Discipline/Course/Subject Area:

Management

Institution:

Glasgow Caledonian University

Start date:

2005-06

Impact:

The practice was introduced:

[X] across a level 3 core module

[ ] across level …..of a degree programme

[ ] across CBS / two or more subject groups

[ ] across the institution as a whole

The practice was adopted by:

[ ] the department, other departments in the institution and in other institutions

No. of students affected:

c700

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Title of Practice – Creating and using a database of frequently used feedback comments when marking students' written coursework (Strategic Management)

Abstract

Strategic Management is a level 3 core module delivered to c700 students via a teaching team of 8 staff, 5 of whom are part-time staff. This interim case study focuses on early stage piloting of Electronic Feedback Software (EFS) to improve the quality and timeliness of feedback. The case study which follows documents the experiences of academics' piloting the free software designed by Phil Denton of Liverpool John Moore's University. The process of implementing the software is reported on and key findings from the resulting evaluation are highlighted. Interim conclusions are that EFS is a very useful tool in assessment strategies on large modules with large teaching teams. Findings show a good correlation between manual and automated grading can be achieved. A key benefit for the teaching team of using EFS has been in facilitating discussion of existing assessment practices; in surfacing previously unchallenged assumptions e.g. in clarifying understanding across the team about assessment criteria; the purpose of feedback; and the allocation of grades.

Description of Implementation

In what context did the new assessment practice happen?

The focus of this interim case study is the level 3 core module Strategic Management. This module has a student enrolment of c700 and a teaching team of eight, three of whom are full-time and five of whom are part-time members of staff. Team teaching has many advantages but it also brings challenges many of which relate to academic consistency in teaching, support and crucially for the REAP project, assessment practices, namely in improving the timeliness, quality and consistency of feedback provided to students.

What was the rationale for introducing the practice?

The teaching team has already designed and developed an assessment process that links two pieces of coursework, providing opportunities for peer and tutor feedback both in class and online. The principle of the team's coursework design is for the first piece of assessment to inform the second, and in this sense provides the opportunity for students to receive quality formative feedback. The coursework also enables students to assess their readiness for the end-of-module exam. Despite considerable discussion of module content and assessment criteria through scheduled team meetings and a system of peer support amongst staff, feedback provided to students has been found to be variable in terms of content and style. At the same time the teaching team felt it could do more to encourage student self-assessment, especially before submitting the second piece of coursework. Moreover, the team has found that many students do not collect the written feedback provided to them, demonstrating arguably a greater interest in the mark awarded rather than in the feedback provided and the learning that can come from this. The module team has therefore decided to pilot the use of technology in their quest to tackle the interlinked issues of a) consistency and quality of feedback provided by the teaching team; and b) student engagement with assessment criteria and feedback.

How was the practice implemented?

Phil Denton's EFS software stores created feedback comments and student and tutor names and email addresses. It can be used to generate and send an email to each student comprising the feedback comments selected. It can also be used to produce a final grade for the piece of coursework, aggregated from weighted marks attached to each feedback comment. It allows the tutor to insert personalised comments for each student and adjust automated grading where necessary. Before the software can be used feedback comments and weighting have to be entered. To do this the teaching team used an existing course work assessment

instrument complete with assessment criteria with associated weightings. Members of the teaching team created a range of feedback comments with marks for each criterion of assessment within the EFS resulting in a comprehensive database of feedback comments and marks.

This was achieved by implementing the following steps:

1. Two half day workshops – one with the author of the electronic feedback software; one by the subject e-champion. The former involved a demonstration of the software, and its potential benefits in ordering and structuring feedback to students. The second attended by the wider teaching team (8) involved reviewing current assessment practices and gaining hands-on application of the electronic software, using a bank of feedback comments extracted from previous student assignments.

2. The current assessment instrument has five clearly-worded criteria, each individually weighted. The electronic feedback software required thought to be given to grading *within* each of these five criteria[1], something that had not been done explicitly by the teaching team hitherto. This required the module team to engage in considerable discussion about how one might formulate feedback within criteria, and this seemed to surface previously unquestioned and unchallenged assumptions about current practice. What constitutes a 50% within a given criterion? What constitutes a 70% within the same criterion? And what constitutes a 60% or 65%? How can one capture this in assessment criteria feedback that clearly differentiates, and differentiates in a way that can be clearly understood by the teaching team and the students?

