Feedback before marks, feedback instead of marks?

Learning and Teaching Conference 2023

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Disclaimer

- The content of this presentation is based on academic work.

- The presentation might not reflect the university's own priorities or actions.

- Our university has approved and implemented a large set of exam board regulations which run contrary to best practices employed by academic staff.

- The university is currently not prioritising the release of feedback to students, be it formative or summative.

- These actions stand in contradiction with general goals of teaching and learning, on which the following presentation is based.

Background

What's our mission?

Provide structures for students to grow as scholars and people	**Or: Rank students against each other**
We want students to ask:	We encourage students to ask:
"What did I learn?"	"How many points did I get?"
We want staff to ask:	We make staff ask:
"How can I help?"	"How can I ensure compliance?"
Focus on feedback	**Focus on marks**

(Sackstein 2015)

What's our mission?

First view: Learning is an ongoing process (Ambrose et al 2010)

1. Students engage with concepts and materials
2. Students have opportunities to try things out, receive feedback from instructors, and try again.
3. The cycle repeats until some goals are met or exceeded.

Today's point: foreground the feedback!

Case study

LEL2A 2022-23

- LEL2A, "Linguistic Theory and the Structure of English"
- Large pre-hons course (Y2, Sem 1, ~180 students), required in LEL.
- Mid-term essay (worth 40% of the final mark):
  - Choice between a number of essay topics (or an Unessay, e.g. Kastner and Zhao 2022).
  - Submitted via Turnitin.
  - Marked by tutors and moderated by the teaching team.
- In 2022-23 we **released the feedback before the number marks**.
- Focus was on feedback, rather than on marks/competition.
  - Butler (1988 et seq): students learn best when they get feedback **without** marks.
- Dependent variable: number of returned submissions opened on Turnitin.

Findings

1. Students **opened the returned Turnitin submission even when they knew there would be no mark** associated (first 36 hours).

2. Higher overall rates of opening returned submissions both right after submissions were returned (36 hours) and later on, with marks (5 month time frame).

	2021-22	2022-23
Submitted	150	165
Opened +36h	69 (46%)	87 (53%)
Opened +5mth	102 (68%)	123 (75%)

None of the differences between years are statistically significant (Wilcoxon rank-sum test).

Discussion

Caveats:

- The 2021-22 lectures were live online; the 2022-23 lectures were in person.
  - Impressionistically, many of us felt higher levels of engagement in 2022-23.
- We didn't ask students for feedback on this feedback feedback.
- Opening a Turnitin item doesn't entail that the student read the feedback.
  - Much less internalised it.
- We don't have(?) research on what our students attend to when they get feedback.
- The university has indicated in APRC that it does not value (timely) feedback.

However:

- Findings consistent with feedback being at least as important to students as marks.
- Why not focus on feedback **instead of** marks? (https://media.ed.ac.uk/media/t/1_zydssy92)

Thanks!

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- This is easy to do technically, if:

1. Students name their file by exam number (as they're supposed to do), i.e. B123456.pdf

2. Markers enter only feedback into Turnitin

3. Set up a separate spreadsheet for exam number and mark
   - Our Teaching Office does this already, with columns for submission time, extensions, essay question, tutor assigned to mark, etc

4. Enter the marks in the spreadsheet

5. Teaching Office imports the spreadsheet into EUCLID
   - CO can also post a version of the spreadsheet onto LEARN, but you'd need to convert exam numbers into student numbers.

Technicalities