

Increasing ESP Student Engagement Through a Process of Structured Feedback

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Abstract

Student engagement is a common concern among many instructors in higher education. This is particularly true relative to student feedback. Indeed, of all the responsibilities inherent in university teaching, grading papers and offering feedback is considered one of the most important, yet least enjoyable among instructors. There are numerous reasons for this, including the amount of time it takes to grade and offer personalized feedback as well as the perception among many instructors that students do not consider feedback as anything but a justification for a particular grade. An overarching goal of feedback, namely to encourage a more thoughtful revision process and to help individuals develop as learners, seems to be lost on many students. This study investigated how to increase student engagement through a process of structured feedback by more effectively utilizing the tracking feature of Microsoft Word. A total of 42 first-semester female engineering students at a university in the UAE were involved in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a survey of both students and faculty, semi-structured interviews of both students and faculty, and analysis of student-written text and observations. Preliminary findings from student-driven data only suggest that students given explicit instruction and training in how to interpret and act on written comments improve their writing, engagement, and motivation to learn.

Keywords: student engagement, structured feedback, engineering students, motivation, attrition, ESP

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Introduction

Student engagement is a common concern among many instructors in higher education (Fraser, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2010; Hepplestone et al. 2011; Wolters & Taylor, 2012). This is the case among many faculty members at this UAE university. Due to a number of factors unique to this university, from the background of its students to its unique post-graduation guaranteed job placement program, faculty often find that attempting to engage students using approaches and methods commonly practiced in the United States and Western Europe often prove ineffective. This is particularly true relative to student feedback. Indeed, of all the responsibilities inherent in university teaching, grading papers and offering feedback is considered one of the most important, yet least enjoyable among instructors (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Wojtas, 1998). There are many reasons for this, including the amount of time it takes to grade and offer personalized feedback as well as the perception among many instructors that students do not consider feedback as anything but a justification for a particular grade (Carless, 2006; Chang et al., 2012). An overarching goal of feedback, namely to encourage a more thoughtful revision process and to help individuals develop as learners, seems to be lost on most students (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010; Rowe & Wood, 2008).

Research questions

This study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

1. Does explicit instruction and training in how to interpret and act on written comments improve student writing, engagement, and motivation to learn?
2. How do these students, most of whom are accustomed to high academic achievement, respond to structured feedback that requires that they take specific steps to earn high marks?
3. Is there a difference between those students that attended private English-medium schools vs. those that attended government Arabic-medium schools in terms of the effect of structured feedback?
4. How can feedback best meet the needs of those students that feel neither an integrative motivation nor an instrumental motivation to learn English (and develop their writing skills)?

Methods

Triangulation and purposeful sampling were used to gather data. According to Thurmond (2001), triangulation is an effective data gathering approach. Purposeful sampling is also an effective technique to identify specific individuals based on their experience or knowledge about a particular topic of interest (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Data were collected through a survey of both students and faculty, semi-structured interviews of both students and faculty, and student-written text and observations. Only finding from student-driven data is considered in this preliminary report.

Participants

The participants were 42 first-semester Emirati female freshman engineering students in two sections of Communication 101 enrolled in the fall of 2015. This is the first of two required communication courses freshman students must complete before being allowed to take more advanced design courses. All 42 students responded, making the return rate 100%. It is likely that all surveys were returned because they were distributed to participants in class and collected from participants before leaving class.

This may also account for all questions being answered. All participants were between 18 and 20 years of age. Thirty-one and a half percent of the students reported that their major is petroleum engineering, 22.3% indicated that their major is mechanical engineering, 15.2% chemical engineering, 14.5% electrical engineering, 8.3% material sciences and engineering, and 8.2% petroleum geosciences engineering.

Instrument

A survey was developed from themes identified in the literature. The survey was divided into five sections: 1) Demographic information, 2) Student Perceptions of Feedback, 3) Value of Feedback, 4) Preferences for Feedback, and 5) Suggestions for feedback. These sections were adopted from Edeiken-Cooperman and Berenato's (2014) study of undergraduate elementary education majors and their perceptions of electronic feedback as an alternative to handwritten feedback. There were 28 closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. A five-point Likert-scale was used for the closed-ended questions. Responses ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The two open-ended questions were: 1) How can feedback be improved?; and 2) Is there anything else you would like to say about feedback?

