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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 (Hounsell et al. 2008). 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; Macfarlane-Dick and MacCune). 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. Research also indicates that rubric articulation in criteria-based assessment might undermine students’ ability to act independently post education, and thus inherently hinder deep approaches to learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Bailey 2009). Also, there is a trend in higher education towards strategic attempts to link the two feedback channels, some students experienced difficulties in navigating between feedback channels. Thus, there is room for improvement and optimization of the assessment designs.

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 reflective texts, 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

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 to different functions. In-text commentary was experienced as referring 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 designs.

Looking ahead

As a way of looking forward, we list a number of strategies for creating synergy 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 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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