E-valu8 – A tool to support proactive feedback: Motivating students to learn and complete their course

John O'Donoghue and Lucy Warman
School of Public Health and Clinical Sciences
Anne-Marie Alger
School of Nursing and Caring Sciences
University of Central Lancashire

The E-valu8 project at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), aimed to utilise technology to support students in effective methods of evaluating the quality of their learning experience, enabling open interaction, collaborative and personal action planning. The objectives explored ways of engaging and motivating students by providing timely feedback, through the development of an online evaluation tool. Initial investigation focused on the mechanism, value and worth of both the process and value of effective feedback. The emphasis within this paper is the consequential effect, if any, on the motivational effect of student feedback by closing the feedback loop and endeavouring to consider if such activity promotes student engagement within a course of study. Creating an environment in which feedback is acknowledged and acted upon and fed back to students has been shown to enhance learning outcomes in many different ways, including improvement in the quantity and quality of the learning experience (Grabinger et al, 1995). This could be defined as an environment which is both dynamic and responsive, with the students being encouraged and rewarded for participating within the feedback and assessment process.

Our work illustrates that by embedding more intrinsic rewards via appropriate feedback mechanisms this allows students to feel involved in taking responsibility for their own learning, (Davies and Smith, 2006; Canaan, 2003). This promotes a deeper understanding of concepts and their application. The technology use needs to be constructively aligned with the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes so the students can become actively engaged in their learning and the learning and teaching process, rather than passive recipients of knowledge and information. To conclude, this paper attempts to show how the effective use of an institutionally based feedback and evaluation tool can encourage and support student motivation to learn and engage within a course of study.

Introduction

The E-valU8 project aims to utilise technology to support students in effective methods of evaluating the quality of their learning experience, enabling open interaction and collaborative action planning. The paper will explore how providing the opportunity for students to provide feedback at relevant times and closing the feedback loop will have a positive effect on the students motivation to learn and complete the programme.

The e-valU8 project began in 2006/7 when a team from UCLan felt that it would be beneficial to provide a tool that would allow staff to seek meaningful feedback from students; all students on a course, at relevant points of the year. Students are given the opportunity to provide feedback through their course representative at Staff Student Liaison Meetings (SSLM) held once per semester. This system relies on the course representatives being efficient in their role and offering all students the opportunity to communicate with staff through them and feeding back the discussion with staff to the students. However, there have been examples of course reps not fulfilling their duties, and some students lacking confidence to speak out, and therefore this method does not give all students a sufficient or consistent interface or voice. Students at UCLan are also given the opportunity to provide feedback through the module

evaluation questionnaires - a standard practise as several HE Institutions (Beckett and Brookes, 2006), along with the National Student Survey and the internal Student Satisfaction Survey. These surveys are delivered towards the end of the year and the results are used to inform improvements for the following cohort. A literature review in the area of student feedback and focus groups with both staff and students led to the conclusion that student feedback was key to the quality assurance processes within the HE institution (Ramsden, 1998). However, this research and experiences of the project team also showed that students were unwilling and unmotivated to participate in feedback which was either not of benefit to themselves or valued by the university (Ballantyne 2003). To encourage students to provide meaningful feedback it is necessary to close the feedback loop (Nelson 2006, Reid 2001).

Reasons to evaluate

In a previous paper (Warnes and Warman, 2008) the team noted Pitkethly and Prosser's (2001) citation of the study by McInnis et al (2000), who found that initial experiences on campus can impact a student's decision to continue with higher education. Pitkethly and Prosser demonstrated that adjustment to environmental factors was a key reason for student withdrawal and capturing the reasons that students withdraw could guide an institutions actions to deal with retention issues. The e-valU8 project team felt that the university should be addressing these issues while the student is still at the university and taking action to prevent the student withdrawing, aiding retention in the current cohort rather than waiting for the following cohort to take action (Warnes and Warman, 2008).

The attrition rate for the Faculty of Health and Social Care at UCLan has been steady for the past three academic years and as a whole had an attrition rate of 22% for 2006/07. Although the Faculty is meeting its targets, research showed that for each of the students who leave, there must be many more that are having difficulties, yet are just managing to remain at university (Cook et al, 2006). The Fresh Start Service at the University, which offers students who fail the course or withdraw support to start again at university, conducts a survey to capture the reasons behind the students' withdrawal or failure. These surveys are conducted during April and July and consist of telephone interviews and questionnaires. The Fresh Start research shows that the most common reasons for Faculty of Health and Social Care students to leave the course were; financial reasons and carer issues – having to care for a family member who became ill. However, several students cited a lack of support or lack of communication with tutors as reasons to leave.

