EVOLUTION OF ONLINE GRADING AND FEEDBACK

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Since the dawn of digitalization, the percentage of course paperwork housed online has increased consistently. Once online platforms existed only for the paperless reporting of grades to university administration and registrars, while today not only do they hold course materials, assignments, syllabi, and grades, but they also house students’ submitted work, discussion space, and instructor feedback. Growing access to educational and scholarly materials online has led to gradual incorporation of electronic media into our syllabi. Similarly, widening possibilities for grading and providing feedback online has meant not only that we provide different feedback, but also that we provide feedback on different things.

Very much like social media, electronic grading platforms allow for a new distance in the relationship between students and instructors at brick-and-mortar institutions as well as new opportunities for diverse forms of communication. Opportunities for digital feedback on coursework vary widely among platforms, yet the undeniable trend is toward providing greater and greater opportunities for online grading and feedback. New platforms don’t require any download of student submissions at all, extending the virtual distance between the instructor and student work. It is possible for every assignment in a course to be provided online, submitted online, graded by the instructor online, and have feedback accessed by students online—all at a virtual distance that provides both more and less communication between instructors and students.

This new distance provides for changes in the student-instructor relationship, changes in the types of assignments an instructor might assign (and therefore the content and learning objectives of assignments), changes in the types of testing offered (and therefore what is tested), changes in the types of feedback provided (and therefore what feedback is given), and changes in students’ reception of feedback (and therefore what they receive). Put simply, this new form will determine new content. What this paper mainly suggests is that it is imperative that instructors of higher education understand the changing content their choices about digitalization incur, lest the proverbial tail of technology wag the disciplinary dog.

Like any kind of change, advancements in electronic grading have brought with them benefits, challenges, and mere differences from the paper bound, hand-to-hand or face-to-face communication of past classrooms. As it is asynchronous, online feedback waits for students online, requiring them to seek it out rather than be handed it in class or consultation. What will motivate students to seek it out? What will hinder their efforts? How will these changes impact how and on what we grade our students?