenzie, 2013, p. 278).

Yet while it is certainly fair to suggest that technology is not a freak occurrence within higher education but has, over recent years, become an important component (e.g. Turney, Robinson, Lee, & Soutar, 2009; Laurillard, 2006; Walker, Voce, & Ahmed, 2012), much of the literature around technology in higher education tends to be dominated by issues surrounding delivery of materials through pedagogy and instruction, such as digital teaching, distance learning, or online peer collaboration. However, a key aspect of the higher education experience is engagement with assessment, which is integral to student achievement of educational goals and motivation (Brown, Peterson, & Irving, 2009; Grieve, Padgett, &

Moffitt, 2016; Heinrich, Milne, & Granshaw, 2012). But here, too, attention has been turning towards how technology can be used to support student engagement (Ambler, Breyer, & Young, 2014; Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin, & Thorpe, 2011; Pellegrino & Quellmalz, 2010; Säljö, 2010; Timmis, Broadfoot, Sutherland, & Oldfield, 2016). Provision of feedback in particular is crucial as it can promote self-regulated learning (Brown, Peterson, & Yao, 2016). This makes it of central importance in the context of assessment as a whole since, arguably, self-regulated learning is what higher education seeks to impart.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that many young people now entering higher education are familiar with new technologies these experiences vary and often do not match the new skills required at university. This means institutions have a responsibility to promote appropriate learning opportunities for students to fully engage with digital approaches (Newman & Scurry, 2015). This does not mean having to replace all learning, as the use of technology does not categorically guarantee benefits. However, by incorporating digital approaches into a blended learning system students make outcome gains (López-Pérez, Pérez-López, Rodríguez-Ariza, & Argente-Linares, 2013) and they tend to show positive attitudes towards such approaches (López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). This means staff and institutions need to examine where blended approaches can be used that appropriately reflect the changing student body's needs and that therefore enhance the student experience.

Online feedback provision is seen to be as valid as marking in hard copy (Shaw, 2008). The use of technology is seen as beneficial as it helps to reduce plagiarism (Baker, Thornton, & Adams, 2008; Batane, 2010). It is seen as easier to use, allows for faster marking and therefore reduces the overall workload (Buckley & Cowap, 2013). Staff also see benefits for students, indicating that the quality of feedback provided to students is more targeted and more effective (Ambler et al., 2014). However, "if feedback is meant to improve performance, raise self-efficacy, and trigger self-regulatory processes, it matters how students perceive it" (Brown et al., 2016, p. 609; also see Ferguson, 2011). From the university student perspective, digital approaches do seem to offer greater flexibility in terms of time and space, which would suit this constantly changing demographic (Timmis et al., 2016; Turney et al., 2009). Most likely as a result of the student body changes we can also note changes over time in terms of their views on assessments. When it comes to submitting their work, students have expressed increasing preferences for online approaches. A decade ago this was noted in around a quarter of students (Bridge & Appleyard, 2005) but has since increased to half of students (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008) and more recently to two thirds (Ambler et al., 2014). On the other hand, preferences in terms of feedback provision do not seem to show the same kind of trend – instead, this seems to have remained stable at around half of students expressing such inclinations (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2008). The first observation is not overly surprising given the increase in net generation students, but the second notion does require further insight into why the same increases are not seen here. This suggests a clearer examination of key barriers to the implementation of online feedback provision.

Opinions regarding benefits of online teaching and learning are certainly mixed (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Students do recognize particular benefits of an online feedback provision approach. This includes the ease of access (Grieve et al., 2016), legibility of comments (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2005) and financial aspects such as travel and printing (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008). Time may also be a crucial feature since taking time to engage with feedback seems to be associated with higher levels of academic self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2016) and online feedback provision may allow for more self-paced engagement. However, previous research also points out potential downsides to digital approaches in feedback provision. Although digital services are continually improving, are technological issues still considered a significant issue for students (cf. Bridge & Appleyard, 2005; Buckley & Cowap, 2013)? Moreover, interpretation and use of feedback may differ between students, suggesting

that an approach that reduces discussion opportunities may not necessarily be most suitable (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; McLoughlin & Luca, 2006). Finally, an online approach may in fact contribute towards higher levels of depersonalization, which may achieve the very opposite of self-regulated learning (McCabe, Doerflinger, & Fox, 2011; Parkin, Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, & Thorpe, 2012).

