



CASE STUDY

Feedback that feeds forward: Using PebblePad workbooks to facilitate engagement with feedback and language development in a university pathway program

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.

THE CONTEXT

The Bridge to Academic Success in English (BASE) program is a pathway for international English language learners who have been conditionally admitted to undergraduate studies at the University of Waterloo. The program has been designed to help students build their language and academic skills within the context of their discipline and to familiarize them with both the academic and socio-cultural expectations associated with their new learning environment so that they may be successful in their full degree studies. One of the courses that students take while in the BASE program focuses on the development of academic writing and research skills and encourages students to develop individual strategies to produce well-structured, supported text. In 2016, eportfolios were incorporated into the course design to not only support the learning objectives of the writing course, but also promote student engagement with writing.

The portfolio process naturally aligns with a communicative language approach to English language education. Both pedagogies are supported by similar theories of learning (e.g. social constructivist theory, collaborative learning, self-regulation, and communities of practice) and aim to actualize common outcomes among learners (enhanced learner autonomy, integrative learning, reflective practices and skill development, as well as collaborative knowledge construction). While there has been little crossover research between the two areas, eportfolio research emerging from English language learning contexts in higher education has demonstrated that using eportfolios can positively impact language development, self-regulated learning and understanding of assessment for both learners and teachers (Alawdat, 2013; Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015).

Prior to the adoption of PebblePad, the limitations associated with the older platform ultimately prevented the portfolio process from being fully realized, particularly those aspects intended to support integrated reflection, peer review and feedback provision. This led to frustration among both BASE instructors and students, who viewed the eportfolio not as a means of supporting the writing and feedback process, but as a 'clunky' and superfluous add-on to the course.

THE PROBLEM

The transition from secondary school to university brings distinct challenges for both learners and educators. These learning challenges can be compounded by degrees of difference with respect to student background and expectations of the learning environment. Most international students in the BASE program come from performance and product-oriented educational systems and view feedback largely in terms of a quantitative appraisal of their work. Thus, from an overall programmatic perspective, it remains a priority, and often a struggle, to encourage the development of self-regulated, autonomous (language) learners and to motivate goal-oriented rather than performance-oriented learning. Within writing courses, this means helping students to improve skills rather than avoid making mistakes and motivating them to engage with and apply feedback, which in turn can facilitate language and academic skills transfer across courses and levels. However, because "the attention paid by students to feedback is largely invisible" (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011, p.890), it was important to conceive of an approach that would make visible the processes of receiving, reflecting upon, applying and giving feedback.

Two key assumptions were front of mind when considering the use of PebblePad to promote student engagement with feedback: first that "students are less satisfied with their assessment feedback than with other aspects of their higher education experience" (Price et al., 2011, p.879); and second, that "student engagement with feedback is not a student responsibility alone" (Price et al., 2011, p.884). Thus, in order to structure a truly effective approach, it was necessary to investigate the expectations most students have of feedback and what it can achieve and build in opportunities to actualize such features within PebblePad. Prior research has suggested that students want feedback that is actionable and transferable to future work (Handley et al., 2011), is specific, clear and individualised (Price et al., 2011), reflects instructor engagement with their work (Price et al., 2011), strengthens existing relationships, and helps to develop positive self-beliefs (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007). In addition to facilitating these student expectations of feedback, it was also important for the use of PebblePad to fulfill additional principles of good feedback practice, including the encouragement of self-assessment, and instructor and peer dialogue around learning, as well as the provision of information to instructors that can help shape teaching (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007).

THE APPROACH

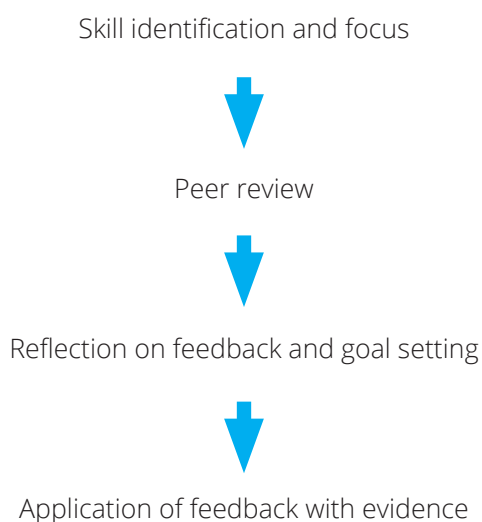
As a result of these key assumptions, PebblePad workbooks have been designed to facilitate a social constructivist approach to feedback through an 'assessment as learning' model, recognising the transformative potential of feedback to both shape identity (Price et al., 2011), and empower learners with a sense of ownership in their writing (Lee, 2017).

The approach taken was aimed at encouraging:

- active student engagement with feedback through capturing skill development and goal setting.
- instructor engagement with feedback and reflection on the quality of that feedback, given the shared responsibility for student engagement with assessment feedback (Price et al., 2011).
- a mutual understanding of feedback as a social, co-constructed process actualised through dialogue "rather than information transmission" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 210).
- sustained language development through opportunities to feed progress forward into re-drafts and future assignments.

Workbooks are housed within shared workspaces, openly viewed in ATLAS by everyone in each course. Structured templates provide a framework to guide students through the writing and redraft process to self-assess their own skills, set learning goals, target specific areas of feedback, and ultimately provide evidence of the application of that feedback in their final submission.