In the 2006/07 NSS (National Student Survey), UCLan opted to select B6 from the bank of additional questions institutions can chose to ask, which relates to student feedback. The questions from B6 were

- B6.1 – I Have had adequate opportunities to provide feedback on all elements of my course,
- B.2 – my feedback on the course is listened to and valued, and
- B6.3 – It is clear to me how students' comments on the course have been acted upon.

Based on the number of students who opted to answer the average score for the Faculty of Health was B.1 = 72%, B.2 = 45%, B.3 = 52%. The overall average score for the section was 53% satisfaction. The e-valU8 project team, formed within the Faculty of Health and Social Care, felt that there was a need to introduce a feedback system to allow students to provide meaningful feedback at times relevant to the students. It was felt that the tool should be flexible, accessible in the students own time and adaptable to suit the needs of the students at set times and the team felt an online tool would meet these requirements. Despite the concern with completion rates of online surveys as explored by Warnes and Warman (2008) who cite arguments against online survey tools by Avery et al, (2006) who highlight that notifications of the survey via email would add to the increasing amount of spam emails in circulation, and Johnson et al, (2003), Conn and Norris, (2005), Avery et al, (2006), who argue that online surveys have a lower completion rate than paper-based methods. However, arguably the student population is ever changing; Mills (2000) discusses the expectations of a generation of students born into a digital culture. As technology advances and the use of technology increasingly becomes the norm for the next generation of students it is likely they will become more responsive to feedback methods that embrace technology rather than "old fashioned" paper methods. The affordances of new technologies in terms of access to rich, multiple representations of information and in terms of new forms of communication and collaboration seem to offer exciting possibilities for education and in particular offer a variety of means of achieving personalised learning, (Conole, 2009)

Warnes and Warman, (2008) also explored the advantages of allowing several days to complete the feedback exercise to allow the students' time to reflect on their responses rather than rushing through the questions to escape the captivity of the classroom.

Impact of closing the feedback loop

An important factor related to closing the feedback loop is the impact it can have on student life. Watson (2003) suggests that there is a longitudinal trend where satisfaction increased when a transparent approach to feedback was adopted. Interestingly Desheilds et al (2005) cite Kotler and Fox (1995), compared loyalty to an institution between students who complained and those who did not. They found that the students that complained and were responded to immediately were more loyal than those who did not complain. This was still the case even if the response from the institution was not favourable. Desheilds et al continue that, not surprisingly, satisfaction can influence a student's decision to complete a course or withdraw from the institution. Deshields et al (2005) also state that academic performance could only account for half of the variance in dropout rates and cite Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) who surmise that universities, like other organisation should become market orientated, focusing on the needs of their customers to satisfy them. Students who have a positive experience are more likely to be satisfied than those who do not. Therefore, it could be argued that by using a feedback mechanism, which will allow the institution to focus on the needs of its customers, will improve students' satisfaction and is more likely to have a positive impact on the students' decision to complete the course. Desheilds et al, note that this is both important to the students, the institution and society as a whole, as institutions have retention targets to meet, students seek a high standard of education and society ultimately benefits from a stronger education system.

Students' learning needs

Prescott and Simpson (2004), based on Maslow Hierarchy of needs have produced a "Students' Hierarchy of Needs" (below).

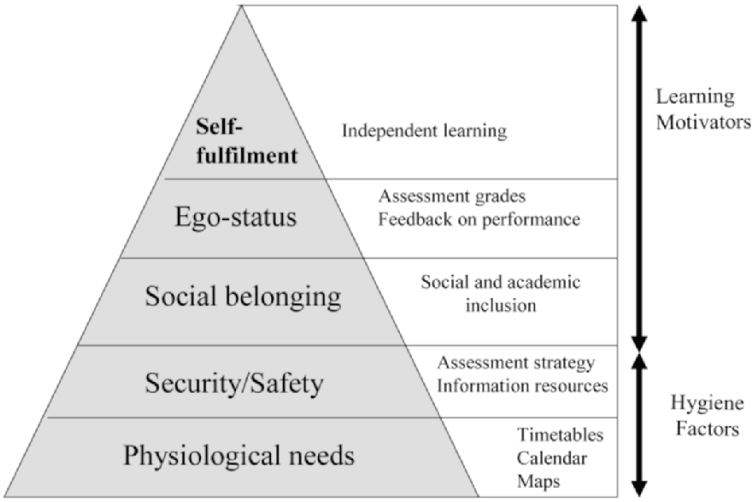

Fig 1: Student hierarchy of needs
(Prescott and Simpson, 2004, p.254)