Procedure

Participants in the researcher's two sections completed the questionnaire on the same day. The questionnaires were collected before students left the class. Interviews were conducted over a two-week period before and after class and during the researcher's office hours in an empty classroom.

Results

Preliminary results suggest that many students believe that feedback is important and helpful to their learning. While no consensus exists as to what type of feedback (handwritten, electronic, or verbal) is more useful, a majority of students believe that feedback in any form is used to justify a grade.

Table 1 reveals that 62.4% of students strongly agree that instructors provide enough feedback, while 12.3% are neutral. A majority (59.2%) of students strongly agree that written feedback is usually provided within one week, while 9.7% are neutral. Almost all students (88.5%) strongly agree that feedback is a justification for a given grade, while only 1.3% are neutral. A majority (57.4%) of students strongly agree that feedback is motivating, while 15.1% disagree. A majority (64.3%) disagree strongly that feedback is useful only when one receives a low grade, while a majority (80.5%) disagree or disagree strongly that feedback is useful only when it's positive. Finally, 81.5% agree or strongly agree that "The grade I receive is a better indication of my learning than feedback."

Table 1: Responses to Closed-ended Questions

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	My instructors provide me with enough feedback.	62.4%	23.3%	12.3%		
2	Written feedback is usually provided within one week.	59.2%	31.1%	9.7%		
3	Instructors use feedback to justify grades.	88.5%	10.2%	1.3%		
4	When my instructor gives me feedback it shows me that he or she cares about my work.	56.3%	24.4%	19.3%		
5	When I receive a lot of feedback, I feel encouraged.	60.3%	26.5%	13.2%		
6	Feedback motivates me to study.	57.4%	15.4%	12.1%	15.1%	
7	Feedback is important to me.	78.2%	18.4%	3.4%		
8	I find feedback useful only when I receive a low grade.		2.3%	10.2%	23.2%	64.3%
9	I often have a hard time reading written comments.	22.3%	11.2%	6.1%	31.2%	29.2%
10	I find positive feedback the most useful.		6.4%	13.1%	39.2%	41.3%
11	Understanding written feedback is often difficult because instructors use different approaches and terminology.	35.3%	49.4%	10.2%	5.1%	
12	I always read the feedback on my assignments carefully.	23.1%	11.3%	6.2%	33.3%	26.1%
13	The grade I receive is a better indication of my learning than feedback.	37.3%	44.2%	13.4%	5.1%	
14	I prefer verbal feedback over written feedback.	21.2%	15.8%	10.4%	37.3%	15.3%

8. Discussion

Preliminary results suggest that it is possible to increase student engagement through a process of structured feedback among these 42 Emirati female freshman engineering students, but the time and effort needed to bring about meaningful change is dependent on a number of factors. One challenge is helping students navigate the varied and often structurally different ways instructors offer feedback. Eighty-five percent of students, for example, feel very strongly or strongly that understanding written feedback is often difficult because instructors use different approaches and terminology. While requiring that instructors follow one approach or practice to providing feedback (e.g., using the tracking feature of Microsoft Word) is both unrealistic and unnecessary, establishing guidelines that instructors across courses can follow (e.g., provide explicit training in how students interpret and act upon feedback) could go a long way to help.

Nearly all students (98.7%) also believe that the main purpose of feedback is to justify their grades. This is in contrast to the 80.7% of students that strongly agree or agree that “When my instructor gives me feedback it shows me that he or she cares about my work.” These seemingly contradictory results suggest that students have an ambivalent and somewhat complex relationship with feedback. On the one hand, they see feedback as a tool used by instructors to justify a particular mark. On the other hand, they seem to recognize that there is inherent value in an instructor’s feedback to improving learning. That 86.8% of respondents strongly agree or agree that they feel encouraged when they receive a lot of feedback from instructors, while 72.8% strongly agree or agree that feedback motivates them to study offers additional insight into these overtly contradictory beliefs. Complicating matters is the finding that 81.5% of students agree or strongly agree with the statement that “The grade is more important to my learning than feedback.”

