Full Length Research Paper

Productiveness of online marking for essay-type assignments in management courses

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In this study, we explored staff and student perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignments in management courses. Focus-group discussion results generated from content analyses were presented, with data collected from 19 staff and 17 students of different management courses within one of the universities in Queensland, Australia. The results revealed a pattern of keywords and phrases used by both staff and students to describe their perceptions of online marking. Furthermore, three themes associated with the keywords and phrases were found to demonstrate the similarities and differences in their perceptions. The relationship between these themes of assignment handling, contact with staff, and marking and feedback is illustrated in a proposed model. Implications of our findings for theory and practice were presented.

Key words: Online assignment marking, electronic learning, staff and student perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the higher education landscape is changing rapidly due partly to increased diversity in student composition and technological advancement (Barker et al., 2008; Dalgarno et al., 2006; Tse et al., 2013). University learning is no longer bound by traditional ways or solely undertaken between staff and students within a physical environment (Behrens and Jones, 2003). Staff and students are exposed to a range of new technologies that act as creative forces for good teaching practices and high-impact student learning (Palmer, 2005). To respond to these technological changes, many Australian universities have focused on the development of electronic learning (e-learning), creating a new platform for educational designs to be formulated and implemented using an array of learning-based technologies. Specifically, e-learning can be implemented in many forms that include: 1) offering students online and flexible learning options, 2) accessing learning materials via video lectures, smart phones, and virtual classroom capabilities, 3) transforming physical learning spaces to become wireless, and 4) promoting electronic marking to streamline assignment submission, marking and return processes (Barker et al., 2008; Palmer, 2005) that provide staff and students with more flexibility to create effective teaching practices and learning experiences. Online marking can be defined as an integrated process in which assignment submission, marking and return are undertaken electronically (Palmer, 2005; Thomas et al., 1998). Online marking is gaining popularity because students are required to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in diverse learning environments by undertaking assessment tasks of quizzes, presentations and examinations (Crisp, 2012). Effective feedback on these assessments can enrich student learning experiences by enabling them to improve their academic skills, course knowledge and other disciplinary knowhow (Poulos and Mahony, 2008). Due to diverse teaching expectations and student learning styles, online marking has become increasingly important to promote the quality of feedback, improved performance standards and marking consistency (Nicol et al., 2005).

Although online marking has been found to have

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potential advantages such as increasing turnaround time, obtaining feedback while away from home, reducing the cost of printing, providing convenience of storing assignments and improving the quality feedback (Dalgarno et al., 2007; Heinrich et al., 2009; Tse et al., 2013), staff and students have different perceptions of the effectiveness of online marking. In this respect, Heinrich and Wang (2003) and Heinrich et al. (2009) have explained that the limited usage of online marking for multiple-choice questions and ordering or matching questions is due to the misperception that online marking is only useful for assessing simple-concept understanding among students. These forms of online marking are not sophisticated enough to assess important student knowledge and skills in terms of logical reasoning, organization skills and presentation techniques (Heinrich and Wang, 2003). This suggests that online marking is not effective for assessing cognitively complex content via different forms of essay assignments such as reflective journals, reports or critical essays (Heinrich et al., 2009). However, essay-type assignments are often used to assess student knowledge and skills in management education because they examine analytical ability, problem solving ability, and presentation techniques among students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Heinrich and Wang, 2003). Thus, it is important to identify how staff and students perceive the effectiveness of online marking for essay-type assignments in management courses.

A review of research also suggests that existing research on online marking has tended to focus on student perceptions of online marking process based on specific courses in Engineering and Health Science disciplines rather than assessing both staff and student perceptions in general (Palmer, 2005; Maxwell and Kist, 2011; Poulos and Mahony, 2008). It is conceivable that factors influencing staff intention of adopting online marking in a specific engineering or health science course can be different from their student counterparts in terms of their perceptions of online marking implemented in more general courses within other disciplines such as management (Baker et al., 2008; Dalgarno et al., 2007; Tse et al., 2013). Consequently, differences in perceptions of online marking effectiveness between staff and students in disciplinary specific courses may result in an incomplete understanding of how effective strategies can be developed to promote online marking capabilities in universities. Although online marking is firmly at the core of e-learning and universities have expanded their capabilities to leverage the advantages of online marking, research exploring both staff and student perceptions of effective online marking process for essay-type assignments remains sparse in the literature.