They state that it is essential that the basic environmental conditions, such as the teaching facilities, classroom, accommodation and refectory, must be satisfied at the commencement of a students' course. If not it may result in a "lack of academic integration which is a contributor to withdrawal" (Prescott and Simpson, 2004, p.247). Gibney et al (2008) support, this stating that these basic needs can significantly influence the comfort of students and could be barriers to the student's progression and their achievement of their academic potential.

However, once these needs are met, Prescott and Simpson suggest that in the content of student motivation the student will focus on unsatisfied needs and "hygiene factors" or "dissatisfiers" related to their studies. Gerstmann (2001) defines hygiene factors or dissatisfiers as factors that are extrinsic tangible benefits, a lack of which could lead to dissatisfaction. Prescott and Simpson's argument supports the e-ValU8 projects' teams aim to evaluate the student experience at stages relevant to the students, stating that that it is essential to address these dissatisfiers at an early stage in the student's experience, so the student continues to attend and is not at risk withdrawal. If the student is not satisfied and is starting to miss a significant number of classes they can often be beyond the point that intervention could prevent them from withdrawing.

Chaffar and Frasson (2005, p. 1) explored the notion that emotional conditions of learning could be defined as the "external circumstances that exist and could affect the emotional state of the learner at the first time and learning therefore". They support this citing Isen (1999) who suggests that positive emotions can have a positive impact on students learning, and negative emotions can have a negative impact. Relating this to Mazlow's hierarchy of needs and Prescott and Simpsons' hierarchy of learning, it could be argued that a students who is having a positive student experience where their needs are met will be feeling satisfaction with the institution – a positive emotion, which will have a positive impact on their learning, thus supporting them to reach their educational goals, arguably motivating them to continue with the course.

Improving retention

McWilliams et al (2004) also address another interesting impact of closing the feedback loop with regards to student feedback. Their research into retention in a computing course discovered a lack of confidence in the student's perception of their abilities compared to the other students in the class. It was found that when the students discovered that they were "all in the same boat", they felt less intimidated which was a large factor in influencing their levels of confidence in their ability to complete the course. McWilliams et al (2004) also noted that changes, based on student feedback increased retention by around 10% such as introducing help sessions and changing the focus of the programme. It could be argued that this was because the students' needs were being met by the changes. Other researchers have also found that students hold a personal opinion that they assume represents the majority opinion of others in the class. Linse et al (2002) identifies the benefits of mid term feedback as providing students with an opportunity to recognise these disparities in their opinions and come to a consensus with other students. Linse et al also suggest that opportunities for mid term feedback allow issues that may be of hindrance to the students' learning or problems to be identified. It also allows students to identify the aspects of the course that enhance their learning. The mid point feedback sessions allow students to provide constrictive criticism of the course and it could be argued that feedback of this nature can help to make the student feel more engaged with the university, which according to Yorke and Longden (2004), is a key strategy in improving retention.

The work of McWilliams et al (2004) and Linse et al, (2002) arguably demonstrated the importance of closing the feedback loop with the students. Through closing the feedback loop the examples above show that it generated consensus among the students and allowed students to identify the issues others were having on the course so they did not feel like it was just them.

On researching the area of feedback motivating students to complete their course, it was discovered that while action as a result of students' feedback improved the course, the student experience and aided retention, there is very little research on the impact of closing the feedback loop to motivate students to learn. Research shows that providing feedback on student work can motivates students to learn by making them involved in taking responsibility for their own learning. Based on this the e-valU8 project team hypothesise that if students were to engage in a feedback system where the feedback loop is closed, that evaluated their experience of the course, they are likely to feel involved in directing the focus of the course, fostering ownership and commitment. This will motivate them to learn and complete the course. Adding to this, based on the work of Chaffar and Frasson (2005) and Desheilds et al (2005) who cite Kotler and Fox (1995), the closure of the feedback loop will evoke satisfaction and loyalty to the institution. Satisfaction is a positive emotion which will have a positive impact on student learning. As the students' needs will be met, they will feel valued by the institution and therefore be motivated to learn and complete their course.

