

Significance and Uniqueness of Personalized E-Coaching

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INTRODUCTION

Students' engagement in completing written assignments or learning activities may, in part, serve the purpose of achieving their learning goals. Assessing student work based on clearly stated course objectives, on the other hand, helps instructors to teach effectively by reaching out to each individual student with strategies compatible to the student's needs and learning level. Such a teaching and learning process may be viewed as coaching through assessment (Chang & Petersen, 2006). It is an essential vehicle that students use to continuously reflect on and construct their particular knowledge and skills (Chang, 2007; Chang & Petersen, 2006; MacDonald & Twining, 2002). Without it, as found by Lim & Cheah (2003), students may feel lost and detach themselves from learning.

BACKGROUND

For the improvement of student learning and for the establishment of human relationships, an e-instructor functions as a coach when providing feedback to students' submitted written assignments. For example, a coach "questioned and prompted reflective practice in building confidence and critical thinking" (Nelson, Apenhorst, Carter, Mahlum, & Schneider, 2004, p. 32). Unlike a referee, a spectator, or even a player, a coach looks for skills to develop rather than errors committed or goals scored (Chang & Petersen, 2006). Athletic coaches work closely with their athletes through feedback and practice in hopes that the athletes will achieve a best result during a final game or competition (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Likewise, academic coaches work closely with their students through feedback and practice in hopes that students develop concepts and skills of logic in order to successfully solve problems and construct new knowledge (Chang, 2007; Chang & Petersen, 2006).

TPOLOGY AND ANALYSIS OF ONLINE INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

Through a text-based asynchronous communication system, there exist three different mechanisms that instructors or tutors employ to offer feedback to student work or learning activities. The following passages provide 1) a pro and con analysis regarding the use of these forms of instructor feedback (see Table 1) and 2) highlight the uniqueness and significance of personalized online coaching.

Handwritten Feedback Pros

Morgan and Toledo (2006) conducted a study to compare students' perceptions toward feedback offered in two distinct forms: handwritten and typewritten, to explore the following three dimensions: (1) students' attitude toward online courses, (2) students' attitude toward an online instructor, and (3) students' preferences regarding the two types of feedback provision. Using Blackboard as an online course management platform for students to submit their work, the course instructor provided feedback with both a Tablet PC and "Comment," a feature available on Microsoft Word. The researchers found that the students' positive attitude toward the course and their instructor was a result of handwritten feedback by the instructor's use of Tablet PC. The rationale primarily lies in the fact that Tablet PC is more accessible and personal to the students than the typewritten. The researchers, therefore, speculated that the students might still be apt to choose the traditional way of communication due to its level of familiarity. "Familiar experiences are more comfortable, at least initially, for most people" (Morgan & Toledo, 2006, p. 336).

Handwritten Feedback Cons

The resulting argument may, consequently, converge on whether handwritten feedback can efficiently and

effectively take on tasks that allow delivering comprehensible feedback helpful to learners for constructing knowledge. For example, every page contains limited marginal space for adequate and detailed feedback written by hand. This may lead to a vague explanation provided by an instructor about misconceptions made by a student. A lack of sufficient feedback may increase a student's frustration, which may further the aggravation of the student's anxiety. In addition, the number of words typed on a computer would be comparatively greater than those executed by hand within the same amount of time.

Handwritten feedback may also restrict otherwise elaborative responses from learners to feedback provided or questions posed by an instructor. Specifically, this predicament brings forth two questions: (1) where can students write their comments or corrections on the same page where the feedback appears? And (2) what communication tools are students expected to use in response to the instructor's feedback? The variety of uses may make the online instructor's life difficult if the faculty has to keep an eye on possible places where students might post responses (e.g., email on a computer mediated communication system or via the university email system or an online platform via either Drop Box or Discussion Forum, etc.). In our currently fast paced society, facilitating student learning efficiently and effectively is a major concern for faculty and students alike.

Automatic Feedback Pros

In the following section, automatic feedback will be interchangeably replaced by other terms, such as machine generated feedback, computer generated feedback, and instant automatic feedback.

Online course management systems, such as Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>), WebCt (<http://www.webct.com/software>), or Oncourse Collaboration and Learning (Oncourse CL: <https://oncourse.iu.edu/portal>), developed by Indiana University in collaboration with other major universities, have features that allow a course instructor to design online quizzes or exams and to preset correct answers corresponding to quiz or exam items. Computers deliver, mark, and analyze assignments or examinations. Not only can it allow students to gain feedback at a time suited to their own individual schedule, but also provide students with quiz or exam results without any lingering delay

(Peat & Franklin, 2002). Instant automatic feedback also reduces the time and cost needed by the course instructor when grading a large number of student assignments (Northcote, 2002).

Automatic Feedback Cons

Although mechanical corrections do provide welcome information (Peat & Franklin, 2002), they constitute a pre-designed "one-shot deal" or gauge student work with a one-size-fits-all mindset (Chang & Petersen, 2006). Machine generated corrections may only be used when there are simple solutions or one right answer (Stiggins, 2005). This type of communication is linear rather than complex.

However helpful, computer-based tests cannot allow for varying types of student learning styles and paces, and are limited to testing lower levels of thinking rather than seeking a higher level of learning. Quiz items may also sometimes lead students to misinterpret quiz questions because of vagueness or errors made by the instructor in designing those questions (Chang & Petersen, 2006). In addition, quizzes and exams are also known to yield inaccurate learning outcomes due to learners' anxiety, nervousness, illness, fatigue, and other factors at the time when a test is being taken. What is more, a machine cannot satisfactorily and sufficiently analyze an essay type of submission taking into consideration learners' individuality and diverse cultural background. Computer generated instant feedback is an end in itself that is insensitive to idiosyncratic expression from students. Therefore, it often cannot further the development of students' thoughts to promote growth in their learning (Chang & Petersen, 2006). Likewise, mechanical corrections may not provide the instructor with adequate information needed to analyze obstacles to student success (Chang & Petersen, 2006).

Siew (2003) argued that most online assessment tools provide very little to assist students in consolidating what they have learned and in encouraging them to proceed with confidence. Automatic feedback signifies an e-interactive exchange between a learner and machine. Human elements, crucial to effective learning, are unavoidably omitted.

Personalized Coaching Pros

Personalized coaching, a means of instructional communication, takes place within a context of high levels of

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