Research purposes

The present study therefore addresses these three

shortcomings by adopting a focus-group method to explore staff and student perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignments in management courses. This study aims to examine three questions:

1. What are the staff perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignments in management courses?
2. What are the student perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignment in management courses?
3. What are the similarities and differences of their perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignment in management courses?

Significant contributions

This study aims to advance the current understanding of online marking in three ways. Firstly, we contribute to the existing research by identifying perceptions of online marking processes for essay-type assignments. This helps confirm whether online marking is assignment-specific because essay-type marking may require different forms of educational design to assess deep-level of knowledge and skills among students in a comprehensive way (Heinrich and Wang, 2003). Secondly, we respond to repeated calls for research by examining the similarities and differences of online marking perceptions between staff and students. This will yield a better understanding of both staff and student expectations about online marking for policy, procedure and system development (Palmer, 2005; Tse et al., 2013). Thirdly, we extend current findings in the literature by exploring staff and student perceptions of online marking in general, across management courses instead of assessing the perceptions of specific course design in Engineering and Health Science disciples only (Palmer, 2005; Maxwell and Kist, 2011; Poulos and Mahony, 2008) where much of the present literature has been generated. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will help confirm whether further study of online marking needs to be discipline and course specific for theoretical and practical development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent development of information and communication technologies has influenced online marking, creating a new platform for traditionally paper-based marking to be conducted electronically (Thomas et al., 1998; Palmer, 2005). The paper-based marking is described as a manual process in which students submit their assignments on paper, staff mark the assignments with comments using an additional marking sheet and students collect their assignment back in class (Dalgarno et al., 2007). This assignment marking approach has been relatively static and requires the involvement of

many parties such as staff, students and administrative staff in order to ensure that assignment submission, marking and return processes are completed effectively (Cox, 2010). However, new technologies and communication devices have shifted paper-based marking towards blending learning approaches incorporating assignment submission, marking and return processes into a one-stop online environment (Palmer, 2005). Researchers such as Behrens and Jones (2003) suggest that the use of information and communication technologies for online marking process could potentially address many of the problems of paper-based marking approaches resulting in positive benefits for innovative teaching practices and learning experiences.

With respect to the increasing interest in adopting online marking in higher education, a few important studies have been conducted to identify factors that have potential impacts on the perceived effectiveness of online marking for different forms of assignment across disciplines. The findings of these studies provide a strong foundation to investigate the perceived effectiveness of online marking processes further. Palmer (2005) developed a formal evaluation system to identify student perceptions of the introduction of online submission, marking and return of assignments in a fourth-year engineering unit. Her results showed that almost 100% of respondents knew how to submit their assignments using the online system. More than 80% of the respondents also understood how to retrieve their assignment marks but only just over 50% of them understood how to get their assignment comments. Furthermore, more than 80% of respondents felt that their assignments were returned faster, and many of them rated their overall experience of the online marking system highly.

Similarly, Dalgarno et al. (2007) conducted a large scale study on paperless submission, marking and return of assignments. Their study involved a group of on campus and distance learning students of Information Technology courses. Results of their study showed that the respondents were very positive about the use of a paperless approach to submission, marking and return for their assignments. Key advantages of their paperless approach reported by the respondents were reductions in time delays, ability to retrieve feedback easily, reductions in printing costs, ability to obtain a replacement copy of lost assignments. Disadvantages of their paperless approach included the cost of printing returned assignments, problems with uploading large assignments, over slow internet connections, and the possibility of students hacking into each other's work.

