Improving assessment practices – is there a place for online marking?

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Abstract

The starting point of this educational inquiry is my concern that marking is time consuming when trying to provide high quality, useful feedback to assist student learning. This poster gives a flavour of the process of creating 'living theory' in an action research project into online marking, illustrating the energising nature of the 'action-reflection cycles'; cycles which encompass six elements: 'observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p.41 & 49). It may be of interest to those concerned with assessment practices in higher education regardless of whether they are currently considering online marking. Initially the purpose was to increase my knowledge of the affordances offered by GradeMark software. However, my gaze turned to the wider purpose of assessment - this was prompted by the literature, interviews with two learning technologists and one academic working at different higher education institutions in England, and concurrent marking commitments. The research question evolved from 'How can GradeMark be used to mark assessments?' to the broader issue of 'How can assessment practices be improved and might an online tool, such as GradeMark, assist this aim?' In interviews my sense of inquiry was 'how can participants' practices help mine?' Emergent categories included the affordances of and barriers to using online marking, together with participants' views on resistance to online marking and what is needed for its successful implementation. The relative positions of stakeholders are illustrated in a model where academics are found to be less aligned with online marking than administrators, technologists, students and institutions. It is proposed that, grounded in their own contexts, academics should determine the pedagogical case for or against online marking and direct their practice accordingly. Without such self-determination others may discover convincing reasons to impose change, leaving academics poorly placed to muster convincing arguments for or against. Thus the pedagogical design of programmes is found to be important and suggestions for a participatory approach to develop feedback practices within a work team, prior to considering whether online marking is supportive of this, are made. The significant influence being the pedagogical design of assessment processes within a particular programme, rather than whether a specific electronic tool facilitates specific functions – though this becomes important having decided to use such a tool. Where online marking is indicated this is likely to require considerable institutional support in terms of leadership, training and technology.

Keywords

Online marking, assessment, feedback, GradeMark, action research, action-reflection cycles

Research Context

Assessments, submitted electronically, are subjected to plagiarism detection software using Turnitin in my department. Initially the purpose of this action research project was to increase my knowledge of the affordances offered by the associated GradeMark software. Shortis and Burrows's (2009) evaluation had placed GradeMark second out of 36 online, semi-automated marking and feedback tools. Furthermore, benefits of GradeMark purportedly include: reduced time correcting assignments; easy electronic access for students to review feedback; the ability for teachers to identify common problems and adjust teaching and learning accordingly; and it is paperless; thus 'providing increased efficiency and flexibility' (Bishop, 2006, p. 6). However, the research question evolved, responding to my contextualised need, to the broader issue of 'How can assessment practices be improved and might an online tool, such as GradeMark, assist this aim?'

Background literature

League tables fed by student satisfaction surveys focus attention on timely, consistent, high quality feedback (Shortis & Burrows, 2009) and the NUS helpfully identify principles of good feedback practice (2008). Typically assessment for learning (formative assessment) is given high currency as it seeks to close knowledge gaps by providing feedback, whereas assessment of learning (summative assessment) measures the student's level of knowledge (Heinrich, 2007) – the implication being that this in itself does not accomplish learning. The Weston Manor Group acknowledge that 'assessment standards are socially constructed', proposing 'greater emphasis on assessment and feedback processes that actively engage both staff and students in dialogue about standards'(Price, O'Donovan, Rust, & Carroll, 2008, p. tenet 4). Hence, thinking on dialogue and quality is aligned, and assessment is linked to feedback and marking as a process.

Heinrich, whilst advocating the advantages of electronic marking, observes that computer power can make feasible tasks which, 'while theoretically possible are [otherwise], too time consuming to perform' (2007, p. 274). Thus, new technologies, in providing alternative ways of achieving tasks, do not necessarily result in time savings because the nature of the task changes, integrating previously unachievable tasks into common practice. Nevertheless, Heinrich, Milne and Moore (2009), having interviewed ninety academics leading in the use of e-learning technology for assessment, reported both time savings and improvement in feedback quality. They concluded that 'while these lecturers remember the challenges involved in the uptake of e-tools, they give the clear message that they do not want to revert to practices without e-tool use' (p. 186).

Preliminary findings

The action-reflection cycles illustrating this journey of inquiry are presented alongside findings of the qualitative data analysis where emergent categories include the affordances of and barriers to using GradeMark, together with participants' views on resistance to online marking and what is needed for its successful implementation. Participants value GradeMark's functionality in communicating markers' comments to students and their rhetoric, as in the literature, includes the ease and speed of electronic access. Importantly, given institutions' sensitivity to student surveys, GradeMark was seen to facilitate what students recognise as feedback. Nevertheless, these views are countered by awareness of alternatives, sensitivity to how students might perceive GradeMark and concerns about exclusion. Importantly, participants highlight significant effort and change required of markers and technological inadequacies.

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