10 KEY CRITERIA TO MANAGE AND SUSTAIN E-FEEDBACK IN WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

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Summary

This paper proposal contributes research evidence to help unravel how to sustain and maintain online formative feedback in online learning environments from a dialogical perspective (Nicol, 2010; Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011; Carless, 2013). Feedback is not a static action of providing support to the learner in one direction; on the contrary, it is a complex process that includes how the feedback is received and utilised by the learner. Following Dysthe, Lillejord, Vines and Wason (2010), feedback is defined as a loop which includes the process of giving or delivering feedback (by teachers and/or peers), processing it and implementing it in an improved product. This paper will present different strategies focused on feedback when developing written assignments. It will suggest how to design, deliver and provide feedback to learners in online learning environments in order for feedback to become an effective support which contributes to implement changes into the final texts and consequently to students' learning.

In an online learning environment or in a technology-enhanced environment (TEL), the teacher/instructor and the learner usually do not share the same time and space; therefore, the process of providing support can become more complex and so feedback needs to have specific characteristics to ensure that it is effective for the learner and that it contributes to their learning. The following figure shows the dialogic approach of feedback (see Figure 1). This feedback loop is understood as a dialogue between students and teacher, who are in a continuous online interaction. Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam (2011) define the characteristics of sustainable feedback as practices that promote "dialogic interaction usually incorporating both peer and lecturer critique" and enhance "technology-assisted dialogue with the aim of promoting student autonomy and reflective interaction" (p.404). The first phase -giving feedback- refers to how feedback is delivered. The second phase -processing feedback- refers to what actions students do with the feedback received (they can perform cognitive activities, metacognitive activities, etc. It also includes feedback comprehension and assimilation). The third phase of the loop refers to feedback implementation, which is performed by the decisions students make and the changes they introduce into a learning product, based on the feedback received in order to improve it.
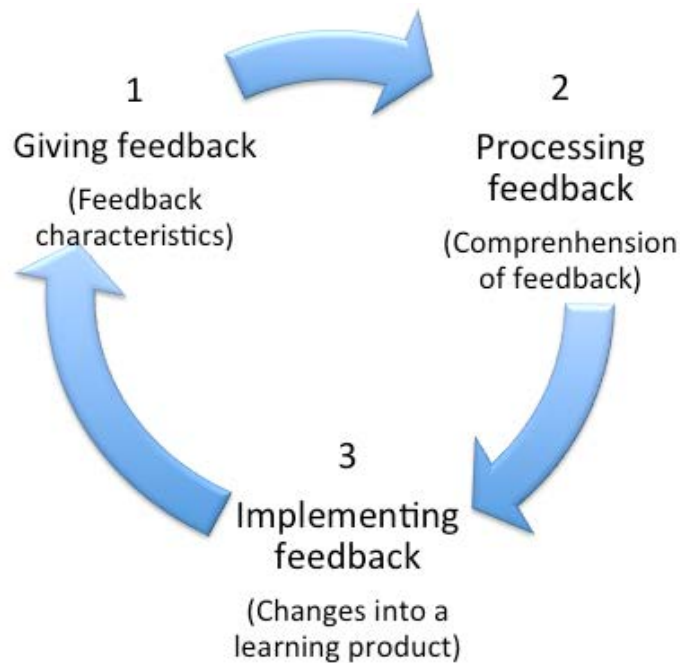
Figure 1. Feedback loop (Guasch & Espasa, 2015)

From this feedback perspective, our research team – EdOnline Research Group – has focused its activity along two main lines: i) in *terms of research,* it has led different research projects with the aim of gathering evidences on how feedback should be delivered and what should be the feedback content in order to become the most effective in the learning process (Guasch & Espasa, 2015; Espasa, Guasch & Alvarez, 2013; Guasch, Espasa, Alvarez & Kirschner, 2013). ii) *In terms of teacher training*, EdOnline Research Group has transferred its research results to online teachers' practice. Both lines of this research group are contextualised in online learning environments. These are typically asynchronous, i.e. teachers and students do not share the same time or space and, therefore, the learning process is based on the development of written assignments (assignment-based), such as essays, study cases, etc.

This proposal is focused on the latter characteristic and presents preliminary results of the four editions of a teacher training action for university teachers on the topic of feedback processes in online learning environments. The results obtained allowed us to define the key criteria which should be considered when designing, processing and implementing feedback for written assignments in online environments.

Methodology

Sample

A training action was carried which consisted of a virtual hands-on workshop addressed to lecturers from all the Faculties of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), a fully online university since its foundation. The participants were 113 university teachers, each an expert in their subject area, and with experience in online university teaching.

University teacher' needs were taken into account from previous surveys to design the workshop. It was a 1 ECTS workshop coordinated by two trainers who worked collaboratively throughout the process. The online workshop was carried out four consecutive times (2010 to 2013) and in all the editions the same design was kept and the same teachers coordinated the activities.