Finally, Barker et al. (2008) extended the work of Dalgarno et al. (2007) further exploring the perceptions of online marking processes on staff and students in another large scale study. Their results indicated that the majority of staff and students preferred the use of online rather than paper-based marking processes. However, staff and students had very different perceptions about

other aspects of the online marking process. Staff were concerned with workload and health and safety issues in contrast with the students' concern about the quality and quantity feedback, when receiving their electronically returned assignments. These findings suggest that staff and student perceptions of online marking processes are very different from each other.

The findings of these three important studies are very encouraging, and provide us with a better understanding that issues related to online marking are diverse and require more systematic examination of these issues. The review of these studies helps to justify the need of the current study and shows that more research is required to address their shortcomings in order to inform our current thinking of new policies, strategies, procedures and practices for online marking (Baker et al., 2008; Palmer, 2005; Dalgarno et al., 2007).

METHODS

Sample characteristics

The sample of this study comprised 19 staff and 17 students of undergraduate and postgraduate Business Management courses in Griffith University. Of the staff sample, 37% were male, 68% were aged between 25 and 50, 36% had 1-5 years of assignment marking experiences and 53% had 1-10 years of teaching experiences. Of the student sample, 35% were male, 83% were aged between 20 and 30, and 100% had experiences of receiving online marking feedback. 47% of the participants were undergraduate students, and 53% were postgraduate students. The issue of sample size was largely dependent on criteria of information redundancy and theoretical saturation (Flick, 2002). Sandberg (2000) also suggests at least 15 participants are required to capture the variation in the phenomenon being studied.

Data collection procedure

Focus-group discussion guide

A focus group is a facilitated group discussion used to collect in-depth qualitative information from multiple participants so that they can express and hear the opinions of others about a particular topic (Edmunds, 1999). The group discussions focused on exploring staff and student perceptions of online marking for easy-type assignments in management courses. Prior to data collection, two focus-group discussion guides containing a set of open-ended questions were developed for staff and student participants, respectively. The content of the focus-group discussion guides was evaluated by each of the researchers independently in order to ensure that it was appropriate for the target participants. Both staff and student focus-group discussion guides included three

Table 1. Staff perceptions of online assignment marking.

Keywords	Frequency	Superordinate themes
Less time consuming	15	Assignment handling
Paper	102	Assignment handling
Easier, better	58	Assignment handling
Location, computers	27	Assignment handling
Class, lecture	32	Contact with students
Personal	48	Contact with students
System, process	213	Marking and feedback
Handwriting	16	Marking and feedback
Efficiency, moderation	76	Marking and feedback
Comments, feedback	239	Marking and feedback
Standardised	24	Marking and feedback

sections. Section 1 was designed to explore participants' basic perceptions in relation to online assignment marking. Sample questions were: "What is your perception about online assignment marking in general?"

(*Staff and Student versions*) or "How do you think online marking and paper-based marking differ? Give me some examples please?" (*Staff and Student versions*). Section 2 asked participants about their in-depth perceptions of specific online assignment marking issues. Sample questions were: "What do you see as the advantages/benefits versus disadvantages/challenges of online marking?" (*Staff and Student versions*), "How do you think online marking can enhance marking effectiveness? (*Staff version only*) or "How do you think online marking can enhance your learning outcomes. Please give me some examples?" (*Student version only*). Section 3 was designed to collect participant demographic information (*Staff and Student versions*).

Focus-group discussion process

During the 1st semester of 2013, staff and students of the Department of Management of one of the Australian universities were invited to participate in a series of exploratory focus-group discussions in relation to the effectiveness of online assignment marking processes. To increase the focus-group discussion quality, all participants were given a copy of the focus-group discussion guide prior to each focus-group discussion being conducted. This was to allow the participants to reflect on the questions they would be asked during the focus-group discussion (Flick, 2002). All focus-group discussions were undertaken by researcher A and a research assistant. Researcher A used a structured process to maximise the quality of responses obtained and to ensure that the opinions of each participant were heard and recorded. The discussion process involved first explaining what online marking was? Then researcher A facilitated the focus-group discussion process by

