

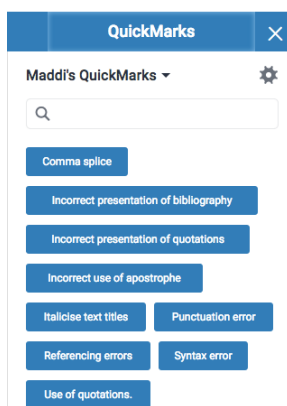


CASE STUDY: ASSESSMENT USING BLACKBOARD LEARNING JOURNALS AND TURNITIN FEEDBACK TOOLS

**DR MADELEINE DAVIES, EMA ACADEMIC
PARTNER**

OVERVIEW

This Case Study outlines the use of Learning Journals and online marking tools on a Part 3 module in English Literature. The discussion considers the relationship between this assessment format and improved student engagement, and it reflects on the opportunities to 'personalise' online marking tools to produce an enhanced marking experience.



OBJECTIVES

- As an Academic Partner on the EMA Programme, I wanted to test electronic management of marking and feedback for myself to assist roll-out.
- I opted to use the Blackboard Learning Journal tool and a Turnitin assessment on a Part 3 module I convene, 'Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury'. Dr Naomi Winstone and Dr Robert Nash state that 'communication' and 'mutual participation' are key to forging a new assessment and feedback 'paradigm' (*The Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit*, HEA, 2016): a key reason for changing the assessment model on EN3VW was to see whether electronic marking would encourage active engagement with feedback ('mutual participation') or whether it would diminish teacher/learner 'communication'.
- In addition, I wanted to see how electronic assessment affected my own marking experience, and I wanted to judge whether new marking strategies would be made available by the online systems.
- I also wanted to judge whether the Learning Journal would be suitable for wider use in the Department of English Literature following EMA roll-out (this was in conversation with the 'Diversifying Assessments' TLDF project I co-lead in DEL).

CONTEXT

'Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury' has been running for several years in the Department of English Literature. The module aims to gradually construct a detailed and advanced knowledge of Virginia Woolf's often complex texts, and a developed understanding of the socio-cultural, political and literary contexts of the inter-war period. There is a great

deal to learn and only thirty teaching hours available. Before I introduced technology-enhanced assessment to the module, the assessment pattern involved the following stages:

- one 1500-word formative essay in Week 5 – the instruction was, 'answer on one text'. Rushed, late, or missing essays characterised this feedback opportunity.
- one 2500-word assessed essay in Week 11 - the instruction was, 'demonstrate substantial knowledge of at least two texts', one of which may be the formative assignment text'.
- a summer term exam – instruction, 'answer on two texts, avoiding the texts used for the assessed essay'.

Not only did this model create significant question-setting work and administrative time, it also inadvertently facilitated inconsistent attendance. Students disappeared from classes in Weeks 9 and 10 as the assessed essay deadline approached, or as they calculated that they only needed 4 texts for assessment; when those texts had been selected and 'learned', students did not attend. Tougher material was avoided altogether because the assessment pattern meant that it did not have to be engaged with. None of this was conducive to consistent, productive learning and to strong attainment.

I changed the assessment methods on this module to try to address some, and hopefully all, of these identified problems.

IMPLEMENTATION

Working with the EMA Programme exposed me to new ideas about technology-assisted assessment and feedback and, though I was initially nervous of a change in practice, I switched to a Blackboard Learning Journal for the Autumn Term. I also moved the assessed essay element to a Turnitin submission and I researched the use of rubrics and QuickMarks to find out what online marking could actually deliver. Though I tend to be an early adopter of new systems, I can lack confidence with technology but the TEL team gave me clear, patient, and effective advice at workshop training sessions.

The Blackboard Learning Journal is a continuous engagement assessment method. It requires students to submit 500 words *every week*, reflecting on the week's teaching and textual material; after 5 weeks, two entries from the online Journal are assessed and feedback is given (this is the formative stage – no essay questions are necessary). The 10-week Journal concludes in a retrospective entry in Week 11 and there is a 2,500-word assessed essay due for submission 4 weeks later. There is no longer a summer term exam. The Journal is marked online and the mark for the journal is generated by completion and by the quality of entry 10 plus 4 other entries selected by each student (2,500 words in total).

Students know that if they miss lectures and seminars they will struggle to complete the Journal so attendance is greatly enhanced: an average module attendance rate of 72% (2016-17) has leapt to 86% (2017-18) since Journal assessment has been implemented.

I learnt how to mark the journals at the formative stage when entries 1 and 2 were presented for comment. I was astonished by how easy it was to provide concise, instant, and constructive feedback. I had thought that I would miss my pen and the flexibility that it gives me to mark in-line; though I was unable to find a replacement for this with the Blackboard assessment tools, I found that it was perfectly easy for me to offer advice about style and to indicate corrections in the typed comments at the end of each entry. Each 500-word piece took me 20 minutes to mark; though this was no quicker than hard copy marking, I found that I could give twice the amount of feedback with far more nuanced detail in the same time.

Further, once I had pressed 'add', the student was able to see the feedback and the mark immediately (at the assessed stage there is no moderation so most students had their feedback available to them within 72 hours). Several students emailed me to say they were surprised by the speed of my responses and grateful for the helpful feedback. The questions I tend to hear following the return of essays are, 'I'm not sure what this means', or 'I can't read your writing'. This time, the responses tended to be more developed, for example, asking me whether 'this' solution would address a weakness I had identified and I was impressed by my students' willingness to engage with the feedback and to act on it. In this, Winstone and Nash's argument that electronic feedback and marking produces enhanced 'communication' and 'mutual participation' in the feedback process seems justified (Winstone and Nash, 2016).