PebblePad Workbook flow:



In addition to receiving instructor feedback, students engage in a 'live' peer review process by embedding a Google doc within a placeholder page. The PebblePad workbook therefore essentially documents an evolving series of feedback 'experiences' on which students may reflect "in an orderly and structured manner, with a series of outcomes or actions that can feed forward into future learning activities" (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010, p.131). Evaluation of workbooks, including components of reflection, peer review and application of feedback, is incorporated into assignment rubrics (although not currently graded through ATLAS), and highlights the integral role of this feedback process in developing language skills and further aligns teaching, learning and assessment of writing.

THE RESULTS

Instructor focus group

Prior to the end of the term, instructors were asked questions related to their own and their students' experiences of PebblePad. Focus group responses were recorded and transcribed, revealing the interrelationship between student and instructor engagement with the feedback process through PebblePad.

- PebblePad allowed instructors to see how students were engaging with feedback at various stages in the writing and feedback process - by students putting into words how they thought or felt about feedback, setting goals for future skill development, and being able to articulate evidence of their skill development. However, the transparency of the metacognitive processes of receiving and reflecting upon feedback afforded by PebblePad also allowed instructors to learn which students did not understand the feedback provided and those that chose not to interact with it.
- All instructors believed that their feedback had become more responsive and, in some respects, more focused toward the skills students themselves identified as most important. In most cases, PebblePad prompted greater dialogue around those individual skill areas.
- Instructors observed that the peer review process was "meaningful and valuable" because students were required to reflect on it and choose whether to apply it in their writing. Compared to previous methods of conducting peer review in the classroom, students were "more engaged in the technology" and appreciated the concreteness of feedback provided in Google docs.
- The goalsetting and reflective practice facilitated by PebblePad made students more responsible for their own skill development, with instructors "now able to call them to more accountability".
- Compared to previous eportfolio use in the writing courses, all instructors firmly believe that PebblePad is a supportive integration that "belongs in the course".

Student written responses

Students' start and end of term written responses to the prompt "What does feedback mean to you?" were coded and emerging themes documented. Notable differences included shifts in perceptions of the function of feedback and its value (to future writing assignments, future studies, in general, and its transferability to other disciplines), as well as increased awareness of self as a writer and as a member of a discourse community.

Agents of feedback: At the start of term, 70 students believed 'feedback' to originate from instructors, experts or professionals, with 20 students identifying peers and themselves as agents of feedback. At the end of term, however, 64 students regarded both their peers and themselves as valuable sources of feedback:

"My peers gave me considerable suggestions that are valuable for my learning"

The reciprocal benefits of giving and receiving peer feedback were also apparent:

"When I give feedback to my classmates, I can recognize the weak parts in my (own) essay."

"Providing feedback provided more ideas for my work."

Awareness of self as writer: Initial commentary centred on instructor feedback to facilitate improvement with little reference to any student responsibility for "actualising this improvement" (Winstone, Nash, Parker & Roundtree, 2017, p. 22). Final responses demonstrated an increased sense of agency and autonomy:

"Receiving feedback make me rethink my personal position"

"I start to find what I need to change by myself"

In addition to specifying areas to focus on as a result of given feedback, there is evidence of students developing a more critical approach to feedback and, for example, whether suggestions given "are suitable for me".

Awareness of self within a community: Another apparent shift is evident in the emotional or relational response to feedback moving from a tentative fear of judgement to a recognition of encouragement. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation for peer comments are woven throughout end of term responses. Feedback is from those *"who really want me to improve"*. Peer review *"increased my confidence"*.

LESSONS LEARNT

- A bottom up approach to the implementation of PebblePad contributed to instructor ownership of this new process, confirmed by the sense that the workbooks "belonged in the course" (instructor quote) rather than being a 'technological' add on.
- Initial classroom time spent collectively working through submission and embedding processes and ongoing availability of 'just in time' support for both instructors and students resulted in a smooth introduction to PebblePad.
- Merging technological platforms proved efficient. PebblePad workbooks and ATLAS workspaces were accessed directly through the university's Learning Management System with Google docs being embedded within placeholder pages.
- Students need to see good modelling of reflection, peer review and self-assessment. The reflective and analytical demands of the PebblePad workbook do not come naturally and may extend beyond prior experience.
- The transfer of earlier feedback messages (feeding-forward) to future writing assignments encourages a goal oriented, not just performance based, approach to writing.

FEEDING LESSONS FORWARD: CHARTING NEW COURSES

- Loosening the structure of the workbook will further encourage self-regulatory behaviours as "... providing choice may be the most obvious way to support a person's experience of autonomy" (Patall, Cooper & Wynn, 2010).
- Using the numeric Capabilities feature on PebblePad will enable students to quantify skill development and competence, adding a further dimension to self-assessment practices. Comparative measurements of competence may provide impetus for the selection of appropriate strategies to drive progress forward.

IN BRIEF

- PebblePad fully supports an 'assessment as learning' model where feedback is a fundamental component of a process approach to writing.
- PebblePad has the capacity to both provoke and extend dialogue around feedback and thus, for our purposes, facilitate various forms of language development.
- PebblePad makes the act of giving, receiving, processing and acting upon feedback visible to instructors, students and the learning community. In turn, the visibility of engagement is enhanced.
- Through the use of PebblePad students have the opportunity to see themselves as agents of their own development as writers.

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