asking general and specific open-ended questions to the participants, while the research assistant observed the participants' physical reactions and facial expressions and made notes for reflection. A series of probing and clarification questions were used to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions further. In accordance with recommendations by Strauss and Corbin (1998), all focus-group data were collected until data saturation occurred (that is, participants started repeating their responses). Eight focus-group discussions were conducted for staff and students on different occasions. Each focus-group discussion consisted of 4 to 5 participants and lasted approximately between 35 to 45 min. Each focus-group discussion was recorded and the audio records were transcribed verbatim (Flick, 2002). Each discussion transcript was approximately 6 to 8 pages type-written, single-spaced. The data were analysed using Nvivo v10 software. Researcher B conducted the primary analysis and researcher A on the project verified the accuracy of the coding system. The main themes were corroborated by the two researchers for validation.

RESULTS

To analyse the transcripts, we used content analysis. The analysis started by reading each transcript to gain a basic understanding and we then re-read the transcripts more carefully in an attempt to identify frequently occurring keywords and phrases that were used by the participants to describe their perceptions and experiences of online marking (Rubin, 2005). Then the coding was used to assign meaning to the text, allowing us to identify emerging themes. Based on the themes emerging in the text, we developed three "superordinate" themes that allowed us to discuss the third research question related to the perceptual similarities and differences among staff and students. Finally, a detailed description of those superordinate themes is provided and supported by excerpts from the focus-group discussion transcripts. Table 1 shows a list of keywords and superordinate themes discussed by staff.

Staff perceptions of assignment handling in online marking

Staff spoke about their perceptions of marking paper-based essays versus electronic versions of essays. The participants discussed online essay marking in terms of the speed and efficiency of the process as well as the capacity to reduce wastage of paper and time. Online essay marking was perceived to be more efficient in terms of collecting the assignments electronically and not having to wait for them to be processed through handling services. A representative statement regarding this theme would be:

"I think online is more efficient, obviously there is no paper waste which is a big thing. And just efficiency in

Table 2. Student perceptions of online assignment marking.

Keywords	Frequency	Superordinate themes
Faster	8	Assignment handling
Easier, better	34	Assignment handling
Eco-friendly, paper, trees	90	Assignment handling
Access	9	Assignment handling
Class, lecture	43	Contact with staff
Personal	19	Contact with staff
System, process	34	Marking and feedback
Written, handwriting	8	Marking and feedback
Efficient	7	Marking and feedback
Comments, feedback	120	Marking and feedback
Comment bank	17	Marking and feedback

terms of time, I find it a lot easier to mark online. And it's also faster to get feedback to students. So, if you've got paper-based, you have to set up a time for them to come and pick up their assignments or they have to do it in tutorials, which they might not necessarily attend. So, if you do it online, everyone can get access to their feedback as soon as it's available. So, that's good" (Participant 7:702).

Staff perceptions of contact with students

One widespread criticism of online assignment submission was that it decreased the need for students to come to class and lecturers/tutors did not get to connect with the students (Weaver, 2007). To increase class attendance, some staff required students to attend class to submit and collect assessment items. Their focus was on increasing personal attachment. As one participant commented:

"So, on one hand they are going, we want everything online, but no, we don't get any interaction and it's like, you can't have both, you can't" (6:602).

Another approach by some staff was to require students to collect their assignments during consultation time. Staff would write fewer comments on each assignment and if students wanted more feedback they could ask when they collected their assignment. The advantage of online marking was that it reduced the need for this type of consultation time. However, face-to-face communication was considered to be a better form of communication for some staff as they felt they were able to explain the strengths/weakness of the student's work more clearly.

