



Review for Session Topic: Effective Feedback to 550 Students

Commentary on:

**Baxter " A Case Study of Online Collaborative Work in a
Large First Year Psychology Class"**

By

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How would *you* feel if you were asked to take sole responsibility for teaching more than 500 students in a year? And let's suppose you were given only two 1-hour lecture sessions a week in which to meet them and no assessment opportunities apart from two multiple-choice tests and a final examination? It might well strike you, as it clearly did Jim Baxter, that you'd have no way of giving your students personal feedback on how they were coping with the ideas in the course. And, without such feedback, you might well feel that, although you would be telling people things, you could hardly be said to be teaching. What would you do?

Jim Baxter's approach, outlined in his case study, was to encourage the students themselves to give one another the formative feedback that is necessary for learning to take place. As they went through the course, students were expected to explore the course material collaboratively online, comment constructively on one another's ideas and draft essays, and thereby contribute to one another's development. Sad to say, although the majority of students who finished the course reported learning from other students' contributions, most were reluctant to offer one another constructive criticism. So the hoped-for individual feedback remained in short supply.

Let's be grateful to Jim for giving us a case study that, unlike so many, is not the story of a *fait accompli*, where everything has gone according to plan. Instead, he has shared with us a work in progress, successful in many aspects -- not least in using assessment to help student focus on key course content -- but with plenty of room for us to exercise our imaginations, not only about the constraints of his situation and how he and his students might overcome problems and build on what has been achieved but also about the implications for teaching and assessment with our own students.

To prime the pump for discussion, I have added a few questions that occur to me. But it is your conference and I am sure you will have many more urgent issues of your own to raise. I look forward to meeting you online and I wish you an enjoyable and useful participation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What proportion of a student's total study time might ideally be devoted to assessment activities that give rise to formative feedback?
2. What might be the pros and cons and practicalities of expecting students to provide one another with formative assessment and feedback?



3. What possibility is there of developing objective (computer-marked) assignments that are capable of testing (and providing diagnostic or other helpful feedback on) levels of learning higher than recall and recognition (e.g. analysis of problems and application of principles)?
4. What other ways might there be of assessing the ongoing learning of large cohorts of students without over-burdening staff?
5. The ability to critically assess the work of others (and of oneself) is a key skill in any profession; how do we help students learn to provide supportive and unthreatening assessments?
6. How might students be persuaded to take seriously an assessment (or teaching) activity that does not directly contribute to their grade on the course?
7. Have you any suggestions as to how Jim Baxter might modify his course for 2007-8?

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