Ownership of learning

Another aspect of learning that the e-valU8 team anticipate this project will impact on will be to encourage students to take responsibility for, or ownership of their own learning. Wingate (2007) discusses how students can be ill prepared to learn in Higher Education, arguing that at school students are considered to be "spoon fed" with the responsibility for their learning lying with the teacher. This is supported by Bacon (1993) who's work on school children's' perceptions of who has responsibility for their learning showed that they felt they were held responsible, but were not responsible. Wingate (2007) states that students in HE need to take responsibility for their own learning. Schloemer et al (2006) suggest that self-regulated learners, learners who modify their strategies to improve learning, thus taking responsibility for their learning, are more successful. Arguably the need to be an independent learner in HE is due to the limited contact hours and expected independent study in a typical university timetable. However, research such as Lord and Robinson (2005) shows that even by the third year of university,

some students still believe that the responsibility and ownership of learning lies with the teacher. The e-valU8 team wish to explore if the feedback system being developed will have any influence over the students feelings of responsibility and ownership for their own learning and encourage collaboration between student and teacher.

Pilot study

The e-valU8 project team piloted the online survey tool in December on the October 2008 DipHE and BSc student nurses. As well as evaluating the two tools identified as suitable for the project, the team investigated the impact the introduction of this feedback system would have on the students learning. It was anticipated that the feedback system would not necessarily have a direct impact on the students learning. However, it was hypothesised that by acquiring and taking action on students' feedback and closing the feedback loop, students will feel they have more responsibility for and ownership of their course and their learning, re-emphasising the message that they must become independent learners, motivating them to complete their programme of study. This process will hopefully act as a catalyst for students to repeat the process with their own work, thus becoming self regulated learners (Schloemer et al, 2006).

The team will also investigate the impact of the introduction of the feedback system on the students' attitudes toward the institution and the course. As key element of this research, as discussed in this paper, will be to see whether the closure of the feedback loop with regards to the students' experience will have a positive impact on the students' attitudes towards the institution, whether they feel their needs are met and are therefore satisfied that their lower level needs (environmental and hygiene factors) are met.

References

Avery R.J., Bryant, W. K., Mathios, A, Hyojin K. and Bell, D. (2006). Electronic Course Evaluations: Does an Online Delivery System Influence Student Evaluations? *Journal of Economic Education* Vol. 37 No.1 pp 21-37. https://doi.org/10.3200/JECE.37.1.21-37

Bacon C.S. (1993). Student responsibility for learning. *Adolescence*, Spring93, Vol. 28 Issue 109, p199

Ballantyne, C. (2003). On-line evaluations of teaching: an examination of current practice and considerations for the future. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* Vol. 96 pp103-112

Becket N. and Brookes, N. (2006). Evaluating quality management in university departments. *Quality Assurance in Education: An International Perspective*, 2006, Vol. 14 Issue 2, p123-142, 20p; (*AN 21630389*). https://doi.org/10.1108/09684880610662015

Canaan, J. E. (2003). Strategies for engaging students more fully in social theory. http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/admin/extras/16_S_02.pdf. (accessed May, 2009).

Chaffar, S., Frasson, C. (2005). *Predicting Learner's Emotional Response in Intelligent Distance Learning Systems*. The 19th International FLAIRS Conference, AAAI Press, Melbourne , FL , USA , May 15-17, 2006.

Conn, C., and Norris, J. (2005). Investigating strategies for increasing student response rates to on-line delivered course evaluations. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education* Vol. 6, No.1 pp13-29

Cook, Rushton and Mackintosh 2006, The STAR project. Available at :http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star , accessed 10th April 2009.