While change is often needed, a top-down approach is not always the most beneficial when considering how to implement changes (Marshall, 2010). This means that in order to examine how best to incorporate digital approaches to feedback provision it is important to listen to the student voice (e.g. Bradwell, 2009; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Hast, 2015; Kay, Dunne, & Hutchinson, 2010; McCulloch, 2009; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012; Robinson, 2012). In doing so, it simplifies the process of identifying issues and barriers that exist within the student body both for and with students – this can strengthen a sense of community and belonging, which is much needed (Sandover, Partridge, Dunne, & Burkill, 2012). So although there may be benefits in online feedback provision from an institutional perspective, what are the key issues for students that need to be considered? As a result the present study sought to draw on quantitative and qualitative data of student preferences and views on online feedback provision through Grademark®, embedded within the plagiarism software Turnitin®, an “innovative assessment and feedback tool ... which benefits both academics and students pedagogically” (Chew & Price, 2010, p. 687). Specifically, it sought to drawing on their comparisons to hard copy feedback and their experiences of the transition from one to the other.

Method

The target participants for the present study were undergraduate students in their second and in their final year of a social science degree programme at a Higher Education Institution in the Greater London area. All of the participants already had previous experience of submitting work in hard copy as well as online using Grademark®. First year students were not included in this evaluation because they had no experience of hard copy submission at the institution. To gain more detailed insight into the student voice concerning online feedback provision a mixed method approach was chosen, combining both statistical trends and personal experiences (cf. Creswell, 2015). A survey drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data was carried out first, followed by qualitative focus groups.

Survey

A total of 99 students on the above mentioned degree programme completed the survey. Of these, 55 (87% female) were in their second year of study and 44 (89% female) were in their final year. At both levels students were primarily aged 18 to 20 years at time of degree enrolment (60% and 57% respectively), with the remainder identifying as aged 21 or above at that time (classified as mature students; cf. UCAS, 2016). Not all students on the programme completed the survey but these distributions are representative of the overall student body for the programme.

To gather initial insight into the student voice the survey covered a range of items and response approaches across two sections. The first section provided background questions about the student, opportunities to indicate which of their work had been submitted in hard copy and which had been submitted online. The main section of the survey then consisted of a range of questions using 4-point Likert scales, closed questions and open-ended response opportunities to elaborate on responses. Questions were asked about ease of access to online feedback, what they liked about the online feedback provision approach, what they did not like, and which method of feedback provision they preferred (hard copy, online or no preference).

Two versions of the survey were developed. While they both contained identical questions they differed in mention of specific modules, reflecting the relevant study level. Paper versions of the surveys were distributed to students during lectures. Students responded anonymously and the surveys took around 10 minutes to complete.

To examine the significance of quantitative responses the Likert items were analysed using Friedman's analysis of variance and post-hoc Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests with Bonferroni corrections applied (significance thresholds $p \leq 0.017$). Preferences were analysed using the same approach but with the post-hoc Bonferroni threshold $p \leq 0.025$. Differences in gender, study level and age group were analysed using Mann-Whitney tests. No significant differences were noted so are not given further consideration here. The open-ended responses were coded and combined, providing initial detailed insight into reasons behind the quantitative results.

Focus groups

Out of the 99 students who completed the survey, 18 participants were then invited to take part in one of five focus groups. Selection was made to represent the student body as closely as possible. However, because of more experience of hard copy feedback provision, slightly more emphasis was placed on third year students. Of these 18, seven were in their second year of study and 11 were in their third year of study. Three participants were male, 15 were female. Groups were organised according to study level to facilitate time arrangements and there were three or four participants per group. While recommended focus group sizes are typically five or six participants (cf. Krueger & Casey, 2014) the requirement of specific participants meant that organising appropriate times to conduct the groups presented a challenge. Data are presented according to focus group and participant number in that group (e.g. the first participant from the first focus group is referred to as 1.1).

