

Feedback and the First Year Experience in a Multidisciplinary Critical Skills Module

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Class Size

650 students distributed over 24 classes.

Feedback Approaches

Multi-stage assignment, Rubrics, Peer feedback

Discipline

Multidisciplinary

Technologies

Moodle Assignment/descriptive rubric (moodle.org), Turnitin PeerMark (turnitin.com)

Challenge & Aim

Critical Skills is a first-year, multidisciplinary module that is offered to all of Maynooth University's first-year students on an opt-in basis. The course aims to foster: the development of analytical skills; the ability to deal with complex arguments; the capacity to evaluate evidence and make balanced judgments; and the ability to communicate ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing. In 2016 the module was taught to 650 students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, distributed over 24 classes.

The key aim of this case study was to embed technology-enabled feedback approaches across the critical skills module in order to:

- Directly impact student learning;
- Increase student engagement;
- Compliment the broader learning outcomes for the course; and
- Reduce tutor workload.

Evidence from the Literature

The case study employed a range of technology-enabled feedback mechanisms: Exemplars and rubrics; Multi-stage assignment; Peer feedback; and Audio Feedback.

- **Exemplars and rubrics** can help students understand the standards associated both with a particular assessment, and with the subject discipline. They can also promote transparency, consistency, and efficiency in feedback provision (Carless 2015).
- In the **multi-stage** approach, the assessment comprises two or more related stages interleaved with feedforward comments (Hounsell 2015). Facilitating feedforward in this way can support engagement with feedback (Carless 2015).
- **Peer feedback** potentially offers many benefits for student learning and motivation, particularly in relation to the development of self-regulation (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin

2014). When assigned to review somebody else's work, students are invited to step from the position of the person being evaluated into a position of an evaluator. This position requires knowledge of all course materials, analytical capabilities and critical thinking. While all these are also required to write an "ideal" written submission, they are employed differently as a reviewer.

- **Audio feedback** has potential to generate number of practical and pedagogical benefits for students and teaching staff. These include: supporting feedback comprehension and student engagement with feedback; provision of richer feedback; improvements in relation to access and flexibility; and potential for time saving (Y1Feedback 2016).

Feedback Approach

The cornerstone of this case study was a **multi-stage essay** assignment which incorporated peer feedback, audio feedback, written feedback and rubric feedback. It consisted of the following stages:

Stage 1 - Thesis statement peer feedback

workshop: Students reviewed material on identifying, assessing and writing thesis statements. They then worked in groups to craft and critique thesis statements.

Stage 2 – Peer, audio and written feedback

on draft essay: Students submitted a draft of their essay to Turnitin. They also exchanged hard copies with a peer in class.

Students provided each other with typed feedback using an instructor-supplied rubric*. The draft was not marked, but the peer feedback was assigned a grade based on its specificity and helpfulness. In addition, the class tutor provided audio feedback on the draft via Turnitin's GradeMark function.

- * Although Turnitin PeerMark does offer a peer feedback interface, experience on a pilot iteration of the module indicated that PeerMark is not suitable for use with this cohort.

Feedback Approach

Stage 3 – Rubric feedback on final draft:

Tutors marked the final draft using a Grademark's rubric and commenting functions.

Students also submitted a **reflective learning journal** using Moodle Assignment. Tutors provided written feedback on journal entries using a descriptive rubric.

Outcomes

The feedback strategies used as part of this case study accomplished the desired aims. Audio feedback allowed instructors to provide meaningful, personal, and empathetic feedback. An effective strategy is to combine the audio feedback needs with feedback to the entire class on common errors and areas for improvement.

Peer feedback can be a daunting experience; however as this case study demonstrates, the benefits to students' development as learners and writers in addition to the immediate impact on the assignment can be significant. Key to the success of this case study was the early introduction of peer feedback using in-class writing; in addition, tutors modelled peer feedback by discussing their own experiences with the process.

Workload remains the largest obstacle to providing feedback to students. The audio feedback requires as much time as traditional written feedback but may offer qualitative advantages. The willingness and ability of students to act on feedback was variable. The reflective learning journal writing prompt asked students to describe how they would incorporate the feedback. Assessing the students' use of feedback proved to be taxing. This required comparing the final submission with the draft, the audio feedback, and the learning journal. Small class size and a limited teaching load are pre-requisites for the strategies used in this case study.

Student Response

Students were asked to discuss their experience of peer feedback in their learning journals. A survey was also circulated to the students; however as response rate was low, the results discussed below should be considered to be anecdotal. Students' assessment of the peer feedback in the learning journals was overwhelmingly positive regarding the value of being exposed to the work of their peers at the draft stage. The following comments are indicative:

"Not only did I find the process of receiving peer feedback beneficial, but I also found that giving my own feedback was incredibly helpful. It aided me in building a better idea of what the other students in the class were working like and made me feel more confident about my own work as well."

"I thoroughly enjoyed receiving and giving peer feedback. It helped me to better my writing skills and get to know more people in the class. I also enjoyed reading through and assessing someone else's work. Doing this gave me a completely different insight on what the essay could be about and gave me on how the essay could be written from another perspective."

"I felt like this experience of peer feedback gave me an overview of how similar or different my essay was to another person's work. I could identify the

standard of work that was shown in the essay that I reviewed and within my own."

Students did express some reservations regarding peer feedback in the survey however:

"It is hard to get feedback off a peer as they may not want to say if there was anything that could have done with improvement ie the feedback from your peer is a lot 'nicer' and therefore less helpful than the feedback from the lecturer where it is more honest."

"the feedback given to me was not useful as it was biased towards the fact the student thought the more criticism they gave me the better marks he would have got and he told me that personally."

In relation to the audio and written feedback, in the survey, while some students indicated that they found this mode of feedback to be beneficial, and referred to the personal nature of the audio feedback, others indicated that they had not been aware of the availability of their audio feedback, a problem that students had also raised directly with their tutors.

Recommendations

- Incorporate feedback and reflective learning into every class if possible. This can be as simple as asking students to summarize the two most important points of the previous class. Short in-class writing that is shared in class is also effective.
- Audio feedback requires a physical work environment that is difficult to achieve for tutors: individual computers and a quiet space to record comments.
- We encountered many difficulties with Turnitin GradeMark and Turnitin PeerMark, and therefore cannot recommend these systems for use with large cohorts. Despite repeated demonstrations many students reported difficulty in finding the recorded audio comments on their drafts. In addition, the interface is not intuitive and the set up for

exchanging drafts is restrictive. As a result, the peer feedback was completely 'analog.'

- Descriptive rubrics can be a useful tool for marking assignments and, if sufficiently detailed, providing a modicum of feedback. The functionality of Moodle Assignment is superior to Turnitin.

Useful Links/Further Information

The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>)

References

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Contact



If interested in finding out more about this approach or technology, please contact Dr. Brian McKenzie at brian.mckenzie@nuim.ie.

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