Evaluation
Once the database of criteria and associated grades and feedback had been formulated the electronic feedback software was trialled on a blind basis, using students coursework assessed in the previous semester. A total of 50 scripts were divided amongst five teaching team members, together with a semi-structured questionnaire for evaluation. The questionnaire was designed to capture views on the extent to which it was felt that EFS could improve the quality, consistency and usefulness of feedback; on advantages and disadvantages based on the trial; on the time taken, i.e. whether it was quicker or slower than manual feedback; and elicited views on the appropriateness of the criteria developed by the module leaders.

Interim evaluations have shown that EFS is a very useful tool in assessment strategies on large modules with large teaching teams. Tutor feedback supports the potential for enhanced feedback to be provided by all tutors for all students. Findings show a good correlation between manual and automated grading can be achieved. A key benefit for the teaching team of using EFS has been in facilitating discussion of existing assessment practices, in surfacing previously unchallenged assumptions e.g. in clarifying understanding across the team about assessment criteria, the purpose of feedback and the allocation of grades.

Future Plans
As a direct result of this pilot it is planned to use EFS to grade coursework and provide feedback comments to all students in the next academic session. The experience gained in undertaking the pilot will lead to some modifications both to the assessment criteria and to the criterion statements. Student views on the feedback they receive will be sought following completion of the assessment process.

What resources were needed?

a) Access to low-cost (free) software
b) Training in software usage by software author
c) IT support related to installation of software, and file-sharing
d) Team meetings to review, discuss and agree marking criteria
e) Team training sessions
f) Financial support to pay for invested time

Perceived Benefits (bullet point)

For students… (based on quotations from the staff evaluation)

- "If feedback can be returned to the student electronically I believe that this significantly improves the chances of them reading it and therefore making use of it"
- "The printed reports are easier for students to read and access if e-mailable"
- "The quality of the feedback is far superior to what the students are given at the moment (excluding one to one meetings) ".
- "It encourages closer matching of student work to the marking criteria and therefore improves consistency"

For teaching/support staff… (based on quotations from the staff evaluation)

- "Features such as e-mailing, report compilation, mark calculation, personalised formatting, etc. really save time and ensure/enable creative, effective and thorough feedback for students. Will probably dramatically reduce the number of student coursework queries."
- "The pre-determined feedback phrases provide constant reminders of what markers are looking for"
- "In view of the amount of required marking, I think it's great. Was a bit apprehensive at first, but I must admit in terms of speed of marking, quality and consistency, I give it the thumbs up!"

Issues/Challenges

For students…

- Students may feel the marking criteria are too prescriptive.
- Student understanding of meaning of assessment criteria and standards
- The degree to which students perceive that the criteria are shared, understood and applied consistently by the teaching team.
- Student ability to self-assess their own work formally using the criteria before submission.

For teaching/support staff…

- "It may be difficult to find a statement that fits the work"
- "Depending on the quality of the criteria formulated, the consistency of feedback can be consistently bad as well as consistently good"
- "Concerned over the security of the system. Also concerned over loss of data"

Enablers that Help/helped the Practice to Work

- The REAP initiative as a whole, providing both financial and advisory support
- Cross – institutional dialogue and debate
- Institutional commitment and support for change
- Active interest and participation of module team

Points of Advice

- It is essential to discuss assessment criteria with the whole teaching team as a first step in any re-engineering of assessment practice.
- In large teaching teams individual tacit assumptions and understandings of marking criteria need to be made explicit on a group basis. Use of electronic software feedback facilitates this process. (Cont'd .../)

Points of Advice (Cont'd)

- Set-up and training costs of re-engineering assessment with the use of EFS are substantial. However the pilot suggests improved economies of feedback provision using EFS, i.e., Greater potential for a return on tutors' time and input.
- Views on quality from the students' perspective is necessary following roll-out of the system.

Possible Improvements/Enhancements (suggested by the case study provider)

- Involve students in development of assessment criteria, in order to enhance student-centred approach to learning

Further Reading

Relevant publications by those doing case-study:

www.ljmu.ac.uk/cis/software/feedback.asp.

http://www.education.uts.edu.au/ostaff/staff/boud_publications.html

Black, P. and William, D., (1998), "Assessment and classroom learning", Assessment in Education, 5(1), 7-74

Nicol, D. and Milligan, C., (2006) "Rethinking technology-supported practices in relation to the seven principles of good feedback practice", In C. Bryan and K.Clegg (Eds.), "Innovative Assessment in Higher Education", Taylor and Francis Group Ltd. London

Relevant/influential/related publications in the research literature suggested by the case study provider: