A trial of the Turnitin GradeMark system in a mixed information economy

Alan J. Cann
Department of Biology
School of Biological Sciences
University of Leicester
alan.cann@leicester.ac.uk

Summary:

1. Although GradeMark seems cumbersome at first sight, it is well integrated with the Turnitin electronic submission system already in use across the School and in my experience rapidly becomes easy to use for markers.
2. Processing of paper-based feedback forms used to deliver marks to students and personal tutors introduces additional staff workload which more than doubles the processing time per item of work. This alone makes use of the GradeMark system unsustainable for modules with large numbers of students. In addition, the delays the current paper-based system imposes on return of marks are problematic in making feedback remote from the submission of assessments.
3. Survey data shows that delivery of feedback via GradeMark is well received by students.
4. Adoption of a wholly electronic feedback system across the School of Biological Sciences has considerable potential to improve student attitudes towards feedback.

I have recently (November 2012) conducted a small scale trial of the Turnitin GradeMark system (http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ithelp/services/blackboard/assignments-and-grades/grademark) on a sample of first year essays from module BS1003 (Cell and Developmental Biology) in the School of Biological Sciences. The reasons carrying out this work were:

1. Although I have looked at GradeMark previously I had never actually used it on student work, so this was my first practical experience of the system in operation.
2. This forms the first part of work on the HEA grant into audio feedback I currently hold (Engaging by Talking: Audio Feedback http://lebioscience.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/engaging-by-talking-audio-feedback.html; University of Leicester Ethical Approval Ref: nna-6053).
3. This report describes both my impressions of the GradeMark system itself, and specifically, how well GradeMark fits into current working practices within the School of Biological Sciences.

Why GradeMark?
GradeMark is integrated into the Turnitin online submission system already used across the School of Biological Sciences. If GradeMark could be used the streamline the process of generating feedback and returning it to students, this has the potential for a considerable efficiency gain as well as the possibility of improving student's interaction with feedback on written work. The first thing to state about GradeMark is that it is predicated on the idea of marking on screen. This is not a problem for me as while I am happy to mark student work submitted as printed copies, the overheads associated with electronic submission for Turnitin checking, the sheer volume of paperwork created by the number of students on many modules, and the delay processing and delivering paperwork causes in returning feedback to students mean that on-screen marking is much more practical. After marking work on screen for a number of years I am perfectly happy with this
and I welcome the benefit of being able to mark work from different locations as it suits me, e.g. from my office or from home, without carrying piles of scripts around. However, not all staff within the School are not yet happy to mark on screen - see below.

On BS1003 I marked 31 essays out of the total number submitted by the 175 students on the module. Students were told to submit their essays via a Turnitin assignment on Blackboard as is common practice within the School. Group tutors who planned to mark printed copies of student’s work also requested their tutorial groups to submit hard copies together with the standard School feedback sheets to the Biology office, generating additional administrative staff time requirement. To accommodate varying staff practices, I adopted the following workflow:

1. In the Blackboard Grade Centre select View Grade Details from dropdown arrow on the student submission.
2. Select Grade Attempt.
3. Select user’s paper by clicking on Earth icon.
4. View information (i icon, bottom left) for word count, originality score, etc.
5. Mark up script. I found a mixture of the pre-configured QuickMarks and custom written comments (including links to online resources where appropriate) useful and efficient.
6. Add text a Text Comment and Voice Comment giving an overall summary of the work (without a mark). For consistency, I used the following template which was copied and pasted, then individually adapted for each student:
   • "Play your voice comment (above).
   • <Insert Grade descriptor (from Exam Code of Practice, tailored for the particular essay>
   • Specific comments are marked on the text of your essay.
   • If you would like to discuss your feedback, email alan.cann@leicester.ac.uk"
7. In GradeMark, save Text Comment, record an upload Voice Comment. Again, I used a template approach for consistently:
   • "Hello <student first name>, this is <marker’s name>. I have read your essay and here is some feedback for you.
   • <Insert comments>
   • If you would like to discuss anything about your essay, please email me at alan.cann@leicester.ac.uk”
8. Download the GradeMark pdf for Personal Tutor feedback (see below).
9. Close the GradeMark window, click Submit and return to Grade Centre.
10. Repeat from start with next essay.

How long does it take?
The above checklist may seem arduous at first sight but after marking the first couple of essays it became a fairly efficient process. I recorded how long each stage of the marking process took me for this exercise. For a 1,500 word first year easy, the online marking component of the process (in GradeMark) took me an average of 10 minutes. This would increase proportionately for longer essays. However, the entire process took an average of 25 minutes per 1500 word essay. The additional 15 minutes per essay arises from processing of paper feedback sheets (see below). This time component is fixed and does not vary depending on the length or quality of the assessment.

Separation of feedback from marks
A considerable body of research literature exists which consistently shows that to be effective, feedback should be separated from the return of marks which otherwise dominate student attention (e.g. see: Black, P. & William, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning. Assessment in education, 5(1), 7-74). If students receive their marks at the same time as or before they receive
feedback on the assessment, our experience shows that many will not look at the feedback if they are satisfied with their mark, and may only do so if they want to question the mark they have been awarded. Although the basic design of GradeMark is not set up to encourage this practice, it is possible to achieve this the separation of feedback from marks using the GradeMark system. Student work can be marked using GradeMark without marks being entered into the Blackboard Grade Centre, or marks can be added to the Grade Centre at a later date. Unfortunately this generates additional staff workload compared with data entry at the time of marking. In the case study described here, the Grade Centre was not used to record marks or communicate them to students. The students in this sample received an email informing them that feedback for their essay was available on Blackboard with instructions (including a screen capture video) of how to retrieve this information via GradeMark, and that they would receive their marks for the assessment later.

Feedback loops and personal tutors
The paper-based feedback cover sheet system used within the School of Biological Sciences is not directly compatible with GradeMark. In order to accommodate this, students were given a cover sheet with their mark on it and which reminding them that their feedback for the assessment was available on Blackboard. Personal tutors received the cover sheet with the mark with a one page printout of the GradeMark comments page attached to the form. Personal tutors were unable to access the Voice Comments left for students (indicated on the GradeMark printout). The additional steps necessary to accommodate the personal tutor feedback system are problematic. Printing, annotation and collation of feedback sheets more than doubled the processing time per essay to an average of 25 minutes. In addition, there is the additional costs and delay of paper slowly making its way though the system before students and tutors receive the marks awarded. Electronic delivery of marks and feedback would cut time and costs considerably.

The present feedback system in use in the School also fails to effectively engage students in any feed forward concerning putting the lesson of feedback into use for future assignments. Students are not required to engage with feedback if they choose not to do so and large amounts of staff time which go into generating feedback are consequently wasted. A defect of the GradeMark system is that it does not indicate whether students have interacted with feedback, e.g. accessed GradeMark or listened to the audio comment.

Student responses to the use of GradeMark
15/31 students (48%) responded to a short anonymous online questionnaire concerning the use of GradeMark for feedback as described above. Full details are given in Appendix 1. The responses received were overwhelmingly positive. All the students who responded said they found it easy to access their feedback via GradeMark. All the respondents found both the voice comments and the text comment useful.

Conclusions

- The Turnitin GradeMark system is well received by students and has considerable potential to improve student attitudes towards feedback.
- Previous work on audio feedback for students at the University of Leicester (A Personal Voice? The Whys and Hows of Effective Audio Feedback, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/seminars/disciplines/DW167) and elsewhere shows that students generally welcome audio feedback in addition to written feedback but not as a sole replacement for written feedback.
Appendix 1 Questionnaire responses

n=15 (48% response rate)

How easy did you find it to access your feedback on Blackboard?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very easy:</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy:</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither easy nor difficult:</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult:</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Difficult:</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How useful did you find the overall Text Comment on your essay?

- Useful, as I can understand what sort of class mark I’m expecting, it summarised how I met the marking criteria.
- Very useful and clear.
- Very useful.
- Just as useful as the voice comment. It made me feel more confident about writing future essays.
- Very useful.
- Useful as it told me about how successful each part of the essay was i.e. references, argument, structure.
- I think there should be a comment about most points in the essay and about the difference aspects of writing - style, paragraphing etc. (whether it’s negative or positive).
- I was left a little confused as to whether certain things in my essay were good because they had not had any suggestions for improvement or been labelled as being good.
- It was useful as it gave an overview of what was thought about the essay but I didn’t find it as useful as the specific comments on the text.
- Useful.
- Quite useful.
- Useful.
- Helpful.
- Very useful.

How useful did you find the Voice Comment?

- Useful, especially with suggestions on things I can do to improve writing style.
- Very useful, it helped to clarify the written comments more.
- Very useful.
- Very useful, direct and interactive.
- Very useful as it’s more personal and specific for me about the points I need improving on. I can remember what is said more than what was typed up in text.
- Very useful
- It was helpful as it extended the points brought up in some of the text comments.
- Very similar to text comment, so either voice or text comment would have been enough.
- I really liked the voice comment. It was useful being able to listen to it again. I would have liked it to be longer and with more improvement points.
- It was very useful, I thought that they said a lot about the essay and that it was more useful than the text comment.
- Very useful. I thought the voice comment was personal and in depth than the text comment.
- Very useful, having the voice comment is a great way to receive feedback!
- Very useful.
- Very helpful for my next essay.
- The voice comment was the most useful technique of marking. This allowed me to hear what my tutor really felt about my essay.
How useful did you find the specific comments on the body of your essay?

- Very useful, they highlight the specific parts that need to be improved/changed and helped me to understand why I went wrong.
- They were very useful, they told me exactly what I needed to do to improve that specific part of my essay.
- Quite useful.
- They are interactive. And useful in the way that we pay attention to specific parts making us remember the features we need to consider.
- Very useful as I know what to improve on to ensure I can get higher marks in any other essays I do.
- Overall they were quite useful, but they were very sparse: only about four on the entire paper.
- Each comment was quite insightful and useful. They were for the most part clear and unambiguous.
- Useful, but a few more would have been more helpful.
- Quite useful. There could have been more specific improvement comments because I only got one.
- Very useful, it was good that specific points within the text could be commented on and highlighted, the feedback on these will be useful in future essays.
- Very useful, as comments of this type highlighted specific parts of the essay.
- Quite useful, there could be more comments
- Useful.
- Fairly helpful for my next essay.
- Very useful and beneficial for further essays.

What were the most/least useful aspects of getting your feedback via Blackboard?

- Useful: quick and clear feedback, can be accessed easily. Least useful: can't ask questions about feedback in person immediately.
- Useful: easy to access, you can go back and look at it again when writing other essays to see where you needed to improve. Least useful: if there are problems with the internet you wouldn't be able to access your feedback.
- I could not find any least useful aspects, it was rather a practical and easily accessible way of receiving it.
- Useful: easy to access and understand. Least useful: notes that were included in the essay text. Any questions asked then about what I wrote cannot be answered or altered.
- Useful: The voice comments.
- Convenient.
- Would have been better if hard copy marks were given at same time as feedback was available on Blackboard instead of having to wait another week.
- Was able to look at it whenever I had time and was able to spend as long as I liked looking through it. Since it is via Blackboard there was no time limit as to how long the feedback could be, so it would be nice to have longer, more detailed analysis of the essay.
- The most useful aspect was that you can access the feedback whenever and I liked the fact that it was interactive and had voice comments.
- Having a voice comment rather than just an annotations was useful. The feedback was readily accessible. The mark and feedback were separate which wasn't as useful.
- The voice was the most useful
- The most useful aspects of feedback was the voice recording as it let me hear the tone in which my tutor felt towards my essay. The least helpful aspect would be the stick notes/comments on the essay within the essay. This at times was crowded to read and should be listed on the side with bullets as to where to comment is referring.

Any other comments?

- Make grade and comments available at same time.
- More comments about the text and include all points on how to potentially get everything right so I can make vast improvements on an already good essay.
- This kind of feedback should be available for all essays submitted
- Could be improved by making it easier to find.
- The organization of how to access the feedback was confusing at first and could be easier to access.