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Responding to student writing online: Tracking student interactions with instructor feedback in a Learning Management System

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ABSTRACT

Instructor response to student writing increasingly takes place within Learning Management Systems (LMSs), which often make grades visible apart from instructor feedback by default. Previous studies indicate that students generally ascribe more value to grades than to instructor feedback, while instructors believe that feedback is most important. This study investigated how students interact with an LMS interface—an instance of Sakai—to access instructor feedback on their writing. Our blind study analyzed data from 334 students in 16 courses at a medium, comprehensive private college to investigate the question: Does the rate at which students open attachments with instructor feedback differ if students can see their grades without opening the attachment? We compared two response methodologies: mode 1 made grades visible apart from feedback, and mode 2 required students to open attached feedback files to find their grades. The data for each mode was collected automatically by the LMS, retrieved, and retrospectively analyzed. The results show that making grades visible separate from feedback significantly reduced the rate at which students opened instructor feedback files and that timing also impacted students' rate of access. These findings provide the basis for empirically informed best practices for grading and returning papers online.

1. Introduction

Responding to student writing is one of the core responsibilities of any writing instructor and in many cases one of the most time consuming parts of teaching writing. For example, Sommers (1982) has estimated that writing teachers spend between 20 and 40 min responding to each student paper (p. 148). For this reason, scholarship in rhetoric and composition has focused on response for over 40 years, drawing on anecdotal and experimental data to help instructors effectively use the time they have for responding to student writing (see, e.g. Anson, 1989; Blake 1994; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2014, 2003; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011; Lee, 2008, 2009; Sommers, 1982, 2006, 2013; Straub 1999, 2006; Straub & Lunsford, 1995; White, 2006). Based on this research, an array of suggestions about "best practices" for response has been developed. Ferris (2014) has usefully synthesized these best practices, which range from the focus of feedback (on "a range of issues" tailored for each student), the timing of feedback ("multiple drafts. . .not only final graded papers"), who should provide feedback ("multiple sources," including peers and the instructor), and the form

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feedback should take ("one-on-one writing conferences may be more effective than written teacher commentary") (p. 8). These best practice suggestions for response inform the training of new writing teachers, and research indicates that most writing instructors are well acquainted with them, even if they do not always follow them consistently (Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2009). Notably, all of the best practice suggestions seem to assume, or even require, a traditional, face-to-face context for response.

However, changes in writing instruction resulting from new writing and learning technologies warrant renewed attention to the issue of response. In particular, the move from handwritten comments on hard copy papers to electronic feedback on digital submissions complicates response and significantly changes its context from that assumed by many current best practice suggestions. Writing in 2004, Kim observed that "English departments are increasingly under pressure to offer writing courses online, but research that informs effective pedagogy—including effective ways to respond to students' drafts—is still limited" (Kim, 2004, p. 304). Twelve years later, Kim's assessment still holds true. In particular, there is a need for more studies that explore 1) the difference LMS interfaces make to the response process and 2) students' actual interactions with LMS interfaces.

This study contributes quantitative data that measures online behavior and tests how LMS configurations impact the response process.[1] The research questions guiding the design of the study were:

(1) Does the rate at which students open attachments with instructor feedback in LMSs differ if an instructor allows the student to see their grade without opening the attachment?
(2) How do other factors—such as timing, gender, delivery method, and course level—affect the rate at which students open attachments with instructor feedback?

Though our study focused on an instance of Sakai, our results should interest instructors, administrators, and instructional designers who wish to better understand how any LMS interface that makes grades visible apart from feedback might impact students' access of instructor feedback.[2]

1.1. Composition research and responding to student writing online

There is a wide spectrum of literature related to responding to student writing in LMSs. The vast majority of this work is situated in the context of fully online courses and develops a contrast between online courses, in which instructors deliver all course content online, and face-to-face courses, which are usually assumed to be traditional courses that do not use online technology (see, e.g., Cavanaugh & Song, 2014; Harrington, Rickly, & Day, 2000; Hewett, 2015; Hewett & DePew, 2015; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Ice, Swan, Diaz, Kupczynski, & Swan-Dagen, 2010; Ruefman & Scheg, 2016; Smith 2014; Warnock 2009). There have been considerably fewer studies focused on responding to student writing in face-to-face courses that are web-facilitated (see, e.g., Gouge, 2009; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Lang and Gouge, 2010; Stine, 2004).[3]

Together, this work suggests that real differences exist between instructors' and students' perceptions of response in online versus traditional courses. However, there is less agreement about how exactly instructors should adapt best practice guidelines for response in LMSs. The continuing uncertainty about online response seems to stem in large part from the methods typically used to study response. While anecdotal evidence and qualitative data have usefully signaled a difference in the ways that instructors and students perceive online response, these studies rely on accurate self-reporting, which Ferris (2014) and Lee (2009) have found to be not entirely reliable in their comparisons of instructors' perceptions of response to their actual response practices. In contrast, very few studies have examined quantitative data measuring online behavior or tested how LMS configurations might impact the response process.

1.1.1. Differences between face-to-face and online feedback

Studies of online response do agree on one thing: collecting digital files, adding feedback to them on the computer, and returning them via an LMS is different from collecting hard copy papers, writing handwritten comments, and returning them to students in person. In a widely cited study of graduate students' perceptions of online feedback, Wolsey (2008) explains that one of the most significant differences between online and face-to-face instruction is that "online education primarily privileges text-based communication" (p. 313). Conversely, face-to-face classes can utilize nonverbal as well as

[1] We limit our discussion to Learning Management Systems, as defined by Watson and Watson (2007): "LMS is the framework that handles all aspects of the learning process. An LMS is the infrastructure that delivers and manages instructional content, identifies and assesses individual and organizational learning or training goals, tracks the progress towards meeting those goals, and collects and presents data for supervising the learning process of an organization as a whole (Szabo & Flesher, 2002). An LMS delivers content but also handles registering for courses, course administration, skills gap analysis, tracking, and reporting (Gilhooly, 2001)" (p. 3–4). This focus on LMSs precludes consideration of other online educational sites and tools such as Turnitin, My Reviewers, Eli, or WriteLab, some of which can be used as plug ins in conjunction with LMSs but which are not, themselves, considered LMSs.

[2] The research team included the authors and 3 undergraduate research assistants (Ariana McCumber, Alexis DePuyt, and Mikal Post). John Brandon Laflen also participated in the data analysis phase.

[3] There have also been numerous studies focused on responding to new genres of digital writing, but we consider these outside the scope of the present study since our focus is on responding to students' text-based papers within LMSs.