

Mid-semester student satisfaction feedback: reducing confusion and anxiety

Lorraine Parkin

Griffith Business School
Griffith University

Michael Henderson

Faculty of Education
Monash University

This small-scale pilot research sought to examine how gathering mid-semester student satisfaction feedback could impact (a) student *and* lecturer satisfaction with using online learning and (b) lecturer approaches to teaching in online environments. Much of the literature on collecting student feedback focuses on end of semester feedback and its benefit for improving future iterations of the course. In contrast, this case study of four units (subjects) in an Australian university investigated the potential of gathering mid-semester feedback to inform lecturers of student satisfaction and thereby open up opportunities for ongoing changes to the unit. The findings revealed that lecturers can use the collection of feedback early in the semester to allay confusion felt by students at the beginning of units. Mid-semester feedback was also found to be valued by lecturers for providing insights into students' perception of a unit's progress, allowing them to modify instructions when needed.

Keywords: student expectations, student anxiety, feedback, online learning, course improvement

Introduction and context

Gathering satisfaction feedback in order to understand student experiences of studying at university and to improve teaching is not new, with Cohen (1980) noting that collection of student feedback has been in use since the 1970s. Collecting student feedback is a reliable and valid method of collecting information on student opinions of a course (Hendry, Lyon, & Henderson-Smart, 2007; Nair, 2010), and that information can go on to assist lecturers to make changes and improve course quality (Cohen, 1980; Murray, 1997; Springgay & Clarke, 2007). However, if feedback is gathered at the end of semester only, course improvement does not benefit the current cohort of students. Despite this problem, there has been very little research into how feedback collection during a course can be used to improve student satisfaction and assist lecturers to improve their teaching while the course is in progress.

Student satisfaction with online learning can be affected by factors such as course expectations and needs, feelings of isolation from instructor and classmates, frustration and confusion, technical and time management issues and feeling less engaged with subject matter (Blackmon, 2012; Wu, Tennyson, & Hsia, 2010). These factors are also important for students using blended learning, where courses may contain some face to face components. In either mode, a student may expect that a course will have certain content, features or attributes and feel that they are important or desired elements in that course. These expectations may differ among students in one group, as many students have never studied online before, and even those who have experienced online learning previously may have differing expectations to their classmates due to the wide variety of teaching methodologies used in online courses (Wu, et al., 2010). If the course does not meet student expectations, satisfaction may be lower, which could then lead to a drop in motivation and, possibly, higher course attrition (Yukselturk, 2009).

The change from face to face teaching methodologies to online teaching can also be confronting for many academic staff and lecturers can feel challenged by using new technologies in their teaching and by the resulting increased time commitment and professional development required to be effective online educators (Downing & Dymont, 2013). Among other things, lecturer satisfaction can be negatively affected by experiencing a lack of face to face contact with students, having problems with technology or receiving insufficient institutional support. These issues can go on to affect subsequent adoption of using online technologies for teaching (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Since one of the major predictors of student satisfaction is the relationship with the lecturer in terms of interaction, providing motivation, clarification and feedback on assignments (Blackmon, 2012), it is possible that reduced lecturer satisfaction and unwillingness to adapt to new online teaching methodologies could negatively affect how online courses progress.

Student feedback can encourage lecturers to make pedagogical adjustments and provide them with insights into student attitudes regarding off-campus learning and the associated technologies used (Kayler & Sullivan, 2009). If feedback were to be gathered regularly throughout a course, lecturers would be able to modify the course while it was in progress, thereby benefitting the students currently studying, as well as students in future courses. This could increase student satisfaction, and also help lecturers understand more fully what students expect and need. Mid-course feedback gives students an opportunity to become involved in their lecturers' practices because their feedback has an impact on the progression of the course (Pardo, 2010; Springgay & Clarke, 2007). Frequent gathering of feedback can give the lecturer insights into how students' learning is progressing and whether teaching strategies are working as learning needs emerge (Pardo, 2010), as well as giving them the opportunity to respond to feedback received before the end of the course.

