Student Perceptions on the Utilization of Formative Feedback in the Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses instructors’ formative feedback to graduate student writing. The authors investigated the utilization of a formative feedback option in online master and doctoral degree programs in health education and administration. Two hundred and five graduate students at a small private university in the Midwest in various health programs completed an online questionnaire focusing on student perceptions of the use of formative feedback including preferences, utilization, usefulness, and barriers. The first part of the survey was completed by all respondents; the second part of the questionnaire was directed at formative feedback users only. Over seventy three percent of respondents utilized the feedback option and most individuals valued the feedback. Results highlighted differences of learner perceptions and preferences. Participants offered a number of barriers and reasons for non-use; however, students who did not utilize the option were either satisfied with their performance or were unable to meet deadlines set by instructors.

Keywords: Academic Writing, e-Learning, Education, Formative Feedback, Graduate Education, Perceptions, Utilization

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, universities in the United States have seen a dramatic growth of students who enroll in online courses. In fall 2009, 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course; this was a 21% increase from the number reported the previous year. In comparison, the entire student body growth in higher education was less than 2% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The growth continued in fall 2010, when online enrollment increased by almost 10%. Approximately 31% of students in higher education took at least one online course in 2010. The growth rate for enrollment in online courses is not expected to drop off in the foreseeable future (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

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Student satisfaction is an important issue in online teaching and learning because it may ultimately lead to higher levels of motivation, engagement, learning, performance, retention and success (Sahin & Shelley, 2008; Wickersham & McGee, 2008). In the online environment several factors such as instructor behavior and interactivity influence student satisfaction (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004). Students’ perceptions of instructor behaviors such as the provision of feedback, availability, engagement of student in their learning, and instructors’ communication and interaction with online learners are important elements in student satisfaction.

In the information age, instructors at postsecondary education institutions need to be attuned to the needs of online learners. Feedback in the learning process is essential and is an integral component of good teaching practice. According to Sadler (1989), “feedback is a key element in formative assessment” (p. 120); it involves a judgment on the part of the instructor on the quality of student assignments. Formative feedback is aimed at identifying gaps in performance, improving performance, and increasing learning outcomes. Learners may use formative feedback to revise and improve assignments before summative assessment takes place.

Black and William (1998), who conducted an extensive meta-analysis of the formative feedback literature, found it can contribute to student learning in a positive way. Yin et al. (2008) notes, “formative feedback is a promising instructional technique, it is not a magic bullet” (p. 356); they point out that formative feedback does not guarantee improved learning or teaching. Instructors, particularly those who teach in the online environment, need to be able to integrate formative feedback options effectively to create meaningful learning experiences in students’ writing process. This scaffolding approach is particularly important to graduate students who rely on the guidance of program faculty, advisors or supervisors during times when students are heavily engaged in the research and writing process, e.g. writing research proposals or theses/dissertations. Providing focused guidance to graduate students is difficult in any learning environment; however, this endeavor becomes more difficult when students and instructors are separated by time and space—when students are completing their degrees via distance. The purpose of this research study was to shed light on how formative feedback was perceived by graduate students whose programs were delivered online.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Formative Feedback**

Bailey and Garner (2010) group studies on feedback into three areas:

1. Student understanding and expectations of assessment and grades;
2. Student experiences and perceptions;
3. Language used in instructor-provided feedback.

Penny and Grover (1996) report students have unrealistic expectations about their grades. Students often rate their performance higher than their tutors. There are certainly barriers to the integration of effective feedback and students may be too focused on grades; however, Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2002) found not only did students read, value, and utilize it, they were “eager to read feedback comments” (p. 61).

Carless (2006) researched students’ perceptions on the feedback process and found instructors and student perceived formative feedback differently— instructors perceive it more positively in terms of assisting in the improvement of future assignments and of student learning when compared to students, whose primary focus was on a grade. Other researchers (Adcroft, 2011; MacLellan, 2001) support this finding. The authors report student and teacher perceptions of assessment and feedback are quite different. Teachers placed importance on formative feedback; however, in reality not many teachers practiced formative
Integrating Educational Board Game in Chinese Learning Environment to Enhance Students’ Learning Performance and Flow Experience
www.igi-global.com/article/integrating-educational-board-game-in-chinese-learning-environment-to-enhance-students-learning-performance-and-flow-experience/236167?camid=4v1a

Changes in Students’ Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategy Use over Five Years of Secondary Schooling
www.igi-global.com/chapter/changes-in-students-cognitive-and-metacognitive-strategy-use-over-five-years-of-secondary-schooling/124369?camid=4v1a