Feedforward Strategies in the First Year Experience of Online and Distributed Learning Environments

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Abstract

Feedforward is an educational strategy focusing on providing students with prior exposure to, and prior practice with assessment in order to clarify expectations and standards. Current research into feedforward has yet to consider the specificity of online and distributed learning environments. We have developed a feedforward-based approach to teaching a large first year prerequisite course in screen history involving the modified and critical use of exemplars and assessment guidance in ways designed to stimulate self and peer assessment throughout the course. Our focus is the improvement of task compliance, quality and criteria in order to stimulate meaningful engagement with assessment and enhanced student performance in the unit.

Empirical evidence shows that while written feedback may be appreciated by students, it "often lead(s) to little if any improvement in their subsequent work" (Sadler 2010, p.548). Particularly in summative assessment, "there are seldom if ever, opportunities to act on feedback, except in some vague, indeterminate way in the future" (Ellery 2007, p. 422). Students can find it difficult "to unpick the subject-specific, or topic-content advice from the generic advice to improve future achievement" (Duncan et al 2007, p.271), and some simply choose not to read, or heed advice provided in written assessment feedback (Chanock 2000, p. 95). Feedback that emphasises mistakes and inadequacies has been negatively linked to issues of retention and engagement of first year learners (Harvey et al 2006).

Feedback remains useful and important for explaining student performance against assessment criteria, but its value in relation to teaching task compliance and quality is extremely limited. Feedforward is an educational strategy focusing not just on post-facto written feed*back*, but on providing students with *prior* exposure to and *prior* practice with assessment in order to develop a clear sense of expectations and standards. Feedforward approaches require that institutions cater to student diversity and dedicate greater attention to building student strengths, which, as Yorke and Longden (2008, p.4) have pointed out, enhance first year learners' engagement with study, and optimise chances of individual success. The most efficacious teaching strategies employed in a feedforward approach include the use of exemplars, explicit composing processes, and self and peer assessment.

Current research on feedforward has so far concentrated on the live, face-to-face classroom environment and has yet to consider the specificity of the online and distributed learning environment. Our teaching experience over the last decade, involving the development of large courses online and in distributed learning environments through partnerships with Open Universities Australia (formerly Open Learning Australia), has furnished us with extensive experience in developing instructional design to enhance teaching and assess learning in these contexts. One of the key challenges identified in the teaching and learning nexus with commencing learners revolves around the place of 'sample essays' or 'past essays' in an

overall pedagogical framework designed to foster active learning and problem-solving (Wood 2009, p.111). We have found that the standard pedagogic practice of simply making exemplary essays available to students is insufficient in the digital higher education context. Rather than providing inspiration, edification or exemplification, the 'model essay', in our experience, tended to act as a kind of intellectual straightjacket, rigidly delimiting the sense of what was required, encouraging 'rote' imitation and – in the worst cases - outright plagiarism. We suggest that current feedforward approaches can be tailored to the online or distributed learning environment to most effectively acknowledge contemporary students' multimodal literacies, and to stimulate a range of strategies toward independent research, argument and enquiry.

For us, feedforward offers a critical opportunity to explain not just criteria, but also task compliance and quality, and to provide a purposeful map for performance throughout an academic unit. Achieving task compliance is perhaps more complicated in the online teaching environment because, unlike the face-to-face teaching context, the usual delivery methods of instructor repetition, reformulation and clarification are unavailable. Although blended learning environments now offer real-time online classrooms such as the WIMBA Collaboration Suite, and the effective use of ICTs to foster and enhance first year learner engagement is well known (see Krause 2005), our experience at the time of writing (early 2011) is that their promise is as yet unfulfilled in practice, with pedagogic usefulness hampered by the uptake by only a small cohort of the most tech-savvy students, and technical instability of the platform for a majority of users. Teachers in the online environment cannot repeat what is required and expected in an assessment item in the course of delivery of lectures/tutorials, nor ask students to reiterate assessment requirements to monitor and reinforce comprehension of assessment criteria. Instead, instruction regarding task criteria takes place in unit outlines, course website announcements and/or emails to students – all of which can be ignored, misread or overlooked.