Conole, G. (2009). Personalisation through technology-enhanced learning. In J. O'Donoghue (Ed), *Technology Supported Environment for Personalised Learning: Methods and Case Studies*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Davies, A., & Smith, K. (2006). Drivers and barriers to the uptake of learning technologies: Staff experiences in a research-led university. In J. O'Donoghue (Ed), *Technology supported learning and teaching: A staff perspective*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

DeShields Jr, O.W, Kara A. and Kaynak, E. (2005). Determinants of business student satisfaction and retention in higher education: applying Herzberg's two-factor theory. *International Journal of Educational Management* Vol. 19 No. 2, 2005 pp. 128-139

Gerstmann D. (2001). *External Effects and Their Impact on Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory* Management Principles for Computing Professionals. [Accessed November 21, 2008]http://home.myuw.net/dgerstma/files/papers/academic/css350/herzberg.pdf

Gibney, A, Moore, N., O'Sullivan and Murphy R.(2008). *Won't someone tell me all I need to know? First Year Expectations of University Life.* U21.U21 Teaching and Learning Conference 2008, Does Teaching and Learning Translate? University of Glasgow. 21-22 February 2008 Available at: http://www.universitas21.com/TandL/Papers/Fri3l.pdf [Accessed November 21, 2008]

Grabinger, R. and Dunlap, J. (1995) Rich environments for active learning: a definition. Association for learning technologies Journal, 3, 2, pp 5-35. https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v3i2.9606

Johnston, B.T., Wilson, N., and Boohan, M (2001). Feedback of audit results can improve clinical teaching (but also may impair it). *Medical Teacher* Vol. 23 No.6 pp576-579

Linse,A.R., Denice D., Denton, RA. (2002). *Making Assessment Projects Sustainable: Using Mid Term Class Interviews to Gather Student Feedback in an International Design Course.* 32nd ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference. https://doi.org/10.1109/FIE.2002.1157990

Lord, B and Robertson, J. (2006). Students' experiences of learning in a third-year management accounting class: Evidence from New Zealand. *Accounting Education*, Mar2006, Vol. 15 Issue 1, p41-59. https://doi.org/10.1080/06939280600581053

McWilliams, L.H, Silliman, S.E, and Pieronek, C. (2004). *Modifications to a Freshman Engineering Course Based on Student Feedback.* Proceedings of the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition. American Society for Engineering Education

Mills, A. (2000). Teaching in the digital Generation – the Challenge of Relevance *Australian Science Teachers Journal*, 00450855, Sep2000, Vol. 46, Issue 3

Nelson D.L. (2006) *Online Student Ratings: Increasing Response Rates*. Athabasca University.

Pitkethly A. and Prosser M. (2001). The First Year Experience Project: a model for university-wide change. *Higher Education Research & Development,* Vol. 20, No. 2 pp. 185-198

Prescott, A and Simpson, E. (2004). *Effective student motivation commences with resolving 'dissatisfiers'*. Journal of Further & Higher Education, Aug2004, Vol. 28 Issue 3, p247-259, 13p; (*AN 13802168*)

Ramsden P. (1998). Managing the Effective University *Higher Education Research & Development* Vol:17 No:3 p.347. https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436980170307

Reid I (2001). Reflections on using the Internet for the evaluation of course delivery. *The Internet and Higher Education*. Volume 4, No. 1, pp.61-75. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(01)00048-3

Schloemer, P, Brenan, K. (2006). From Students to Learners: Developing Self-Regulated Learning. *Journal of Education for Business,* Nov/Dec2006, Vol. 82 Issue 2, p81-87,

Warnes. A, and Warman, L. (2008). *E-valU8: on-line Evaluation of the Individual Student's Learning Experience*, York, 2nd July 2008 on Transforming the Student Experience: York: Higher Education Academy Annual Conference

Watson, S. (2003). Closing the Feedback Loop: Ensuring Effective Action from Student Feedback. *Tertiary Education and Management*, June 2003, Vol. 9 Issue: Number 2 p145-157,;

Wingate, U (2007). A Framework for Transition: Supporting 'Learning to Learn' in Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, Jul2007, Vol. 61 Issue 3, p391-405,

Yorke, M. and Langden, B. (2004). *Retention and Student Success in Higher Education.* Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2004

Authors: John O'Donoghue. School of Public Health and Clinical Sciences. University of Central Lancashire. Email: JODonoghue@uclan.ac.uk

Lucy Warman. School of Public Health and Clinical Sciences. University of Central Lancashire. Email: LPWarman@uclan.ac.uk

Anne-Marie Alger. School of Nursing and Caring Sciences. University of Central Lancashire. Email: AAlger@uclan.ac.uk

Please cite as: O'Donoghue, J., Warman, L. & Alger, A (2009). E-valu8 – A tool to support proactive feedback: Motivating students to learn and complete their course. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*.
https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2009.2267