Likewise, 96.6% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Feedback is important to me.” This, along with the 87.5% of students that disagree or strongly disagree that “I find feedback useful only when I receive a low grade” is more evidence that many students perceive feedback as both a tool used by instructors to justify a grade and an opportunity for students to learn and improve their work. What is striking, however, is that 59.4% of students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, “I always read the feedback on my assignments carefully” while only 34.4% agree or strongly agree. The idea that feedback is important to and valued by many students, while apparently not being read carefully by many students, is both noteworthy and worrisome. After all, if certain beliefs are held by students and their behavior is affected by these beliefs, then the idea that many students value something that they are apparently not carefully reading suggests that there is a disconnect between beliefs and practice.

Although respondents appear to be inconsistent with their beliefs about feedback, an overarching reason why this is the case might be linked to their experience receiving feedback over the years both in and outside of school. While understanding this link between perception and experience is beyond the scope of the current study, it is something that deserves to be examined further.

Conclusion

Students provided seemingly contradictory responses to questions about feedback. While feedback is often perceived as justification for a grade, it is also valued as an opportunity to improve assignments and grow as learners. Where a participant falls on this continuum depends, in large part, on the kind of experience they have had as students. It is necessary, therefore, to better understand the kinds of experiences students in a particular course have had prior to entering university. Doing so should offer insight into how individuals perceive feedback and what responsibility they have to engage with feedback in a positive and meaningful way.

Although preliminary findings from the current study raise more questions than provide definitive answers, it is clear that among many of the 42 Emirati female freshman participants, increasing student engagement through a process of structured feedback is possible. The challenge is to recognize that feedback is contextual, co-constructed, relative and uniquely interpreted according to factors that may or may not be apparent to all stakeholders. While student engagement increased over time, it

is unclear at this stage of the research if that increase is sustainable over time. As students complete their first semester and move on to their second semester, they will not only encounter a number of new instructors, but will likely find that these instructors use their own particular feedback system. Establishing guidelines that instructors across courses can follow in giving feedback may help ameliorate some of the burden this places on students.

Limitations and Recommendations

The primary limitation stems from the study's design in that only females in the researcher's own classroom were included. Freshman male students taking the same course with another instructor could have been included, but doing so would have inevitably complicated data collection. Nonetheless, future research should consider expanding the current study to include males.

Another limitation is the fact that the researcher was conducting emic research. While the benefits of emic research are well-established, being part of a group or community under study poses a number of potential problems. In this case, the researcher's familiarity with the participants may unduly influence his interpretation and analysis of data. In addition, serving as both the instructor and researcher in the current study opens up the possibility that the Pygmalion effect (or Rosenthal effect) influenced participants in undue ways, thus impacting the results of the study.

The third limitation is connected to the fact that the study is still on-going. While the findings are preliminary, it must be recognized that the researcher has yet to fully consider the other data that has been collected to date (i.e., interviews with faculty and observations of participants and an analysis of their writing samples). Consequently, understanding that interpretations may change as more data is collected and analyzed is important.

Further research of the current study could explore what impact early intervention has on the ability of students understand and act upon written feedback using, in this case, Microsoft Word. If students that appear to struggle with the writing process (and, thus, how to incorporate feedback into their writing) are given additional support early in the semester, they too might exhibit more growth as writers/researchers and produce documents that clearly demonstrate the benefits of feedback.

Finally, additional research should better understand how feedback can best meet the needs of those students that feel neither an integrative motivation nor an instrumental motivation to learn English. Doing so will help those individuals confronted by the challenge of learning English as a second language while being expected to effectively use it to advance their studies.

While trying to understand the role feedback plays in learning is a complex process, doing so is beneficial to the individual student and everyone with whom he or she engages.

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