Enabling higher-quality peer feedback in thesis project groups

CONTEXT

Situated within the domain of marine animal ecology, learning activities were conducted on a chosen topic in the form of marine animal ecology. Within these thesis rings, students were encouraged to share their work-in-progress meetings with each other for feedback on specific components. Using the Automated Feedback tool, students were given the option to check their submissions according to a few criteria before handing the work to peers for peer review. These criteria were referring both to in-text citations and reference list, sentence length, figure and table captions, and grammatical and syntactical aspects. Students who attended these discussions to Automated Feedback would receive suggestions on their work if any of these criteria were not met satisfactorily. They then revised their writing as necessary, before continuing to ask for feedback from peers within their thesis rings. Learning activities, according to Bloom's Taxonomy, were mainly at the level of:

- Remember
- Understand
- Apply
- Analyze
- Evaluate
- Create

Learning objective

Learning objectives for this thesis project were not directly related to the use of Automated Feedback.

Learning activities

Over the course of six months, 4 thesis rings of 5-10 students each worked on their theses which related to a chosen topic in the form of marine animal ecology. Within these thesis rings, students were encouraged to share their work-in-progress meetings with each other for feedback on specific components. Using the Automated Feedback tool, students were given the option to check their submissions according to a few criteria before handing the work to peers for peer review. These criteria were referring both to in-text citations and reference list, sentence length, figure and table captions, and grammatical and syntactical aspects. Students who attended these discussions to Automated Feedback would receive suggestions on their work if any of these criteria were not met satisfactorily. They then revised their writing as necessary, before continuing to ask for feedback from peers within their thesis rings.

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Assessment of learning outcomes

The Automated Feedback check was a voluntary, formative exercise and did not count toward final thesis grades. The tool allowed students to peer review each other’s work for adherence to a rubric. Feedback and suggestions both from peers and Automated Feedback would receive suggestions on their work if any of these criteria were not met satisfactorily. They then revised their writing as necessary, before continuing to ask for feedback from peers within their thesis rings.

The main motivation for the instructor to start using Automated Feedback was to allow students to gain each other feedback on their thesis drafts. Oftentimes, peer feedback ends up focusing primarily on textual or grammatical aspects rather than higher-level content. Using this tool, the instructor addressed this issue and promoted students to avoid lower-level mistakes in their written work before continuing to ask for feedback from peers.

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