

Case Study

Rapid Personalised Feedback (and Feedforward) Using Mail Merge

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Abstract

This article highlights the need for personalised feedback on student work using experiences from the School of Biosciences at the University of Birmingham. It is argued that the value of such feedback is enhanced when it is clear to the student how a particular exercise builds on previous experience, and when it is clear that the developing skills will be used again to further improve performance. Using an example of a practical scientific write up it is suggested that the use of comment banks along with a requirement for students to actively reflect upon their performance promotes active engagement with feedback. Students were required to contribute in the feedforward activity as failure to do so resulted in the percentage mark (but not the grade), being withheld. Provision of personalised feedback was facilitated by use of mail merge. Although this was not essential it increased the efficiency and speed of the marking and feedback process for the staff involved. The high level of student participation and positive comments in the module evaluation questionnaire suggests that the exercise positively reinforced student engagement.

Introduction

As academics we spend a lot of our time marking student assignments. This process has two aspects: firstly the mark, indicating to the students how well they have matched the criteria, and secondly the annotations which aim to indicate to the student where they have gone wrong and what they should be doing to improve their next piece of work. Perhaps because of an assessment-driven culture that is imposed by the A-level exam system, students at university often take the awarded mark as the end point of an exercise. Annotations and feedback are frequently ignored, as evidenced by the piles of marked work that accumulates in the tutors' pigeonholes after online release of marks. Not surprisingly, students score low on the Birmingham Student Survey (BSS) and National Student Survey (NSS) questions when asked if they have had feedback that improves their performance in subsequent assessments. So how can we get the students to engage with the feedback we provide and use it in subsequent assignments? This problem has many aspects, including the siloing of modules by students and the lack of students' reflection on feedback for use in future assignments.

Highlighting feedforward

To address these problems we need make it clear to students about the tasks/assessments that will be coming up in the future and how the current exercise will help them do better in the next one. A partial solution may be to unpick the perception that success in assessment is achieved by absorbing and regurgitating knowledge. While knowledge is important (and much easier to assess), there is an increasing recognition that the outcomes of a degree course are skills-, as well as knowledge-based. If marking criteria appropriately encompass skills in addition to knowledge, and these are transparent to students, then the feedback provided should clearly signpost how the students can improve in subsequent assessments.

Another key aspect is the recognition and use of the feedback that has been provided. I was led to address this aspect of the feedback loop in the School of Biosciences where scientific writing is a key skill. As an example, construction of practical reports is a skill required of all scientists and there is a clear and well accepted format for these. In Biosciences, practical work in the first year introduces some of the components of such reports, which are then developed in skills modules and tutorials through into the second year. This then leads in the final year to a major piece of assessment which is the write up of the research project and requires a full understanding of formal communication of science, both in writing the report but also understanding how 'real' scientific papers are constructed.

A practical example

My attempt to increase recognition and use of feedback by students was trialled on a second year ecology module taken by approximately 70 students. A major component of the continuous assessment in this module was a write up of data collected in the field in the form of a scientific paper. Given the central role of such reports in science it is not surprising that similar reports are required in other modules, both in second and final years. Considerable instruction was given to the group, including reminding them of where they had undertaken some of the required components in their previous year's study, and where the skills they were developing would be used in subsequent modules.

The students submitted their reports to the Canvas VLE via Turnitin. These reports were downloaded and comments were added to scripts using the annotation facility in Microsoft Word. For an assessment such as this, where the criteria are clear and less subjective than a more open-ended essay, comments can often be repetitive. Accordingly scripts were largely annotated with codes referring to a bank of comments, for example T2, T2.M1, M1 and O1, where T refers to 'Title' 'M' is for methods and O is 'overall' etc. T1 might be 'good title', T2 'title is too short, use a question or statement', and O1 could be 'use past tense' for example. A list of the codes was compiled as the marking proceeded, but once constructed these lists of comments can be used in subsequent assessments. More specific annotation was added as required on individual scripts. Each script was saved in a folder with the student ID number.

At the end of the annotation process each script was given a mark appropriate to the marking criteria. The mark was added to the module Microsoft Excel spread sheet (but not on the script). The work was then moderated in the normal way. The 'if' command in Excel was used to set up columns where the percentage mark awarded was converted to a class (first, 2:1, etc.). The spreadsheet also contained a column of students' email addresses. The annotated scripts were returned to students by email-mail merge along with the final list of annotation codes. Note that mail merge will only allow you to email the same document to all recipients; to send each student their own individual script you require a mail merge add-in such as Mapilab¹. Additionally, some generic, exemplar write-ups of work from previous years with extensive annotation indicating good points and areas for improvement were also made available on the Canvas VLE.

¹ <http://www.mapilab.com>

Mail merge or blackmail?

Students were emailed individually using mail merge to send each student their grade (for example first, 2:1, etc.), but not the actual percentage mark. In this email it was outlined that the percentage mark (a favourite type of 'feedback' for students!) would be sent to them when they uploaded a word document of three sentences to the module Canvas site indicating one aspect they thought they had done well and two ways they think they could have improved their write up. These 'student reflection' documents were collected on Canvas by setting up an 'assignment' and the uploads by individual students could then be tracked in 'grade'.

The students who had uploaded a file of reflection could be checked on Canvas and this was recorded each morning on the Excel sheet. Each group of responding students was then contacted using mail merge based on the existing Excel spreadsheet and sent their actual percentage mark. At the same time, using the 'IF' command allowed those who had not yet engaged to be reminded of this.

After three days over 80% of the students had engaged with the process. At this stage the Word documents of individual student reflection were downloaded and merged into a single document. This was then divided into two documents, one with positive comments and one suggesting ways the reports could have been improved. All students who had uploaded their own reflections of the feedback were then emailed these two summary documents.

Did it work?

Yes. The take up (84% of 65 students) showed that simply withholding the percentage mark (but not the grade) was sufficient to get students to engage more closely with the feedback provided. Once the spreadsheet was set up and a familiarity with mail merge was achieved the operation was simple and straightforward to operate. It will be difficult to measure in this ad hoc study whether students' learning has been improved by their reflection on the feedback, but their comments on the module evaluation questionnaire (MEQ) were positive: *'the feedback exercise was really useful'*, *'the documents you sent with everyone's comments give good tips to consider for future assignments'*, and *'we could see the scale of good to bad for each section so we know how to improve next time'*.

The process was easy to operate and it personalises what could be seen as merely generic feedback. The technological expertise required is not large and once set up is straightforward to operate. While the sanction of withholding marks was not great (as the students were told their grade), it would be interesting to see if they would still engage without this encouragement. Finally, it may be that interacting with students in this more technological manner may be more familiar and accessible to them and may result in reduction of the piles of uncollected work in the pigeonholes, with a concomitant increase in appreciation of the feedback we provide.