Method

Two lecturers from different faculties at Monash University volunteered to be involved in this study, one from the Faculty of Education and one from the Faculty of Business and Economics, both teaching two units each. Information on the units appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Information on units studied

Unit & Degree Level	Mode	No. of students	Questionnaire (Q) Responses				Student Interviews	Lecturer (pseudonym)
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
EDUGradDip Graduate	On campus with online components or Off campus studying wholly online	13	6	5	0	0	0	David
EDUPostgrad Postgraduate	Flexible (online with optional face to face components)	20	12	1	4	6	2	David
BUSUndergrad Undergraduate	On campus with online components	110	9	6	3	3	1	Stephen
BUSPostgrad Postgraduate	On campus with online components	39	4	4	2	2	1	Stephen

Note: Q1, Q2 etc refers to four separate questionnaires

A case study methodology (Yin, 2009) was used for this research, using qualitative and quantitative methods. It used a combination of questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews of both students and lecturers for evidence gathering. There were two different sequences of questionnaires; one distributed to students and one distributed to lecturers. The first questionnaires for both students and lecturers collected data regarding their expectations of online learning. The second, third and fourth questionnaires collected data regarding experiences of the course. Student experience questionnaires asked questions on course experience, satisfaction and observed changes, while lecturer experience questionnaires asked lecturers to reflect on the student feedback as well as their own impressions of course progress. Lecturers were also asked to indicate whether they intended to make changes in response to student feedback.

As the student response was slow, it was decided to keep all questionnaires open for two weeks, instead of the initially decided one. Lecturers were asked to remind students of the project via email or the learning management system. At the end of the two weeks the expectations questionnaires were closed and the first of the student experience questionnaires that covered weeks one and two of the unit was opened. Lecturers were asked to post a message with a link to the new survey on the learning management system. This survey was also kept open for two weeks and when it was closed the results were deidentified, collated and sent to the lecturer with a link to the first lecturer reflections questionnaire, also hosted online, for them to complete. This process was repeated twice more.

The second phase of the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the lecturer of each subject and four students (see Table 1 for distribution) who volunteered to be interviewed after participating in the questionnaire phase. In addition to answering questions about their satisfaction with the unit, lecturers were also asked about their perceptions of student satisfaction and behaviour. There were also lecturer questions regarding the technicalities of teaching using online methodologies. Data from both the questionnaires and the interviews was analysed using the constant comparative method.

Results and discussion

There were varying levels of student participation in the project, and in general, numbers of responses were quite low, compared to student numbers in each unit (see Table 1). An average of 11 percent of students enrolled in a unit participated in the questionnaires. The low response rate may be due to Springgay and Clarke's (2007) finding that getting students to give feedback is difficult because students believe it is time consuming, that nothing will happen in response, or fear that even giving anonymous feedback will affect their grades. In this paper, the low response rate necessarily limits the capacity for the findings to be generalized, however, the combination of survey and staff responses as well as student and staff interviews provide a number of valuable insights. This paper reports on only a part of the overall findings, focusing on the usefulness of mid-semester feedback in responding to initial anxiety and confusion about studying online, including online assessment.

One of the main themes that the feedback gathering raised was that in the first few weeks of their units many students were feeling anxious or confused about their studies, either because they were unclear about what was expected of them, or because they were feeling overwhelmed by the new online methodology. For example, in the first questionnaire one student from EDUPostgrad reported problems in entering the online learning environment, was unclear about what they needed to do when entering the site, and consequently felt dissatisfied. The interviews further clarified the commonly reported initial confusion in the unit. In the interviews, three of the four students confirmed that they had felt a degree of confusion, apprehension or nervousness in the early stages of their units. One student from EDUPostgrad, who had never studied online before, attributed their anxiety and confusion to having not experienced online interaction before, and called for “protocols of participation at the beginning of the term”.