Focus groups were conducted in one of the researchers' offices. The talks were facilitated by one researcher who used a pre-determined set of questions to guide the participant interaction. Participants were asked to discuss the benefits and the drawbacks of accessing online feedback in comparison to hard copy feedback provision, what they felt would make them more likely to access online feedback in the future, how they had been able to take into account previously provided online feedback, their thoughts and feeling about the relationship with the online marker, their recent experiences of engaging with online feedback, and their suggestions and recommendations for future use of online feedback provision. The sessions lasted between 15 and 39 minutes. All sessions were video recorded to ease the process of transcription.

After completion of the focus groups, the transcripts were analysed by drawing on a grounded theory approach (see e.g. Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Transcripts were coded following the three stages of open, axial and selective coding. First, manual line-by-line open coding was performed, which meant reading and re-reading the transcripts and identifying all emerging instances of attitudes, feelings, ideas, thoughts and experiences which were repeated multiple times. These were then constantly compared within and across transcripts. This was done until theoretical saturation had been reached. Memos were written alongside the extraction of codes. During axial coding the initial codes were then grouped to form thematic relationships with more elaborate definitions based on the memos. Finally, through selective coding central and peripheral themes were identified and relationships between themes were established.

Results and discussion

Accessing online feedback

A key aspect of interest in the evaluation of student views on online feedback provision was their perception of ease of access. There was significant variation among expression of levels of ease, $\chi^2(3, 86) = 43.21, p < 0.001$. Post hoc analyses show while 'fairly easy' (50.0%) was selected most frequently this was not chosen significantly more often than the second largest group 'very easy' (31.4%), which in turn was not selected significantly more frequently than 'fairly difficult' (16.3%). However, 'fairly difficult' was selected significantly more frequently than 'very difficult' (2.3%), $T = 3, r = 0.31$. The total percentage of students selecting 'easy' (either fairly or very) was 81.4%. Of particular note was that while a reasonably large proportion of students did judge access to have been 'fairly difficult' it was clear from the open-ended responses that this difficulty was frequently momentary, and this view was also confirmed by the focus group data:

I'd say it's easy to use to a certain extent, easy to access. Like, obviously, I think the first time we all used it, it was a bit difficult. (2.1)

Most of the survey responses highlighted ease of access (42% of open-ended responses). However, the responses and the focus group data also enabled to view these issues more critically, and participant views indicated that accessing feedback can be challenging. Challenges were expressed in two different ways. Firstly, it was pointed out that engaging with online feedback is only possible if there is appropriate technological access, which represented a majority of downsides identified in the survey (44% of open-ended responses):

As minor as it sounds, you've got to have internet access to do all of this. (3.3)

More critically, though, there were concerns from students that assumptions may be made about them regarding technology skills, limiting opportunities of access. Interestingly, these views were far more common among the mature students, showcasing that while today's university students may be more likely to be of the net generation (Manuguerra & Petocz, 2011) there exists nonetheless a certain risk of excluding particular students from an online feedback provision approach:

Some of us don't know how to access it properly ... they assume everybody knows how and is computer literate. (5.2)

The survey further demonstrated that a small proportion of participants were still unsure how to access feedback (7% of open-ended responses) Such views evidently highlight that more care may need to be taken to ensure that all students are given appropriate training opportunities, and these are discussed further below.

Preferences

As the participating students had experience of both hard copy and online feedback provision the opportunity was given to evaluate their preferences between the two, if any. Focus was on five aspects (submitting work, accessing feedback, reading feedback, understanding feedback, acting on feedback). There was significant variation among submission preferences, $\chi^2(2, 97) = 119.16, p < 0.001$. The preference to submit work online (85.6%) was significantly higher

than having no preference (8.2%), $T = 8$, $r = 0.62$, which in turn was not significantly higher than preferring to submit work in hard copy (6.2%). In terms of accessing feedback there was again significant variation among preferences, $\chi^2(2, 96) = 44.44$, $p < 0.001$. The preference to access feedback online (64.6%) was significantly higher than preferring to access it in hard copy (24.0%), $T = 4$, $r = 0.40$, which in turn was not significantly higher than having no preference (11.5%).

In relation to previous work that has similarly examined preferences of online submission and access a clear trend over time can be noted here. A decade ago only one in four students claimed a preference for online submission (Bridge & Appleyard, 2005) and this preference has since shown consistent increases to half of students (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008), just under two thirds (Ambler et al., 2014), and finally to over four fifths in our research. Accessing feedback does not show the same steep increases over time but has shifted from around half of students (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2008) to two thirds in the present study. These changes over time are probably a response to the increase in net generation students (cf. Manuguerra & Petocz, 2011) but may also reflect technological innovations.