Design and procedure

This study was based on the study case method (Sharan, 1998). The case we refer to shows a typical teacher training experience to develop competencies which enable the teacher to design and give feedback in virtual learning environments. The assignments devised essentially respond to the principles of learning based on authentic tasks, learning which is guided, collaborative and constructive, i.e. learning by doing. The workshop had three main assignments: in the first one, participants had to explain how they give feedback to their students and to contrast it with their peers and with two articles provided by the trainers. This task had the aim to identify what they already do well and what they could improve when giving feedback. Participants had to submit a document explaining what they thought they were already doing well and what they thought they should have done differently or could improve. In the second assignment, participants were asked to work in small groups (4-5 per group) and they had to choose one assignment with the feedback provided to their students and analyse it based on the previous tasks carried out on the workshop. The aim was for them to discuss an example in groups and design new approaches, or methodologies to contribute to students' learning. In the third assignment, co-evaluation was performed between the groups so that the participants learned other examples or approaches to designing and giving feedback, and became critical with the analysis of other proposals.

To collect information different techniques were combined so that the data could be contrasted from different sources. First, an online survey was administered to the students to find out about their previous experiences about designing feedback in online environments, particularly in relation to writing tasks. Secondly, participants' interaction in the groups was recorded to understand their difficulties in order to design and give feedback; this task was developed in each group. We also collected the learning products submitted by participants in the first assignment. Finally, participants had to answer a satisfaction survey.

This study is focused on the analysis of the learning products submitted by participants in the first assignment of the course. A content analysis of the documents was carried out from an inductive perspective identifying the topics related with how feedback should be in order to contribute learning. The data analysis is based on a previous study (Álvarez, Espasa & Guasch, 2011) taking into account different dimensions, such as the planning process of designing the feedback, the nature of feedback, its function, the medium to provide feedback, and students' use and implementation of the feedback. This analysis will be explained in a longer version of the paper.

Results

From a triangulation of the different data sources, we can summarise ten key criteria which cover the whole loop of "giving or delivering-processing-implementing" feedback. Examples of the strategies will be presented in order to scaffold their implementation into the teaching practice in TEL or online learning environments.

10 key criteria to sustain and maintain online feedback in written assignments:

1. Planning feedback. In the design and planning stages of teaching and learning in online environments, planning feedback becomes especially important. Such planning involves making decisions about the feedback's form and content, but also about the timing and nature of activities that would help promote students' participation, monitor their progress and provide suitable support (feedback) accordingly. If these interventions are not pre-planned, feedback is less likely to take place and would only happen at the end of the learning process, once the students have submitted their work. Therefore, we believe that only by monitoring the students' learning process will we be able to implement truly formative assessment.
   This planning would need to take into account the various element of the feedback loop (giving feedback, receiving and processing feedback and implementing feedback).
   In planning feedback, actions to address the following criteria would need to be considered:

2. Timing feedback: feedback should be given when the students are working on their assignments and also once they have submitted it.

3. Matching feedback to aims: feedback should be delivered taking into account the learning aims.

4. Shaping feedback content: Feedback content should include both verification and elaboration components (i.e. corrections and suggestions and/or epistemic questions).

5. Personalising feedback: feedback should be tailored to student's needs.

6. Implementing feedback: from the planning stage, some activities should be proposed in order to ensure that students have processed feedback and are willing to introduce changes in their written assignments.

7. Delivering feedback: feedback should be delivered by the teacher, a team, a peer, a technological system, an external expert or by the students themselves. Depending on who gives feedback, some strategies are identified:

   – Co-assessment or peer assessment: students take part in the assessment process, giving and receiving feedback to each other.
   – Self-assessment: students monitor their own assessment process comparing their assignment to a model assignment.
   – Using rubrics for giving feedback.

8. Choosing the feedback medium: you should decide which medium you will use to deliver feedback: audio, video, written (with comments into the text, sending an email, etc.).

9. Promoting interaction -feedback as a dialogue: you should promote interaction and collaboration among students and between students and teacher to facilitate the processing phase of the feedback loop.

10. Designing feedback for self-regulation: feedback given should be oriented to enhance self-regulation of learning.

Some of these criteria are referred to the first phase of the loop, other should be taken into account when students receive and need to process the feedback received and other criteria are related with the implementing phase. Therefore, the criteria identified cover the whole loop.

It is worth mentioning again that these criteria have been designed taking into account the results from previous studies but also integrating the difficulties expressed by teachers. Some of these difficulties revolve around providing personalised feedback in online environments with a large number of enrolled participants or with few evidences of what the students are doing with the feedback delivered. In this regard, the aim of this paper is to provide strategies that contribute to students learning but without adding to the teachers' workload.

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