

Chapter 10

Rebooting Revision: Leveraging Technology to Deliver Formative and Summative Feedback

Sarah-Beth Hopton
University of South Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

In the past decade, digital feedback tools to review and revise student writing have proliferated. Scholarship in rhetoric, composition, and professional writing has yet to consider how digital feedback systems might offer a promising alternative to traditional and arguably broken feedback practices. This chapter offers a review of the latest scholarship on the digital feedback and revision practices of students and professors, and demonstrates the use of a heuristic customized to college writing applications and programs, which can help professors review and assess new digital tools used to manage an electronic feedback and assessment protocol.

1. INTRODUCTION

One central frustration for English professors is the time it takes to offer quality feedback on the writing assignments of their students. This frustration is often coupled with questions about whether, and to what extent, students act on the formative feedback offered by their professors. Technology can ease these frustrations and make the work of offering quality feedback on writing assignments more effective and efficient while simultaneously offering professors a view into the revision practices of their students. Or, at least, this is what the advocates of digital feedback technology promise. Limited studies have measured the effectiveness of various digital feedback

technologies like Camtasia and Google Docs, but these studies need to be replicated to confirm their claims that digital feedback technologies are preferable to analog practices. Further compounding the issue is the difficulty in selecting appropriate software to manage feedback protocols. Untrained in usability principles, and lacking relevant heuristics, many English professors are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of technology options for feedback delivery. As a way of alleviating some of this frustration, in this chapter, I review some innovative practices using technology as a way of delivering formative and summative assessments. I then turn to a discussion of the revision practices of students as a way of helping professors to see how assessment can enhance the revision practices of their students. And, before I end, I offer an overview of areas in the field of digital

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feedback technology that require further study. My final analysis concerns the heuristics of choosing between delivery technologies. In short, I attempt to offer aid to English professors by proposing a good model for selecting between software to deliver formative and summative feedback.

2. DEFINING THE DIGITAL FEEDBACK PROTOCOL

Advancements in technology and the rise of the “app”—short for an application built to optimally function on digital devices—affords English professors an array of tools to call upon to assess the writings of their students. However, today, writing is much different from what it was when many of our professors were in college. Now, most college papers are written on a computer, not paper; essays are now turned in via e-mail, not attached by paperclips and plopped down on a desk at the beginning of class; peer reviews are managed using collaborative digital technology like MyReviewers, not in small groups; and conversations between professors and students are increasingly conducted via voice-over-Internet-protocols like SKYPE, not the old twentieth century mode of the telephone. Moreover, because technology is affordable and easily accessible to most, devices like Apples’s iPad have changed how we access textbooks and how English departments across this nation are experimenting with knowledge transfer and adaptive learning technology. Indeed, even the very *idea* of what constitutes text has changed. Concerning textbooks specifically, in the past textbooks were bound objects of static information complimented by two-dimensional images, but today’s digital textbooks are haptically responsive, multi-modal, and to an increasing degree customizable. Professors can use technology, when soundly selected and cleverly employed, to better assess the writing abilities of, and promote

good revision practices among, their students. But what *is* a digital feedback protocol? And how do English professors manage such protocols amid a constantly shifting backdrop of new technologies?

Innovations in digital technology are much too rapid and dynamic to expect professors who are not technologically savvy to maintain fluency across multiple tools and applications. Nevertheless, formative feedback (commentary) is generally regarded as a significant factor in motivating learning and improving knowledge and skill acquisition (Epstein et al., 2002; Moreno, 2004). Formative feedback helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas of writing that need improvement. Formative feedback also helps professors monitor, and in some cases, customize content to improve student learning. Summative feedback, on the other hand, evaluates student learning; it evaluates learning relevant to a particular point in time, usually with a grade. Formative feedback can be considered the endnote an instructor writes on a student’s essay that offers global suggestions for revision. Such suggestions might include issues with organization, sources, or argumentation. Formative feedback can also include “local” suggestions for revision such as suggestions for improving style, grammar, and punctuation. By contrast, summative assessments are generally thought of as grades, though summative assessments can be used formatively when students or faculty use them to guide their efforts in subsequent writing activities. Both formative and summative assessments are used to develop student writing, but formative feedback is particularly important to professors who subscribe to writing process pedagogy (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1979; Flower & Hayes, 1971). Stated simply, then, digital feedback and revision protocols establish procedures for offering formative and summative feedback on student writing assignments using a digital device, software program, an application, or combination of such tools.

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