Paper Review Revolution: Screencasting Feedback for Developmental Writers

Researchers from Kaplan University present findings from a media-rich feedback pilot program that targets students from developmental writing courses. One study of student reactions reveals how screencasting feedback encouraged more formative, holistic feedback and students' awareness of writing process, audience, and revision. A second study comparing grades shows how media-rich feedback had a positive effect on student performance.

Overview of Study

In this study, professional tutors within the writing center of Kaplan University provided media-rich feedback (a combination of screencasting and written comments) to students in several sections of the university's developmental writing course. Screencasting is a method of capturing and recording the screen as the reader scrolls through the student paper and comments on major elements of the writing, thus creating a video and audio examination of the student’s writing. The writing center director and a professional tutor within the staff studied the effects of this feedback method using student surveys. They also monitored student grades for the term and compared those to the grades of students receiving written-only feedback as well as students receiving no writing center feedback. The aim of this research was to determine if the process of providing screencasting feedback encourages the center’s professional tutors to produce more formative, holistic feedback, and also, if this type of multi-modal, media-rich feedback encourages students to more fully engage in the writing process rather than simply make quick fixes to lower-level writing errors. Finally, researchers wanted to determine
instructor feedback. According to the results of this study, video summaries provide several benefits to student writers including “1) increased ability to understand nuances that might be lost in written communication, 2) feeling more involved in the course, 3) improved retention of content and 4) a belief that the instructor cared more about the student’s learning” (p.13). Ice (2009) also found students were three times more likely to reach the top levels of Bloom's taxonomy in the content of their essays after receiving audio feedback than those receiving text-only feedback. Ice also concluded that audio and video feedback from classroom instructors help students better understand instructor comments, encourages students to think critically, and help students engage with their instructors.

Online Writing Center Background

After considering the current research on audio and screencasting feedback for classroom assignments, the writing center staff at Kaplan University thought screencasting feedback provided by tutors could have a positive impact on the writing process, basic skill level, and confidence of students. The online writing center initially launched with a small staff that created tutorials and offered synchronous online tutoring, but the primary focus was paper review. Major changes in the writing center occurred in 2009-2010 with the implementation of a writing across the curriculum (WAC) program. Under WAC, the paper-review service remained a service focusing on skill development and improving process versus product, and tutors continually worked to find ways to provide authentic outreach to students in an online environment. In an effort to provide individualized and robust student feedback and avoid the “proofreading service” reputation, the writing center staff implemented a media-rich feedback pilot project.

The inspiration for this pilot came from a need to make paper reviews more engaging, active experiences for students. For online institutions, effective, relevant technology is crucial in the efforts to create a robust learning environment for students. For several months, writing center staff members had already been using TechSmith’s screencasting software Jing (www.
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When asked about the quality of the feedback experience, 89% (60 respondents) rated the experience excellent or good, with 65% of students selecting excellent. When asked to rate screencasting compared to written feedback, 62% rated screencasting as more helpful (41 respondents), and 33% rated screencasting and written feedback equally helpful, yet 78% (52 respondents) preferred having both written and screencasting feedback.

The following qualitative, open-ended questions were also included on the survey:

- What type of help were you hoping to receive from the paper review?
- What did you learn about your writing from the written feedback in the margins?
- Did you learn anything new in the screencasting feedback that you didn’t learn from the written feedback in the margins (please explain)?
- Did you incorporate the feedback into your next draft or your next writing project (yes or no)? If yes, please explain what/how you incorporated the feedback.
- Please include any additional comments about written or screencasting feedback.

Results from these survey questions showed media-rich, screencasting feedback encourages students to think more critically about the writing process and their writing overall.

The most common type of help students initially expected from paper review dealt with grammar or mechanics and references to a specific assignment rather than their overall writing skills or refining their writing process as illustrated here:
Comments also indicated students recognized audience, referring to the reader, instructor, tutor, or the voice as they revised their writing. For example, one student noted, “The video feedback shows the person who read your essay. It’s personal and [not] just something written on paper.” Through students’ recognition of audience, writing center staff hopes to motivate students to achieve higher levels of thinking, and considering Bloom’s taxonomy, perhaps screencasting feedback can help students move beyond recall to understanding and analysis of their writing. If students become more aware of the need to appeal to a specific audience in their writing, many issues that developmental writers have (clarity, development, organization,) may be more thoroughly understood and addressed.

Second Study – Grade Point Average Comparison

In addition to the student survey containing largely qualitative data, we compared grades for students who received screencasting feedback, students who received written feedback, and students who received no feedback in two terms of the same course. Researchers initially intended to provide media-rich feedback to all students who submitted; however, a number of students inadvertently submitted their papers incorrectly to the main written feedback queue and others failed to submit their papers to the writing center at all. The results of this component of the study suggest that those students who received screencasting feedback earned higher grades in their writing course. The average final grade on a four-point scale for students who received screencasting feedback was 3.62, the average final grade for students receiving written feedback was 3.13, and the average final grade for students who did not receive any writing center feedback was 1.4. We recognize that students who did not follow the submission guidelines may not have followed additional directions within the assignment which may have negatively affected their grades.
grades as well. However, we did exclude students who were not engaged in the course—completing fewer than 4 assignments tied to course-level assessments—so as to not skew the data.

We must note that one graded assignment required students to submit their writing center feedback with a plan for revisions to their project; therefore, students who did not submit papers to the writing center could not receive any of the 20 points allotted for the assignment. There are 1,000 points total in the course, but the incentive was so small as to not affect course grade (2%). The failure to earn those points does not explain the discrepancy between grades of students who received writing center feedback and those who did not receive any. Overall, the grade differences showed the positive impact of writing center feedback—especially screencasting feedback—on student performance in the developmental writing course.

Summary and Conclusions

Through this study, researchers recognize the effectiveness of media-rich screencasting feedback for developmental writers in various ways. Screencasting feedback encourages students’ higher-level thinking as they begin to recognize and acknowledge audience and the need to holistically improve their writing. Students claim that screencasts help them understand written comments provided by tutors and use media-rich feedback to holistically improve their writing. Even more encouraging, researchers see a positive effect on student grades. While recognizing that students claim to prefer the combination of screencasting and written feedback, quantitative evidence suggests screencasting-only feedback has potential as well, so our strategy is to explore this hypothesis with continued research. The student responses and improved student performance, in addition to enhanced tutor approaches to feedback in this study, help validate the importance of media-rich experiences in the online writing center environment.

References


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