Electronic delivery of oral feedback on graphic design projects

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The characteristics of feedback that support students' learning have been described. However, the learning preferences of today's students (e.g. use of current technologies, expectation for flexibility and immediacy), when combined with the declining amount of time students spend on campus, may translate into particular expectations about the mode of delivery and time and place of receipt of assessment feedback. This study reports graphic design students' and their teacher's perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of oral feedback recorded on an ipod and emailed to students as a digital voice file. Students' questionnaire responses suggest the advantages of this mode of delivery outweighed the disadvantages and support the learning preferences of this m-learning generation. For time-poor university teachers seeking to balance the tensions between timeliness, quantity and quality of feedback for student consumers, who are frequently not on campus to receive that feedback in a face-to-face session, electronic delivery of pre-recorded oral feedback may be one way to meet students' learning preferences.

Keywords: electronic, oral feedback, assessment, graphic design

Introduction

Assessment shapes learning (Brown, 2001; James, McInnes & Devlin, 2002; Munn, 2003) and feedback is critical to learning through assessment (Blayney & Freeman, 2004; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Mutch, 2003; Yorke, 2003). Researchers generally agree on principles of effective feedback and characteristics of constructive delivery (Brinko, 1993; Nicol & Milligan, 2006). They have also noted that giving effective feedback is not as easy as it might appear from the lists of good practice. Composing feedback is a balancing act.

University teachers need to negotiate a balance between timeliness, quantity and quality of feedback on student assessment products. This balancing takes place in a context in which university teachers perceive that the time available to compose individual feedback is contracting, as the number of students is increasing, and the demands of research, administration and community service expand. Feeling that the "burden of assessment is becoming unmanageable" university teachers seek ways to "save energy and time in giving feedback" to their students (Race, 2003, pp. 42, 44).

Students are also time poor (McInnis & Hartley, 2002). The demands of part-time work reduce the time students spend on campus for lectures, tutorials, and individual face-to-face feedback consultations with their university teachers. Today's students see higher education as a service; they expect feedback as part of that service (Higgins et al., 2002). These student characteristics, when combined with students' "unique attachment" to new technologies (Raine, 2006, p.3), may translate into particular expectations about the mode of delivery (electronic), and the time and place (any time, any place) of receipt of assessment feedback

In art and design schools oral feedback is critical to learning and creative design outcomes. Giving and receiving oral feedback is a generic skill required by all employers. Design students receive oral feedback on their projects in a 'crit' or design critique session. For the student, 'crit' sessions can be an intimidating. They are a public examination (in front of other students and teachers) of a work that has never been viewed before, and indeed, may be in a developmental stage, rather than a finished product. For the university teacher, giving face-to-face oral feedback in a design critique session is stressful,

emotionally draining and time consuming. The teacher has to give feedback that is encouraging and motivating, that may contain negative elements, often without adequate time for reflection and preparation of a response prior to the feedback interaction. Oral feedback recorded and delivered electronically has the potential to reduce the difficulties encountered by both students and teacher in the current design feedback context.

Method

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger action-orientated inquiry (Taylor & McCormack, 2006) in which final year graphic design students, a design teacher and her colleague collaborated to develop, trial and revise, a checklist for giving constructive oral critique, both online and face-to-face. Reported here are the perceptions of the teacher and the students where oral feedback on a design project was recorded on an ipod and emailed to students as a digital voice file rather than being given orally in a face-to-face 'crit' in front of peers and other teachers. The question of interest in this cycle of the action inquiry was: what do graphic design students, and their teacher, perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of electronically delivered oral feedback on design projects?

Students' perceptions of the feedback were gathered using a questionnaire. Two scaled and two open-ended questions were of particular interest to this investigation: Did the recorded oral feedback emailed to you help you learn (yes/no); Did you listen to the feedback more than once (yes/no); if yes, how many times did you listen to the feedback; In what ways did receiving feedback electronically help you learn? and In what ways did receiving feedback electronically hinder your learning? Twenty students from the semester 1 2005 cohort (67% response rate) completed an emailed questionnaire. In 2006 only 15 students from the semester 1 cohort (25% response rate) completed the emailed survey. The poor response rate to the 2006 email survey led the authors to ask the students to complete a paper version of the survey at the beginning of second semester (response rate 70%). Students' responses were consistent across the 2006 email and paper questionnaire. The 2006 responses reported below are those of students completing a paper survey.

Results

All 2006 respondents, and all except one student in the 2005 group, felt that the feedback emailed to them helped them learn. Privacy, immediacy, convenience (and accessibility) and the opportunity to listen, and re-listen, to the feedback were the advantages most frequently mentioned by students.