When the whole Learning Journal was submitted for assessment, the process was precisely the same except that I added a 'Feedback to the Learner' section summarising my response to the completed Journal. Following another TEL training workshop, I found GradeCentre easy to operate and I concealed marks until the moderation process was complete.

At the assessed essay stage, I marked 2,500-word essays online for the first time. Before I began I created a 'bank' of style-focused QuickMarks and embedded links (see image 1) to reduce the repetition involved in writing the same corrections on every essay. I was then able to drag across these comments and links as I marked and this not only reduced marking time (and teeth grinding), but also allowed me to focus fully on the *content* of the essay. Moreover, perhaps because typing is quicker than writing, I found that I was providing far more diagnostic comment than usual, and far more practical suggestions about how weaknesses could be addressed. When it came to the final feedback, it seemed easier than usual to summarise my response to the essay as a whole, and to give constructive advice, because (undistracted by the need to constantly

write out style corrections) the essay's content was so much clearer to me.

As with the Learning Journal, the time spent on marking was not necessarily reduced, but it was a less repetitive experience (it was a relief not to have to write 'comma splicing' 50 times) and it produced more usable feedback. Another huge advantage was that I did not have to traipse backwards and forwards to collect and drop off a heavy stack of essays, and nor did my second marker. The essays were available to me and to her online and we could drop in and out whenever we had a marking opportunity.

IMPACT

The Learning Journal initially produced some anxiety amongst students but the majority of the group submitted weekly work without difficulty and on time. Most reported their enjoyment in writing 500-word pieces that did not have to be standard essays, and several gathered in confidence as the module progressed and ended up writing 'Dear Virginia' letters, poems, and parodies of Woolf's style. This produced enhanced critical engagement and I have no doubt that my students' learning was significantly assisted by the comparative intellectual freedom that the Journal format gave them. I also found it interesting that students were more able than usual to forge connections between texts and ideas and I wondered whether this was because the weekly Journal entries cemented the reading and seminar discussions more securely.

This module was not scheduled for appraisal in 2017-18. To gather informal feedback on the new assessment practices, I asked the students in the group to write down (anonymously) how they rated speed of feedback: '5' was registered by every student who responded. I followed this with a question on 'quality of feedback': again, '5' was selected by every student. The implications for student satisfaction scores are clear.

Because our students are used to submitting essays on Turnitin, they did not find it much of a change to receive their feedback online; all my students were delighted that they did not need to print out their essays, nor penetrate the mysteries of essay hand-in dates, places and times, nor complete duplicated receipts. Further, the feedback I gave each student was detailed and legible, and it was easily available if they wanted to discuss my comments in tutorials.

REFLECTIONS

In the example of EN3VW ('Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury'), technology has allowed me to employ a pedagogic model that was always perfectly

suited to the module but that was not always enabling success because students' engagement was a desired outcome rather than a clear requirement. With the Learning Journal, the pedagogy underpinning the module works effectively for the first time.

The Turnitin marking tools allowed me to develop an individualised system that suits me and that was able to deliver the kind of feedback that I wanted to give my students. By using QuickMarks exclusively for style, and in-text comment exclusively for content (ideas, argument, and so on), I found a marking method that was streamlined and to the advantage of both myself and my students. I had not realised that an electronic system could be 'personalised' in this way because I had assumed that it was 'one size fits all'. This is quite definitely not the case.

I will not return to hard copy marking. Technology-enhanced assessments very significantly improved my students' engagement and the quality of their work, and it also very significantly improved the quality of my feedback. Finally, students seemed to respond actively to the feedback I had given for their Learning Journals; the assessed essays demonstrated determined attempts to address the weaknesses I had identified. As such, electronic marking seems capable of creating the 'mutual participation' identified by Winstone and Nash and capable also of forging a new assessment 'paradigm' that offers significant benefits to both teachers and students.

FOLLOW UP

The EMA Programme is currently producing a research paper using UoR 'early adopter' schools as the basis of our research. Our findings will be presented at an EMA Symposium, co-led by the HEA Assessment and Feedback Community of Practice (September 2018), and at an internal, one-day Symposium in May 2018 at which UoR colleagues can pool experiences introducing electronic assessment change in their schools. We will be inviting colleagues to share their expertise using rubrics, QuickMarks, audio feedback, and their use of other tools, so as to communicate knowledge and disseminate good practice at the University of Reading.

To participate, please email Dr Emma Mayhew or Dr Madeleine Davies at ema@reading.ac.uk

LINKS

The University of Reading. (2017). Frequently Asked Questions: EMA Programme. Retrieved from <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/ema/ema-faqs.aspx>

The University of Reading. (2017). About the Programme: EMA Programme. Retrieved from <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/ema/ema-about.aspx>

The University of Sussex. (2014). Giving teachers more time for teaching and students more time for learning. Retrieved from <http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/elearningteam/2014/11/25/reducing-paperwork-electronic-submission-for-all-first-year-students/>

Madeleine Davies, 'Connecting with the Curriculum Framework: Using Focus Groups to Diversify Assessment - Part One' <https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/t-and-l-exchange/connecting-with-the-curriculum-framework-using-focus-groups-to-diversify-assessment>

Madeleine Davies, 'Connecting with the Curriculum Framework: Using Focus Groups to Diversify Assessment - Part Two' <https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/t-and-l-exchange/connecting-with-the-curriculum-framework-using-focus-groups-to-diversify-assessment-part-2/>