The remaining preferences we examined further add to these trends. First, there was significant variation among reading feedback preferences, $\chi^2(2, 96) = 30.25$, $p < 0.001$. Most preferred to read work online (56.3%) significantly more frequently than in hard copy (33.3%), $T = 2$, $r = 0.24$, and this was in turn higher than having no preference (10.4%), $T = 3$, $r = 0.33$. For both understanding feedback, $\chi^2(2, 96) = 9.00$, $p < 0.05$, and acting on feedback, $\chi^2(2, 95) = 8.48$, $p < 0.05$, significant variations were noted. However, no further significant differences emerged between online and hard copy. It is nonetheless worth noting that in both instances the highest proportions were noted for online feedback (45.8% and 46.3% respectively).

Distance as connecting theme

A central issue that emerged from the focus groups in particular, but also finding support from the survey's open-ended responses, was that of distance in relation to online feedback provision. The data analysis identified three types of distance. Firstly, there was the aspect of spatial distance. Reflecting the preferences identified above, the survey showed students liked the fact that they could access or submit the work from anywhere without having to travel (19% of open-ended responses). Saving time and money as key benefit was also expressed in the focus groups:

I live a good, like, hour drive away so, you know, if I'm, like, 'aw, I forgot to pick up my feedback' it's not really that much of a big deal, I just go online and I can access it. (3.4)

Furthermore, in the survey students expressed a liking for the fact that their work was saved online (10% of open-ended responses) and that the work could be accessed at any time (9% of responses). Time may be a crucial issue since taking the time to engage with feedback has been suggested to be associated with higher levels of self-efficacy in university level students (Brown et al., 2016), and using technology offers flexibility (Lai, 2011; Timmis et al., 2016; Turney et al., 2009). The issue of access at any time was also linked to aspects of being able to engage with feedback in the comfort zone of home:

Having it on Turnitin really helps with privacy because sometimes in class you don't, you might not want your peers to look at what you got. (4.2)

As a whole, spatial distance was seen as a positive aspect as it reduces travel (and consequently finances), allows for storage that prevents loss, allows for immediacy of access to feedback, and can be done in a manner that allows more privacy. These are common factors that have also been reported in other studies (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2008; Grieve et al., 2016). The only direct negative aspect emerging here was an isolated concern about the ethics of data storage because submitting online meant the student became detached from the assignment and no longer felt having sufficient control over it (also see Timmis et al., 2016). With the increase in such information gathering this may become a more significant issue in the future.

Closely related to spatial distance was temporal distance. This was again seen as a positive as it meant convenience in terms of being able to maximise time writing assignments and reduced time travelled (linking back to spatial distance):

I commute and it takes me 1h30min to get to university. Turnitin allows me to send off all my assignments without rushing and at home. This allows me to give in a copy which has been proofread a lot of times. (Survey)

A third component to consider is personal distance. This referred mostly to communication, or lack of such opportunities. This was an area where most concerns emerged, though there were also positive elements. Some of the students liked the marker anonymity; others did not like this as it meant they were uncertain who to speak to about their feedback. This also meant there was no student-tutor relationship that could be established, and this was seen as a concern, and this relationship will be discussed in more detail. However, enhanced legibility of feedback, for instance, meant comments were easier to comprehend in the absence of the marker:

It's typed and it's easier to read than if it's, like, a tutor that's handwritten out. (4.4)

Communication

The three distances addressed here should not be seen as mutually exclusive. While temporal distance was largely seen as a positive, it impacted on personal distance because students felt they might not take opportunities to discuss drafts prior to submission if they do not have to travel to university. Similarly, spatial distance meant that personal distance was frequently inhibited, since being in the comfort of home meant it was possible to avoid communication with tutors about feedback. The survey already demonstrated that online feedback provision meant there was a perceived lack of relationship because it did not allow for immediate discussion of work (21% of open-ended responses):

You are not able to talk to the lecturer about the mark unless you book a tutorial to go through it. (Survey)