Seventy percent of the 2005 survey respondents, and ninety five percent of the 2006 respondents, listened to the feedback more than once. The comments of two 2006 students were typical "I was able to listen to it as many times as required" and "I could repeatedly reflect on what needed to be improved". Being able to return to the feedback allowed students to hear the multiple messages in the feedback. During face-to-face feedback students often miss learning opportunities as they are concentrating on an earlier comment rather than the comment currently being delivered. "Being able to replay the message again and again alerted me to the things I needed to address" (2005 student).

Listening could occur at a time, and in a location, of the student's choosing. "It was good to sit at home, where it's nice and quiet, and listen to the feedback" (2005 student). This more relaxed environment facilitated the reception of critical feedback. The feedback was experienced as "less intimidating" (2006 student). Tone of voice allowed students to hear the emotion and emphasis in the teacher's comments: "You could understand what the teacher was talking about through the tones in her voice" (2005 student). Some students in both year groups mentioned that electronically delivered oral feedback was "more personal" (2006 student).

Few students identified aspects of the feedback delivery that hindered their learning. Loss of opportunity to interact with the teacher, to clarify comments or to ask questions, was mentioned as a disadvantage by a small number of students. One 2005 student for example, noted that while online feedback was valuable during the developmental phases of a design, face-to-face consultation would "be more beneficial during the closing stages of the project, as it will be more of a conversation, give/take, idea-bouncing". Four 2006 students suggested "it would be good to have face-to-face feedback as well".

The teacher identified several time-related advantages. There was time for thoughtful construction of the feedback messages, time to elaborate on a point if needed and the opportunity to edit the comments before sending them. The construction of feedback in a personally comfortable environment, at a time convenient for the giver, was also an advantage. After all feedback had been returned the teacher felt that she had saved both time and energy as indicated in the following comment.

> The greatest advantage to the teacher is that it takes considerably less time to deliver considerably more effective feedback. Written feedback for GD4.2 2004, took 6 staff approximately 5 days to complete a tick box form with approximately 100 words of comment. By comparison in a similar subject, recorded feedback for GD4.1 2006, took 2 staff 2.5 days to complete and deliver with approximately 400 words of specific comment.

The teacher noted a potential advantage where there are multiple markers as is frequently the case in design assessment. Staff can listen to each other's feedback. This can increase the consistency of marking and feedback across classes within a student cohort. A disadvantage for the teacher as the giver of the feedback was that she could not see the receiver responding to the feedback to adjust the feedback in response to the receiver's reactions. She felt that this mode of delivery required the giver to have a wider design critique vocabulary and a higher level of competency and confidence to use it constructively.

Concluding remarks

This paper has presented the advantages and disadvantages, reported by final year graphic design students and their teacher, of oral assessment feedback recorded and delivered electronically. The use of technology, combined with the immediacy, privacy, convenience and accessibility of the feedback and the opportunity to listen multiple times, was reported by students as helping them learn. The demands of face-to-face feedback on the time and energy of university teachers and the need for careful management of the process to avoid confrontation have been noted by researchers (Mutch, 2003; Race, 2003). In this graphic design context both students and the teacher felt that electronic recording and delivery of feedback reduced the impact of these challenges. The advantages of electronic recording and delivery of oral feedback noted in this study may carry over into other professional learning/feedback contexts such as oral feedback to students on workplace or clinical placements.

Generalisation beyond this project is limited by the small number of respondents and the absence of an in-depth understanding of the student experience. Interviews with students could probe more deeply the ways in which electronically delivered feedback is experienced by students as different from, or similar to, face-to-face feedback and written feedback. Conversations with students could also identify the ways in which students go about deciphering the feedback and close textual analysis of transcripts of the feedback could identify the academic discourses on which the language of feedback is based. Questions such as, are we sacrificing quality for convenience, remain to be addressed as this investigation continues.

University teachers seek ways to enhance student learning by improving feedback. However, feedback is a relatively under-researched area (Higgins et al., 2002; Mutch, 2003; Nicol & Milligan, 2006). In addition, most studies of students' perceptions of feedback in higher education learning contexts have focused on written feedback (Maxwell, 2005) or relate to the use of technology no longer available to, or in demand by, today's university students (Black, 1992; Kirschner, van den Brink & Meester, 1991). A clearer picture of how feedback relates to learning, the factors that affect how students receive and interpret feedback, how students use feedback, the influence of mode of delivery and receipt on students' perceptions of usefulness of the feedback, and the implications for assessment feedback of the learning preferences of the m-learning generation, is needed.

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