

From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education

David Nicol
University of Strathclyde

Student surveys across the world have highlighted that students are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive on their assignments and many institutions have been putting plans in place to address this issue. Much of this work has focused on improving the quality of written comments. This paper takes a different perspective. It argues that the many diverse expressions of dissatisfaction with written feedback, both from students and teachers, are all symptoms of impoverished dialogue. Mass higher education is squeezing out dialogue with the result that written feedback, which is essentially a one-way communication, often has to carry almost all the burden of teacher-student interaction. The paper suggests ways in which the nature and quality of feedback dialogue can be enhanced when student numbers are large without necessarily increasing demands on academic staff. It concludes with a conceptual discussion of the merits of taking a dialogical approach when designing feedback.

Introduction

Providing written comments on students' assignments is seen as a central feature of feedback processes in higher education. In the past, when student numbers were smaller, written feedback was part of a larger coordinated system of teacher-student communication that also involved one-to-one discussions and the drafting and redrafting of assignments. Also, the comments themselves would have been provided within the context of earlier assignments that would have been the subject of earlier discussions and feedback. While this feedback system might still be in place in some select universities (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge) where it forms the cornerstone of their 'tutorial systems' (Gibbs, 2006), in most institutions, due to the growth in student numbers, written comments have become detached from this supportive context. The result is a great deal of dissatisfaction with feedback by students and teachers, as evidenced in a number of surveys, research studies and reports.

This article can be found at:

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/02602938.asp>

This article should be referred to as follows:

Nicol, D (2010) From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback in mass higher education, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501-517