Title: Assessment and feedback dialogue in online distance learning

(1) What problem was addressed?

Dundee’s Centre for Medical Education has delivered a paper-based Masters in Medical Education for over 20 years. Our new online distance learning programme, commenced in November 2011, already has 569 students (70% UK-based, 90% medically qualified). Flexibility, including rolling enrolments and no assignment deadlines, is valued by students, but hampers social learning opportunities. The InterACT (Interaction and Collaboration via Technology) project tackles lack of assessment and feedback dialogue and the isolation felt by both students and assessors.

Without dialogue, teachers may invest time producing feedback which students may never use or have difficulty understanding. Feedback often arrives after students have progressed to the next module, limiting opportunity for dialogue or redress to assist students’ knowledge building. Self-evaluation and feedforward opportunities are compromised.

Due to the programme’s size we employ a distributed model of marking with academics on and off campus assessing and providing feedback. There is no continuity in terms of establishing a relationship with the student or a shared context for the assessment task. Assessors are unsure about the usefulness of their feedback and whether similar issues have been identified before.

(2) What was tried?

InterACT was designed to provide a longitudinal repository of feedback and student reflection on previous assignments in the new online course. To encourage use of feedback in future assignments, assessments were blueprinted against learning outcomes and reviewed to promote better sequencing.

For each assignment students complete a cover page where they evaluate their work qualitatively against the assignment’s criteria, request specific feedback, and identify how previous feedback informed the current work. Tutors provide feedback about the assignment and respond to students’ self-evaluations, thus establishing dialogue.

Students then upload their marked assignments into their personal journal and answer four questions relating to their interaction with and understanding of the feedback. Explicit comparison of external feedback against internal evaluative judgements of one’s work is the essence of informed self-assessment. An email alerts the tutor when a student posts to their journal and can continue the dialogue as required. The journal acts as a repository for all of the student’s work throughout the programme. It is accessible to all course tutors but only to that student. Tutors can quickly access previous feedback, giving a longitudinal and programmatic approach to assessment. The process is introduced in the induction module to ensure familiarity.
(3) Lessons learned

Tutors find the process valuable for dialogue with students, receiving immediate feedback on their feedback, clarifying issues with the assessment and module content, and efficiently closing the evaluation loop. Preliminary student evaluations indicate that they understand the pedagogical rationale and appreciate the opportunity to ask further questions about their work.

The process must be easy for students, tutors and administrators to ensure engagement. Automatic alerts and reminder emails stimulate participation. We are now evaluating InterACT, examining stakeholder satisfaction and value, and improvements in student learning. We will introduce a patchwork assessment where students identify how they meet the exit outcomes at Certificate and Diploma levels using evidence from their journal reflections and are exploring opportunities for peer-evaluation.

Reference:


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