Staff perceptions of marking and feedback using online marking

While not a widespread subtheme, there were some consistent views of the value of online marking in relation to the moderation process. For instance, one staff

suggested "*streamlining the moderation process is very helpful*" (11:1101). This was due to the opportunity to share a bank of comments and provide a consistent standard and style of feedback based on the marking criteria. This also had the effect of standardising the volume of feedback given across the markers in a course. Convenors were able to provide instructive comments on the markers' style of feedback in a timely manner. Staff were able to easily share comments and benefit from analysis of common errors provided by their colleagues in previous semesters. A major issue for staff when commenting on paper-based marking was clarity, in particular, the standard of their handwriting. It was noted that there is little room in the margins for the staff to write extensive comments and make the students understand. One staff member noted: *"I do it in pencil because I'll constantly erase things"* (9). This was to highlight that with paper-based assignments, the marker needs to be more focussed on what they are writing as they cannot take back what they have written on the original document. Another participant said *"because they can't read your writing, when you type it then it actually forces me to make more coherent grammatical statements"* (8). Table 2 outlines the keywords and superordinate themes discussed by students.

Student perceptions of assignment handling in online marking

From the student's perspective, electronic lodgement of assignments for online marking is a positive. While students could see some advantages or positives to paper-based assignments, the preference was definitely for online submission. One of the major issues for students was associated with the flexibility offered by lodging their assignments online. They commented on being able to submit their work from anywhere without having to leave work early to get to university before 5pm. Also, if they were interstate, electronic lodgement enabled them to still get their work in by the due date. They felt it was faster and easier to lodge assignments electronically. For example:

"I have the perception that the online marking is quicker than the paper-based, obviously the paper-based. There is this extra steps involved with printing it out, handing it in. And then you are getting that back, and the lecturer has to carry it around. Where else the online marking, like student B said. You can put in at midnight or whatever, and then it comes, and at the lecturer's leisure. You don't have to wait till the class or make a special trip or something, and then the lecturer can access that at their convenience to mark it. And they get it back to you again, a lot quicker than waiting around till the next week when you go to class and handing it back" (4:401).

Student perceptions of contact with staff

Some students liked personal contact whereas others felt

it could be a source of discrimination and preferred to remain unknown to their lecturer/tutor. One group of students identified that you get greater anonymity with online marking. If a student has to go to a lecturer/tutor to collect their results and discuss their work, there was a perception that girls got preferable treatment if the lecturer/tutor was male. For example, *"If I am a girl and he was a lecturer, he will give her more time and give her high marks, unfortunately that will happen."* Students acknowledged the fact that unless they had to go to class to lodge an assignment, they were less likely to attend. As one student put it:

"Say if you had to submit your assignment online you're less likely to go into class because you don't need to because you can tell once assessment is finish, students don't really attend tutorials of that anymore. So you don't have to go to submit your assessment, you probably wouldn't go at all" (2:202).

Students did not like their work being marked by unknown others as this quote shows:

"So, it gives a lack of ownership, I guess. From the teachers, professors, don't know they have to own up in that case. And I think that because of the lack of personal touch, it does put a distance between students and teacher" (3:302).

Student perceptions of marking and feedback using online marking

Both staff and students commented on the issue of handwriting and how online marking made it easier to read the comments provided as feedback. Some students liked that fact that with online marking the feedback was connected to the point of error. Then they knew with what particular aspect of their work the lecturer/tutor had an issue. As one student noted:

"The thing that you can see right away where your mistakes are so you can just actually improve for the next time. That's the most important thing at least for me" (2).

Students perceived they got a greater volume of comments from the online marking process as they felt there was little room in the margins for lecturers/tutors to comment. In contrast, they thought that paper-based marking gave a feeling of greater personalisation of feedback. If they merely received generic comments about referencing or the marking criteria, they were not as satisfied.

Perceptual similarities and differences among staff and students

Across the three superordinate themes identified in this study there are similarities and differences between staff and student perceptions and with previous research into online assignment marking (Delgarno et al., 2007). Both staff and students agreed that assignment handling within online marking provides greater efficiency, is better for the environment, and speeds up the marking process. Staff appreciated the ease with which assignments could be stored or archived in an electronic environment and students valued the digital record of comments but had some concerns regarding potential system crashes when submitting their work.

