Investigating different types of criteria-based assessment through student data: towards optimization of assessment designs

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Introduction
Currently, there is a trend in higher education towards formative assessment practice in the hope that assessment can serve as a feedback tool for learning rather than of learning (Honauer et al. 2006). In this context, criteria-based assessment is often advocated on the argument that it provides students with transparency and clear articulation of learning goals – facilitating deep approaches to learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2003). However, some studies point to potential difficulties associated with criteria-based assessment in that it might undermine students’ ability to act independently post education, and thus ironically hinder deep approaches to learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Bailey 2009). Also, there is increased scholarly interest in the question of how different types of assessment and feedback channels impact important affective factors of successful learning, such as motivation and learning climate (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Västberg 2009).

Aim and research questions
In light of the challenges involved in designing successful formative assessment practices, our study presents and evaluates an assessment design in a first-year university writing class for academic purposes. The set-up combines two types of criteria-based assessment: in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback. We asked the following research questions:

• How do students understand, integrate and act on the two feedback channels: in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback?
• Are there benefits in a combination of feedback channels or would just one suffice?
• How effective is the current assessment design for a combining the two feedback channels?

Method and Material
We used action research methodology to investigate our own professional practice through systematic and reflective study of student data. We looked at three sources of data for triangulation of data collection methods: 46 semi-structured interviews, 46 questionnaires and 7 semi-structured interviews. Data analyses involved a hermeneutic method where we identified key themes and interrelationships and patterns in students’ comments.

Results
Strategic attempts to link the two feedback channels involved exemplary discussion and self-assessment. The exemplar included both in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback from the two teachers normalized and compiled onto a common text and rubric.

In text-commentary included editing symbols and teacher comments in the margins of both higher and lower concerns, and a paragraph of general comments at the end of the paper.

The rubric assessment sheet indicated the assignment’s achievement in the form of criteria linked to grades.

Students connected the two forms of feedback in different functions. In-text commentary was experienced as informing mostly to lower-order concerns and language proficiency issues, while rubric-articulated feedback emphasized higher-order concerns related to writing development achievement. Further, students generally found that both channels were necessary, but even though we tried to balance comments in the two feedback channels, some students experienced difficulties in navigating between feedback channels. Thus, there is room for improvement and optimization of the assessment design.

Looking ahead
As a way of looking forward, we list a number of strategies for creating synergy effects between the two feedback-channels, with the aim of generating an assessment strategy serving both short-term and long-term learning outcomes:

• Supplement in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback with a third feedback type that can serve as a bridge, e.g. recorded oral feedback or screen capture.
• Color code in-text commentary to the rubric category it corresponds to.
• Ask students to write reflective texts on the relationship between the two feedback types received.
• Ask students to write a short memo describing changes made between drafts.
• Time self-assessment differently for a more gentle introduction of this activity.
• Follow-up early assessment activities with teacher-student discussions of feedback.

Literature

Further information
Part of the study was linked to Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.