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Nordrum, Lene; Evans, Katherine; Gustafsson, Magnus

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



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Investigating different types of criteria-based assessment through student data: towards optimization of assessment designs

Lene Nordrum & Magnus Gustafsson, Division for Language and Communication Chalmers University of Technology; Department of Applied Information Technology
Katie Evans, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Davis

Introduction

Currently, there is a trend in higher education towards formative assessment practice in the hope that assessment can serve as a feedback tool for *learning* rather than of *learning* (Housell et al 2008). In this context, criteria-based assessment is often advocated on the argument that it provides students with transparency and clear articulation of learning goals – facilitating deep approaches to learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Yorke 2003). However, some studies point to potential difficulties associated with criteria-based assessment in that it might undermine students' ability to act independently post education, and thus ironically hinder deep approaches to learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Bailey 2009). Also, there is increased scholarly interest in the question of how different types of assessment and feedback channels impact important affective factors of successful learning, such as motivation and learning climate (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Värlander 2008).



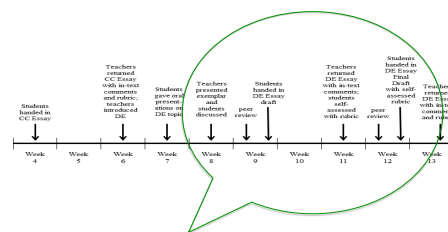
Aim and research questions

In light of the challenges involved in designing successful formative assessment practices, our study presents and evaluates an assessment design in a first-year university writing class for academic purposes. The set-up combines two types of criteria-based assessment: *in-text commentary* and *rubric-articulated feedback*. We asked the following research questions:

- How do students understand, integrate and act on the two feedback channels: in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback?
- Are there benefits to a combination of feedback channels or would just one suffice?
- How effective is the current assessment design for a combining the two feedback channels?

The assessment design

Learning activities involved process writing and peer-response and writing assignments included two essays: first a single-draft compare and contrast essay (CC), and later a multi-draft descriptive essay (DE). The two essays involved different activities and received different types of feedback in the form of in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback.



Strategic attempts to link the two feedback channels involved **exemplar discussion** and **self-assessment**. The exemplar included both in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback from the two teachers normalized and compiled onto a common text and rubric.

In text-commentary included editing symbols and teacher comments in the margins of both higher and lower concerns, and a paragraph of general comments at the end of the paper.

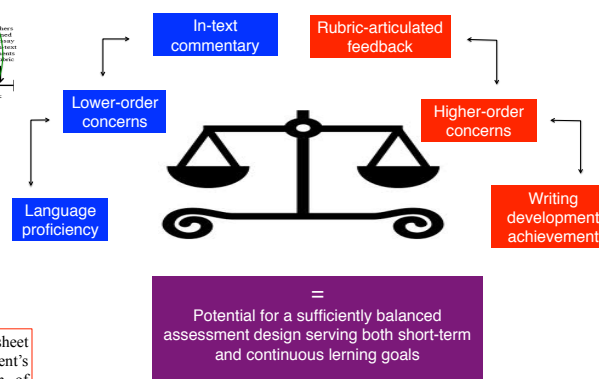
The rubric assessment sheet indicated the assignment's achievement in the form of criteria linked to grades.



Method and Material

We used action research methodology to investigate our own professional practice through systematic and reflective study of student data. We looked at three sources of data for triangulation of data collection methods: *46 reflective texts*, *46 questionnaires* and *7 semi-structured interviews*. Data analysis involved a hermeneutic method where we identified key themes and interrelationships and patterns in students' comments.

Results



Students connected the two forms of feedback to different functions. In-text commentary was experienced as referring mostly to lower-order concerns and language proficiency issues, while rubric-articulated feedback emphasized higher-order concerns related to writing development achievement. Further, students generally found that both channels were necessary, but even though we tried to balance comments in the two feedback channels, some students experienced difficulties in navigating between feedback channels. Thus, there is room for improvement and optimization of the assessment design.

Looking ahead

As a way of looking forward, we list a number of strategies for creating synergy effects between the two feedback-channels, with the aim of generating an assessment strategy serving both short-term and long-term learning outcomes:

- Supplement in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback with a third feedback type that can serve as a bridge, e.g. recorded oral feedback or screen caption.
- Color code in-text commentary to the rubric category it corresponds to.
- Ask students to write reflective texts on the relation between the two feedback types received.
- Ask students to write a short memo describing changes made between drafts.
- Time self-assessment differently for a more gentle introduction of this activity.
- Follow-up early assessment activities with teacher-student discussions of feedback.

Literature

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Further information

This study is published online, and forthcoming in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*: Lene Nordrum, Katherine Evans & Magnus Gustafsson (2013): Comparing student learning experiences of in-text commentary and rubric-articulated feedback: strategies for formative assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, DOI 10.1080/02602938.2012.758229
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