

Overcoming Barriers to Electronic Feedback
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Introduction

This small-scale research project took place in 2010/11 in the School for Humanities and Cultural Industries at Bath Spa University (BSU). Its aims were to

- review literature and good practice of e-assessment
- identify practical barriers to effective electronic assessment and investigate solutions
- identify pedagogical benefits and/or detriments
- provide guidance and support for academic staff and students.

Three staff members used the GradeMark function in Turnitin®, via Blackboard®, as a learning development and feedback tool for students in their second and third years of study on Creative Writing and English Literature programmes.

The project did not seek to provide universal answers or necessarily contribute to the body of knowledge for the wider scholarly community, rather it simply aimed to try GradeMark and identify its potential as an assessment and feedback tool; however, we believe that our experiences are worth sharing as they highlight some potential barriers and solutions which others might find helpful.

The project was led by Joelle Adams, with direction from Tim Middleton, Head of the School of Humanities and Cultural Industries and Steve May, Head of the Creative Writing Department, and input from Greg Garrard, Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Annie McGann, a part-time Creative Writing lecturer.

It is worth noting that the Creative Writing programme team is one of the original courses involved with the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) project; as such, assessment is already at the heart of many of our learning and teaching discussions, reviews, and changes.

Review of Literature, Student Experience and Good Practice

Principles of good assessment have been widely discussed; due to the subject team's recent involvement in the TESTA project, and Graham Gibbs' extensive work in the field the research team has used Gibbs' *Principles of Assessment* (2010a) and *Feedback Guide for Lecturers* (2010b) as our guidelines for what constitutes 'effective' assessment and feedback. One of the key principles is timeliness: as Gibbs asserts, 'feedback should be timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance' (2010a). To this end, Siebert's case study from Caledonia University asserts that

an electronic submission system reduces the time taken to mark and second mark coursework, and consequently it reduces the time the student needs to wait for feedback. In addition, this type of system improves student access to assessment grades and

feedback, and reduces the amount of time required to mark assessments. (2009:1)

Concerns about timeliness tie in with both National Student Survey responses for Bath Spa University and across the sector, as students often indicate that feedback is too slow. In addition, TESTA data shows that students on BSU's Creative Writing programme too often experience slow feedback or even marks without feedback (for example, when student work is sent to external examiners).

Studies about the effectiveness of assessment and feedback using electronic tools are beginning to emerge and generally offer promising results. Siebert's findings show that 'the 'turnaround' time is shorter, and the feedback is released faster' and that 'the management of coursework and feedback is easier as all files are stored on one server that can be accessed remotely' (2009:3).

In addition to some of the advantages discussed below, Siebert's findings highlight potential problems with the 'digital divide' and 'may disadvantage those you [sic] lack competence' (2009:4). Finally, it's important to note the finding that 'students would only embrace [e-assessment] if it were employed on most if not all of their modules' (Siebert 2009: 4).

Reviewing the literature on electronic assessment can be difficult as the technology changes rapidly; in addition, each institutional and discipline contexts presents its own issues, challenges, barriers, and unique solutions. More recent publications from JISC (2010a; 2010b) provide some practical guidance on e-assessment and feedback at all levels of the education system; again, issues of timeliness are central, with support, theoretical approaches (and therefore values), and pedagogical worth also argued as integral to e-assessment practices.

Methods

The first step of the project was to collect staff and student views on electronic assessment. Of course, the TESTA data gave us insight into students' general experience of assessment on the course, but we also wanted to find out what they thought about the possibility of electronic assessment and feedback. Using the TESTA focus group questions (see www.testa.ac.uk for all TESTA materials) as a starting point, we added questions about students' thoughts about potential barriers and advantages to using GradeMark as an assessment tool. The questions were put in person to a group of five 3rd year Creative Writing students studying the Teaching Writing module, as well as by email to five student course representatives (various year groups).

Similarly, and more problematically, staff (mostly academic, but also from a quality manager) views on the potential for using electronic assessment and feedback tools were collected by an email questionnaire distributed by the Head of School. A part-time member of staff was informally interviewed to more fully explore some of the issues raised in the questionnaire responses.

During the second term of the academic year, Greg, Annie, and Joelle used various functions in GradeMark to facilitate peer feedback, collect work, and provide and deliver tutor feedback on student writing.

In June 2011, staff and students involved in the pilot project will be asked to share their views on the experience via online questionnaire and informal interview.

Findings

Before Using GradeMark

Table 1: Summary of Staff and Student Views Before Pilot Project gives an overview of the issues raised from the data collected via questionnaire, interview, and focus group during the first term of academic year 2010/11.

Table 1: Summary of Staff and Student Views Before Pilot Project

	Staff	Students
Pedagogical Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students could read comments, as opposed to illegible handwriting (non-academic member of staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> may get feedback more quickly work all in one place so can refer back to it comments will be legible
Other Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> environmental (saving paper) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> will stop papers from getting lost won't have to travel to campus to submit
Pedagogical Concerns/barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> potential for standardised feedback potential to discourage students from attending feedback tutorials lack of 'personal engagement' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the best feedback is that which you get in person

	Staff	Students
Other objections and barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health and safety • workload • technological ignorance • (un)reliability of technology • change in working conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (un)reliability of technology • technological ignorance, though could be overcome with support •
Other comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seemed to be a lack of awareness of the tool and how it works 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concern that not all lecturers would adopt

While Using GradeMark

Below, Table 2: Issues identified during the project summarises the technological and pedagogical barriers and how we tried to overcome them.

