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Nordrum, Lene; Evans, Katherine; Gustafsson, Magnus

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

Lene Nordrum & Magnus Gustafsson, Division for Language and Communication, Chalmers University of Technology; Department of Applied Information Technology

Katie Evans, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Davis

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 (Hounsell 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 2006; Värlander et al. 2008). 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; Värlander 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 questionnaires, 46 questionnaires and 7 semi-structured interviews. Data analysis involved a hermeneutic method where we identified key themes and interrelationships and patterns in students’ comments.

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-text commentary</th>
<th>Rubric-articulated feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower-order concerns</td>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-order concerns</td>
<td>Writing development achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Potential for a sufficiently balanced assessment design serving both short-term and continuous learning goals |

Students connected the two forms of feedback in different functions. In-text commentary was experienced as delivering 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 caption.

• Color code in-text commentary to the rubric category it corresponds to.

• Ask students to write reflective texts on the relation 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


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