

STYLIANOS HATZIPANAGOS

4.1.5 DESIGN NARRATIVE: A TUTOR'S JOURNEY

SUMMARY

This design narrative is a reflective narrative used to demonstrate a tutor's trajectory in creating student centred learning opportunities and to showcase the associated impact. The story provides support for the pattern by giving an account of the development of a tutor's skills in providing feedback to high achieving students through interaction with his students and a mentor. It draws on evidence from an Open University course and describes the challenges in giving feedback and providing evidence of the students using the feedback to impact on future learning (closing the loop). Consequently, it is an account of both the students' and the tutor's learning.

SITUATION

This was an Open University, predominantly online, distance learning course, 'Networked living: exploring information and communication technologies', where knowledge and understanding of information and communication technologies was the core of the associated curriculum. The group consisted of 16 students whose backgrounds were diverse, in terms of age and aptitudes. This dictated an adaptive approach to address student needs. Students submitted their assignments online for the tutors to collect and mark. A significant aspect of the course was the assessment process, consisting of a robust model of periodic assessment, where students submitted assignments online to a university server. The tutor's duty was to download and mark the assignments and projects. Tutor feedback activities consisted of completing a generic form and annotating the assignments before submitting them back to the system. A monitoring process was in place to ensure that this particular aspect of the feedback process was completed (see Appendix). In addition, a computer conferencing tool, FirstClass, was used in the course, and there were opportunities for the tutor to use this channel to provide feedback to individuals or to the group.

In this context, the tutor is central in the feedback and assessment process. Though course content encourages some peer review by embedding peer review activities that require online collaboration, these are limited. Since this is a university entry course, it is assumed that the students need 'strong' tutorial guidance rather than focussing on developing independent learning competences at this stage. However,

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there is an underlying pedagogical framework that has certainly strengths, namely to develop an appreciation of technologies, including learning technologies: computer conferencing, e-assessment tools, and in some cases, social software and social networking.

TASK

A general problem for me was to ensure that the closing the loop process took place even for students who performed well, and to enhance the quality of feedback in order to also address the needs of those students that performed well.

ACTIONS

Engaging in reflective practice was a priority to help me improve my feedback. Collegiality was a characteristic element in the assessment framework. Monitoring of assessments identified certain areas for my development. The monitor would contact the tutor to introduce himself/herself and discuss his/her recommendations. This worked well as conventional power relationships and hegemonies were undermined from the beginning and the tutors had the opportunity to engage in dialogue during the monitoring process.

In response to the monitor's comments, a number of questions helped me to engage with my assessment duties in a reflective manner:

- Do I provide good feedback?
- What do students make of my feedback?
- Does the 'closing the loop' component of the assessment process take place?
- Do students who get high marks benefit from my feedback? Do they need my feedback at all, since they manage to get most of the marks?
- Do I have to justify the loss of every individual mark in the distinction bracket? Why?
- Is it necessary or completely redundant to be specific about missing marks? E.g. does it matter how they lost between 1 and 15 marks, if they received an overall mark of between 85 and 99?

The electronic submission worked well in this course. The role of technology was to facilitate the submission and to support easy access to the assignments (pre and post submission) and potentially to make the feedback provision process pain-free and transparent enough. However, this flexibility and ease of access did not address other significant issues, namely:

- the provision of appropriate feedback to all students regardless of their performance in an assessment task
- closing the loop, by ensuring the students took comments into account in subsequent assessments

- keeping a balance in the power relationship between tutor and students, as the process made the tutor the absolute adjudicator of student performance with the student not having much of a say in the process.

I encouraged students to comment on the feedback they received and to give an account of their responses to the feedback. I included, where possible, further comments on the students scripts concerning marks gained and lost.

Table 1. Criteria in monitoring form (The Open University)

Acknowledges good work
Uses a friendly/personal tone
Provides encouragement and support
Provides a summary of strengths and weaknesses
Suggests ways of improving future work
Course specific criteria
Comments positively on good points
Corrects and explains errors or omissions
Identifies and explains irrelevant material
Makes clear and constructive comments
Directs student to course materials and/or other relevant materials
Clearly explains where marks were gained or lost
Identifies excessive or insufficient length
Comments on communication skills
Course specific criteria

EXAMPLES OF COMMENTS ON FEEDBACK

Monitor 1

As you probably know, my aim as a monitor is not to check every little mark you give, but to ensure that your marking is consistent with the marking guide and that guidance is given to the student where appropriate. I may occasionally make the comment that I would have done things differently, but please remember that this is only my opinion and not some hard and fast rule.

Looking at these three assignments, I found myself a little unsure about the way you approached them, so I'll apologise now if I've missed anything in the way of embedded comments or misinterpreted your feedback. I say that because there seems to be quite a variation between them. I felt your marking was fine, but that the quantity and quality of the feedback varied considerably. For example, you hardly

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said anything to X – either on the feedback form or on the script. I counted a total of 57 words of feedback, and even for someone who'd done as well as he has, I feel that's a bit low. He would probably like to know what he'd have to do to get the remaining marks and **some praise for specific good points** that he's made would help to encourage him and reward him for the work he's put in.

Conversely, I felt that you handled Y much better and more sympathetically. There's considerably more feedback and encouragement there, and if the other two had the same level of commenting I'd be much happier. However there's time to work with him on that, and I appreciate that there's a lot for everyone to take in with the very first assignment in the first presentation of a new course.

I felt that Z fell between the two – both in terms of marks and in your feedback, and that made me wonder **if you find it hard to find enough to say to stronger students**. It's a problem I have from time to time, and I have tried to overcome it by commenting on specific things that I really like.

Regards, A

Monitor 2

Dear Stylianos

I agree with your marking and comments.

But I think you could develop your practice to provide a marks breakdown on the student's script to show more explicitly where marks were gained and lost on the student's script.

And for more feedforward potential I think it could have been appropriate to include further/more comprehensive skills comments on the script/feedback form, and suggestions for future assignments.

I think your comments are supportive and informative. But the breakdown above suggests that it could include a more comprehensive summary of strengths and weaknesses, and further suggestions for ways of improving future work.

Regards, B

Comments from Staff Tutor

Hi

I think B has made some useful suggestions above. Students really do appreciate being able to see clearly where they have lost marks.

RESULTS

The use of a prescriptive mark sheet allowed me to increase the range of marks I awarded, breaking my usual 70s barrier. Sometimes it was difficult to justify the loss of marks, as I am predisposed not to award marks beyond a certain threshold. For instance it was hard to explain what happened to the missing 28 marks, when

the overall mark was 72 and a distinction. As far as the students were concerned, it was difficult to monitor how feedback was taken into account from assignment to assignment even though the university had established as part of this learning process reflective activities on 'learn how to learn' that were integrated in the assessment process. I also felt the need to highlight in my feedback how excellent performance could be replicated across the different assignments in the course periodic assessment, and how people could benefit from interaction with each other in the context of computer mediated communication.

LESSONS LEARNED

I was fortunate for two consecutive years to have high-achieving groups and I assumed I did not to have to write copious comments in my feedback to encourage them to improve. I realised that the weakness of this assumption was that my students did not have the opportunity to transfer good performance to other contexts and situations.

Revisiting often the learning outcomes of both of the course and the assignments made me think about multi- and cross-disciplinary skills that students have to develop. I could finally appreciate the electronic submission not just for the flexibility it offered but for the opportunities it gave to the tutors and the students to engage in dialogue.

AFFILIATION

Stylianos Hatzipanagos
Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning
King's College London
UK