Table 2: Issues identified during the project

	Barrier	Solution
Pedagogical	Timing of peer marking exercise	Students should use the peer-marking exercise at the beginning of year two – they should engage with marking/grading criteria after they have had some work back from first-year, but while there is still enough time to make learning useful on their degree
Technological/Practical	Setting up post dates	Educate staff on how to set up Turnitin® assignments – screencast
	Students unsure how to find feedback	Educate students on how to find feedback – screencast and in-class demonstration

	Barrier	Solution
	Tutors can't see what students see	Ask registry to set up 'dummy' student
Other	Staff set up non-Turnitin® assignment	Staff education – screencast, workshops, written guidance

After Using GradeMark

Although the formal data collection will not take place until June 2011, Table 3, below, highlights some informal initial responses from staff and students about their experience of using GradeMark.

Table 3: Initial responses from staff and students

	Staff	Students
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no need to carry/be responsible for stacks of student papers • no need to come in to pick up student work for marking • Peer Mark scheme makes feedback more useful if done and timed well (e.g. frees up more time for tutorials if peers give feedback on drafts) • faster – typing faster than handwriting comments • more, better? feedback given 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PeerMark allows for multiple feedback sources • feedback more quickly • more feedback on the actual script
Issues/concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time spent setting up • Technological issues with personal computer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PeerMark feedback can be confusing/contradictory • need to get used to using new technology

Discussion

As Table 1 demonstrates, staff initially reacted negatively to the idea of electronic assessment; what it does not demonstrate is the furore caused simply by the asking of these

questions. Note that the objections to the use of GradeMark by staff were not rooted in pedagogy, but in fear of using the (perceived) unreliable technology and health and safety concerns; while these concerns should not be dismissed, detractors might have a stronger case against the use of electronic assessment if they could prove that there are pedagogical detriments or, at the very least, no pedagogical advantages.

Gibbs (2010a) also argues that 'feedback needs to be received and attended to'. Further research needs to be done in order to ascertain whether students are more, less, or just as likely to read and use feedback delivered electronically or in 'hard copy'.

If we put student experience at the heart of what we do in learning environments, we must at least consider the use of electronic assessment; our preliminary findings mirror those of Siebert, who found that students 'consider the electronic submission of coursework via Blackboard to be cheaper, quicker, more secure and accessible than traditional methods' (2009:3).

Conclusions and Recommendations

As argued in previous work (Adams, 2010), this project highlights the need for technological innovation and change to be founded on sound pedagogical principles rather than simply because the tools exist. The case for using GradeMark should be made because it has pedagogical and practical benefits, not because 'others are doing it' or because the edict has been given from decision-makers.

In addition, due consideration must be given to institutional, disciplinary, and subject-specific conventions, expectations, and contexts. For example, our creative writer tutors identified a need for a 'personal' feel to the feedback, as they had development relationships with their students over the three years of the programme. In other subjects this need for a 'human touch' might not be at the forefront.

A student-centred approach to learning and teaching in higher education requires consideration of the question 'what is best for students' learning and experience?'. GradeMark and similar systems or tools can facilitate some of the principles of assessment outlined by Gibbs (2010a). For example, in the National Student Survey and TESTA data, students continually highlight timing of feedback as problematic, both in terms of how quickly they receive feedback and at what point in the academic year. Using GradeMark can facilitate faster turn-around times because it reduces the need for travel, exchange of paper, and return systems among first markers, second markers/moderators, external examiners, and students. In addition, for 'digital natives' typing is much quicker than handwriting; in this project at least two of the three markers gave more feedback than they would have if handwriting on paper, though there is no evidence to suggest that this necessarily meant feedback was of higher quality or more useful to students.

Many of the concerns identified by staff can be addressed through training and incentives. Health and safety concerns are perhaps the strongest reasons for not using electronic assessment; however, as one lecturer sighed, 'we spend most of our lives in front a computer, so this won't really change anything.' While some marking tutors may wish to hold on to the seemingly one remaining task that does not necessarily require using a

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computer, the pedagogical benefits outweigh the wish of some staff to completely control their working habits. Health and safety concerns should be dealt with on an individual basis.

Other concerns raised by staff might actually be improved by e-assessment; for example, JISC reports that '[a]ny time, anywhere assessments benefit learners for whom a traditional assessment regime presents difficulties due to distance, disability, illness, or work commitments' (2010b:9). This personal approach to assessment might override any perceived or actual value of handwritten comments.

Changing attitudes can be a long and difficult process; arguments about the use of new technologies should be informed by evidence and pedagogical rationale, with due consideration of health and safety, working conditions, and staff education and support. The deliverables from this project include guidance for both staff and students; links to these can be found on www.academia.edu/JoelleAdams.

More research is required to determine the pedagogical effect of using electronic assessment. Essentially GradeMark is just a tool – how we use it will determine its pedagogical and practical value. The real issues are in assessment design, quality and delivery of feedback, and student engagement with that feedback. JISC's report *Effective Practice with e-Assessment* offers an excellent tool for determining the appropriateness of e-assessment activities (JISC, 2010b:40).

The next phase of this project includes collecting and analysing data about staff and student experience. A follow-up project will involve part-time staff being paid to use GradeMark, with the intention of creating buy-in from other members of staff and, again, determining the effect on staff and student experience. Discussions about the use of GradeMark at the institutional level will be informed by this project, its follow-up, and experiences from other Schools and subject areas.

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