The Study

Research indicates regular and meaningful feedback is critical in developing better writers. TCTE 3290/Technical Writing is designed to help students develop the writing skills they will need in their respective workplaces. The writing intensive course relies on regular feedback of weekly writing assignments to help students improve as writers.

The Course: TCTE 3290/Technical Writing

Each week during the semester, students write a paper that applies the lessons learned that week. Students write four to six traditional assignments in the first month of the course:

- A technical document analysis
- An ethics analysis
- An audience analysis
- A research assignment

The reminder of the course focuses on writing specific workplace documents:

- A graphics assignment
- A page design assignment
- A business letter
- A technical description
- A resume and cover letter
- A memo with embedded instructions
- A proposal
- A technical report

The students turn in each of these documents as an assignment. The instructor grades the assignment, gives feedback, and returns the graded assignment with the feedback. Students can view and read the feedback when they return the assignment. The student reviews the nine workplace documents based on the instructor feedback, and compiles the documents into a portfolio, which is then submitted as the final project. The documents the students write throughout the semester and the final portfolio constitute all of the graded work for the course—there are no standard tests or quizzes.

For this study, students in one section of the course received a recorded video that showed the instructor in one corner of the video, and the student's paper in another, larger window. (See figure top right.) The instructor used the highlight and track changes function to mark the paper while narrating the changes being made orally. The combination allows the student to see the specific areas of the paper that are problematic, and hear the instructor reinforcing the ideas discussed in class. The intent is to provide more complete feedback to students in an effort to improve their writing. The instructor started by opening the assignment and reviewing it briefly to see what aspects needed to be addressed and explained in the video. Then the instructor started the recording and created the narrated video. Depending upon the length of the assignment and the number of issues that needed to be addressed, videos ranged from two minutes to twelve minutes in length. Once uploaded and ready for use, the video was downloaded to the student's computer. (See figure middle right.) The instructor uploaded and labeled the videos to the general course site before an assignment was due to aid all students in a course.

Another potential area of study is whether students feel the level of feedback they received from the instructor was adequate, and if not, why. All 23 respondents in the standard feedback sections responded that they felt the feedback was adequate. Fifteen of the 16 respondents in the Tegrity feedback section felt the feedback was adequate, with the lone remaining respondent declining to answer the question.

This homogeneity would indicate that regardless of how the students received feedback, they felt it was adequate. None of the respondents in either section indicated any dissatisfaction with the feedback they received, and it is likely that those who chose to add additional answers above and beyond a simple "yes" the comments were positive. This would indicate that the student expectation regarding the level of feedback was met regardless of the delivery method.

Results

Both the Tegrity and Standard feedback sections of the course were asked whether or not they had feedback from the instructor was adequate, and if not, why. All 23 respondents in the standard feedback sections responded that they felt the feedback was adequate. Fifteen of the 16 respondents in the Tegrity feedback section felt the feedback was adequate, with the lone remaining respondent declining to answer the question.

The first question asked of the students in the Tegrity feedback section of the course was designed to find out how the students utilized the feedback. Students were asked how they used the Tegrity feedback and were given four choices to choose from. Students were told to choose as many of the four that applied. The choices were:

1. I listened/watched the video, then revised my paper.
2. I revised my paper while listening/watching the video.
3. I listened/watched the video on each assignment as soon as it was posted to Tegrity.
4. I listened/watched the videos at the end of the semester before turning in my portfolio.

(One respondent noted that he/she listened to the videos both as soon as they were posted and at the end of the semester).

Conclusion and Future Research

The particular study was a pilot, and the data gathered statistically small. The emphasis was on launching the tool, and collecting preliminary data on its reception by students. Any solid conclusions, therefore, can only be drawn after similar studies are undertaken in the future, and an effort is made to solicit more responses from students. However, the study does suggest that audio/video feedback of student writing is worth studying, and that students at least feel it benefits them for a variety of reasons.

The study of the particular tool is how to face technical writing courses continues in the 2012-2013 academic year, with more emphasis on accumulating additional data and a focus on collecting additional information beyond how and when students utilize the feedback.

Current research questions also being addressed include whether students perceive audio/video feedback as more positive and encouraging than written feedback, and whether students feel more connected to the instructor as a result of this type of feedback.

Another potential area of study is whether universal videos could be created for view by all students in a course. For instance, if an instructor examined a sample document and explained what was "good" about the writing and what needed attention, could that video be posted to the general course site before an assignment due date to aid students in judging their own work? This, along with the individual audio/video feedback may be especially helpful in online courses, where the student never sees the instructor face-to-face.