However, this confusion was not limited to students who had never studied online before. For example, Robert (BUSUndergrad) had previously studied online but like the majority of survey respondents reported initial anxiety and confusion. The issue was not the fact that the course was “online”, but rather the variability of what that term means from unit to unit. In the past, Robert had used a learning management system in a way that provided very limited interactions for online learning, with lecturers mainly posting notes online and not encouraging discussion between classmates. However, in this unit students were expected to use technologies such as blogging, Twitter and online video as well as the learning management system and email. Robert noted that his satisfaction increased as he became more familiar with the expectations and technologies: “it's just getting over the unexpected, the fear of the unknown, and now that I've done quite a lot of the online work on this unit... it's been really good”. The findings in this research are confirmed by (Bork, 2013) who found that it is common for students to experience a degree of confusion and uncertainty in the early stages of courses utilising online learning. However, not all students can overcome the initial hurdles of new environments and new modes of working. Moreover, while students are coming to grips with the new expectations and skills, they are not engaging fully with the course content. It is here that mid-semester feedback can be useful, providing lecturers with immediate understanding of student confusion, needs and progress.

Both lecturers used the feedback about student confusion and discomfort early in the units to make small changes in order to address these issues. For example, in EDUPostgrad, David responded to a student complaint in the feedback questionnaires that they were confused and did not know what was expected of them by trying “to make weekly goals more explicit and information structured in a more linear fashion to enable easier navigation by students”. Although David chose not to discuss these changes with students, he felt that student behaviour in subsequent weeks demonstrated a reduction in confusion about weekly goals. In his interview, David remarked that feedback gathering during a unit was important because:

people get overwhelmed. If it's the first time, if it's mostly online, they freak out, in the first few weeks. It is part of the learning experience, but to just give them a bit of gentle support and encouragement along the way is really important.

In BUSPostgrad, after some students raised some concerns about one of the unit assessments in the questionnaires, Stephen responded by communicating directly with the entire class about the assignment, with the goal of “clearly [setting] expectations and to let students know that their diversity of learning styles and approaches to study [wouldn't] disadvantage them in the assessment for the unit”. After this discussion, Stephen reported that students then participated more readily in the assessment task and the issue was not raised again in the feedback questionnaires, suggesting that lecturer response to the feedback lessened confusion amongst students. In his interview, Stephen also mentioned that feeling a level of discomfort in the early stages of a course using online learning was common, “particularly when I'm pushing them in terms of trying new things and innovating and so on” and that the process of gathering feedback during the course helped him understand

that discomfort more deeply.

Neither David nor Stephen chose to explicitly report back to students about the feedback gathered or their intended strategies, but instead acted upon the feedback to make improvements to their units. While this clearly had a positive impact on students, Pardo (2010) has argued that once feedback has been collected and analysed, teachers should report back to students about what they learned and the differences that will be made in the course as a result. Springgay and Clarke (2007) highlight the importance of discussing these differences with students before actually putting any changes in place. Doing this can increase the feeling of engagement in the feedback process for the students, as they see their feedback is being listened to, which can then make them more willing to participate in future feedback gathering. It should be made especially clear that feedback gathered is anonymous as students may worry that their grades may suffer if they give negative feedback (Springgay & Clarke, 2007).

The results of the study showed that gathering student satisfaction feedback gave lecturers insights into current student experiences, something they had not received previously. It also highlighted difficulties students were having and gave lecturers the opportunity to remedy these difficulties while the unit was in progress. Both lecturers remarked that the information gleaned through feedback gathering was very useful to them and they would be keen to receive this type of feedback in every unit they teach.

Conclusion

Although this study was limited by low participation, it found that in these four cases, student and lecturer satisfaction were positively affected by the collection of mid-semester feedback. In this paper we have highlighted the particular value of student feedback in the early stages of a unit. It enabled the lecturers to see where problems lay as they were happening and to modify units in response, thereby creating the opportunity for more successful student outcomes. While these findings cannot be generalised to all tertiary courses, there is enough evidence to encourage further research. This research should focus on conducting feedback gathering within the first three weeks of a unit and take steps to ensure student engagement in the process to increase response rates. In the meantime, we propose that mid-semester feedback gathering is valuable for meeting current student needs and improving student satisfaction while a course is in progress rather than end-of-semester feedback, which is gathered at a stage that is too late to help current students and may never be acted upon by lecturers. Although mid-semester collection of feedback can mean extra work for teachers and students, it can effectively be used to increase student satisfaction and improve instruction. The process of gathering mid-semester feedback can be a complex one, but the benefits to student, lecturer and institution can outweigh their limitations.

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