The most interesting finding was how online marking was perceived in terms of personal contact. Indeed, it suggests that there is more research required on the relational aspect of operating in an online environment. Both staff and students agreed that assignments were one of the major reasons for students to attend university in person: either for submission, collection, or receiving feedback. The agenda for staff was to increase personal attachment whereas students wanted personalised comments on their work (Weaver, 2007). Having someone other than their teachers mark their work gave students a sense of insecurity about the standards required. In other words, even if they do not connect with their marker, they want to know the marker's expectations. We consider this pivotal in understanding students' level of satisfaction with the marks and feedback given.

Lastly, in relation to marking and feedback, both staff and students agreed that online marking is likely to provide a greater volume of comments and has potential for greater personalisation of comments if used well. Staff noted that there was a risk of only using comment bank responses and not providing adequate personalisation of comments however this was a minor issue. Other benefits to staff were consistent with those previously identified by Barker et al. (2008) and Palmer (2005). The effectiveness of online marking was where staff and students differed in their perceptions. Both spoke of effectiveness in terms of feedback that would promote learning and enable students to improve in future. Staff did not believe online marking contributed to this; however students did.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that staff and student perceptions of online marking can be summarised using a 3-step process model. Figure 1 shows that the way staff handle student assignments has an impact on the level of contact they have with students, which in turn influences their perceptions of the marks and feedback given. The keywords and phrases reflecting the underlying meaning of each theme are consistent with the findings reported in the seminal studies that were reviewed earlier (Barker et al., 2008; Dalgarno et al., 2007; Palmer, 2005; Tse et al., 2013). However, none of the seminal studies proposed a process model similar to the one presented in this study.

Figure 1. Model illustrating the relationships between themes.

Our findings suggest that online marking needs to be viewed as a process which is dynamic in nature. Each step in the model is interrelated and is also contingent upon each other to explain how staff and students interpret and contextualise online marking in their teaching and learning experiences.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study advances the current research on online marking in several ways. First, our study extends the literature by exploring perceptions of online marking for essay-type assignments. Although it is arguable that essay-type marking may require different forms of educational design to evaluate cognitively complex knowledge among students (Heinrich and Wang, 2003), our findings show that keywords and phrases used by the participants were similar to key findings reported in other studies which were produced using other types of assessment such as online quizzes, multiple choices or technical calculations for investigation (Barker et al., 2008; Dalgarno et al., 2007; Palmer, 2005). These findings imply that staff and student perceptions of online marking are similar across different types of assignments. Secondly, this study responds to repeated calls for examining the similarities and differences of online marking perceptions between staff and students. Our findings report that staff and students perceived online marking process of assignment handling, contact with staff and marking and feedback differently. Staff were concerned with marking efficiency and level of personal attachment with students, whereas students were concerned with the convenience of assignment submission and receipt of personalized feedback. These findings can help universities to leverage the advantages of online marking by designing effective policies, procedures, practices and systems (Palmer, 2005). Thirdly, we inform the current research by exploring staff and student perceptions of online marking in undergraduate and postgraduate management courses (Palmer, 2005; Maxwell and Kist, 2011; Poulos and Mahony, 2008). Our study revealed again that keywords and phrases used by staff and students are consistent with the findings reported by other researchers who

conducted their studies in Engineering and Health Science disciplines (Barker et al., 2008; Dalgarno et al., 2007; Palmer, 2005). This is important because universities can improve their existing online marking system by specifying its standard features to meet specific expectations of staff and students in different courses.

In conclusion, this study has reported the findings of exploratory research to investigate staff and student perceptions of online marking for essay-type assignments in undergraduate and postgraduate management courses. Three themes of assignment handling, contact with staff and marking and feedback were generated based on the frequency of keywords and phrases used by staff and students to report their perceptions of online marking processes. The results suggest that the staff and students perceived online marking processes differently, resulting in their different expectations about the usefulness of the processes. Our results also indicated that staff and students' perceptions of online marking for essay-type assignments in management courses are consistent with the findings reported in the literature. Our findings inform the existing policies, procedures and systems of online marking to promote good university teaching practices and high-impact student learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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