In the off-campus or distributed learning environment, the instructor has no control over student reading of instructional materials and, furthermore, impending assessment can in some cases, generate anxiety or even panic which militates against full and proper understanding of assessment criteria. In this situation the hermeneutic capacity of task compliance is at the mercy of students correctly (and calmly) engaging with materials provided. Similarly, students' awareness of quality in assessment items is dependent on their comprehension of materials provided – it is difficult to frame exemplars in the general sense, when, as we noted earlier, students can tend to double-guess what they think instructors want to see and simply reproduce the form and content of "model" essays. These exemplars run the risk of being seen as "templates", which as Sadler (op cit) notes, "can actually inhibit the formation of a full-bodied concept of quality because they tend to prioritise specific qualities (criteria) rather than quality as a global property".

To address these problems in the first-year online environment we developed a specific pedagogic strategy based on feedforward principles. In our prerequisite course on screen history, we embedded feedforward approaches within the substantive content of the course teaching. That is, to overcome the problems of "once-off assessment events" that "provide little opportunity for effectively learning through feedback" (Ellery op cit) we incorporated assessment-focused learning activities and explicit guidance on assessment items into the fabric of lecture notes from the very beginning of the course. We have made these available in both written and audiovisual form. Our lecture notes thus now comprise relatively simple tasks like key discussion points and activities to reinforce learning within each module of

knowledge; detailed discussion of the processes of moving from description to analysis by use of example; emphasis on the forms of acceptable (and unacceptable) academic research; specific guidance for the completion of the first assessment (a step-by-step guide which explicates the time period for completing each aspect of assessment preparation, research and writing); an exemplification of research and preparation strategies for the final assignment; a detailed explanation of academic argument clearly applied to the assessment task; an extensive account of the heterogeneity of task-appropriate research strategies; and the use of selected segments (not whole essays) from previous students' final assignments. The prior essay selections, which range from a Fail to Distinction levels, are designed to model a variety of student essay performance – from the reprehensible (incoherence, task non-compliance, Wikipedia citation and extensive plagiarism) to the commendable (high quality independent analysis). We deliberately did not provide a High Distinction example in order to demonstrate to students what would be required to move up to the highest level, while circumventing the problem of uncritical mimicry of "model" essays.

The combination of this suite of feedforward strategies embedded in the course material is designed to "promote and encourage each learner in making their own regular and structured self-assessment judgments on their progress" (Robinson and Udall 2006, p.94). It contributes to the enhancement of efforts on the part of universities to educate students about assessment expectations, norms and practices through the provision of additional support structures in the first year, which is positively correlated with the engagement of learners (Krause op. cit., p.23). While no instructor can ever coerce all students to thoroughly read and comprehend all their course materials, it is our belief that the integration of these materials in the lecture notes proper – rather than as additional guidance materials or reminders in emails or announcements – formalises, emphasises and reifies them as course *content*, encouraging students to view them as central; indeed, we hope, as essential to their learning. We contend that these are meaningful ways to stimulate the real learning that has long been noted to take place when the gap between students' 'actual level' and the 'reference level' – where they need to be – is narrowed or closed (see Ramprasad 1983, p.4). At the time of writing, Study Period 4 (the 'summer semester') is underway and the impact of these initiatives is still unfolding; we anticipate that they will have a significant and positive effect on student learning and performance. Early signs, in the form of email queries to tutors and discussion board activity, are highly encouraging. Through these strategies, students can meaningfully engage with assessment concepts "not as abstractions but as core concepts that are internalised, operationalised and applied to concrete productions" (Sadler op cit).

Session Plan

Introduction (5 minutes):

Introduction to and outlining of the concept of feedforward in the "on-campus" context.

Feedforward in the Open Learning context. (5 minutes)**:**

Play short (3 minute) video outlining the work of the unit CMM10 Screen History and Research.

Brief discussion of particular local context: first year OUA unit CMM10 Screen History and Research. A large complex course that does a lot of academic work, sets up literacies and also grounds students in concepts, has assessment that involves primary research AND essay writing.

Paired discussion (10 mins):
1/. What feedforward strategies have we developed in the online context?

2/. To date, how has feedforward enhanced the Online first year experience for students.

Presenters + Whole group discussion (10 mins):

Questions.

Discuss whether participants would consider/have considered / have implemented / similar initiatives within their own institutions or nationally.

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