Although students were not actually prohibited from communicating with module tutors there was the perception that they would not be able to do this, complementing research where students express a favouring of face to face tutor communication (e.g. Healy, 2015). Again this highlights the need for appropriate training, not only for how to access feedback but how to maximise future improvements by discussing the work with a tutor. Overall this does appear to reflect concerns relating to depersonalisation (cf. McCabe et al., 2011; McLoughlin & Luca, 2006; Parkin et al., 2012) and the consequences identified in the student data are clear – interpretation of feedback becomes more challenging:

How I might have interpreted something you said may not be what you were trying to relay ... interpretation is down to the individual. (3.3)

Similarly, these issues have been noted in connection with self-efficacy and self-regulated learning in students, suggesting that levels determine the interpretation and use of feedback (Andrade, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Nonetheless, when weighing up the benefits and downsides, reflecting the preferences identified above, students frequently expressed that online feedback provision was preferred for its convenience even in light of the downside presented by communication issues:

Being able to access it wherever you are is much more important to me than coming in and having a quick conversation ... because I can do that another time. (5.3)

Motivation

A further core issue arising from the distance interrelationships is motivation. Both storage of data, meaning feedback can be accessed at any time and does not have to be done immediately, and the comfort of home can lead to avoidance of engaging with the feedback. While this is probably not unique to online feedback provision, some student views do appear to indicate that this approach may enhance this, possibly due to the various technological steps involved in having to navigate towards the feedback:

You don't necessarily go into the document and read all the document notes until you really kind of think you have to. It suddenly gets to the point where, well, maybe I am leaving something out, when struggling with the next bit of work. (4.4)

The avoidance of engaging with feedback in turn can lead to avoidance of communication with tutors. In addition to the personal distance issues identified already, while the home environment provides an important comfort zone the focus groups uncovered that students frequently felt that as a result there was no real need to discuss their feedback:

I'm less inclined though to come in to uni to then speak about my feedback if I've got it online. Whereas if I'm coming in to uni to get my feedback, you're in, you're there right then. (2.1)

Training

As a result of motivational issues, future academic performance could be impeded, especially in combination with issues around interpretation of feedback. Also, as noted in the first section of this discussion some students highlighted that accessing online feedback could be challenging because there are potential assumptions on the side of feedback providers that all students possess the appropriate technological skills, and a small proportion of students are unclear on how to access feedback. These challenges suggest that more focus may need to be placed on training. The focus groups in particular were able to uncover that a key issue for students was the transition from hard copy to online feedback:

I feel like if we started off using it ... we'd be used to it by now and it's just a matter of, you know, gotta keep going on there to try and understand how to use it. (4.1)

While the participants did indeed experience this transition during their degree, either halfway through their first year or their second year of study, it is very possible that this transition will arise for all newly enrolled students. The wide research field on school transition, for instance, focuses on the need to promote transition between settings to reduce challenges – and in the currently underexplored non-compulsory higher education environment this includes issues such as retention rates, requiring enhanced engagement with supporting transition (e.g. Gale & Parker, 2014; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). To address the issue of motivation and communication – which in turn impact the distances – more emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate student training. This needs to occur both to meet the technological aspects and post-feedback discussions (see e.g. Hast, 2017). The student voice enabled in the focus groups mirrors this need, in particular by highlighting the benefits in doing so, thereby enhancing motivation to engage. This includes clarifying the relationship between online feedback access and communicating with tutors to discuss the feedback:

It's been emphasised Turnitin is more of a plagiarism checker, and it's not actually something that can benefit you and for you to access feedback. (1.1)

Conclusion

While not a new phenomenon, in light of the changing student demographics and a heightened emphasis on promoting successful student experiences in higher education, this study has demonstrated that online feedback provision is perceived to be easy and is generally preferred over hard copy feedback. Accessing the student voice has helped uncover concerns but has also demonstrated mostly positive attitudes. The key concerns highlight that more care needs to be taken particularly on the communication level. This means developing appropriate training opportunities to ease the transition process and to reduce avoidance issues. Reducing avoidance of engagement should enhance overall feedback and student experience:

See, it's like fifty-fifty ... in the long run I think it would be beneficial, it's just learning to understand it more and get used to it. (4.1)

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