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Citation

Havemann, Leo and Sherman, Sarah (2017). Introduction. In: Havemann, Leo and Sherman, Sarah eds. *Assessment, Feedback and Technology: Contexts and Case Studies in Bloomsbury*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Learning Environment, pp. 1–3.

URL

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Assessment, Feedback & Technology

Contexts and Case Studies in Bloomsbury

Edited by

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DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.5315224



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Introduction

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Assessment and feedback lies at the heart of the learning experience, and forms a significant part of both academic and administrative workload. It remains however the single biggest source of student dissatisfaction with the higher education experience.

(Ferrell, 2012, p.3)

As technology-enhanced learning (TEL) practitioners, we have noted that practices surrounding assessment consume a significant proportion of the time academic staff and students spend interacting with learning technologies. Indeed, we would suggest that this is because assessment and feedback are increasingly produced and consumed digitally. Here in the UK, post-secondary education-focused organisations such as Jisc (2009), the National Union of Students (NUS, 2010 and 2011) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2012) have called for increased and improved application of learning technologies in assessment practice. The NUS study “Student Perspectives on Technology” was based on a range of views from students with differing experiences of, and exposure to, online learning and technology. This study recommended that institutions consider ways of making university administration more accessible through technology, including online submission of assessment (NUS, 2010). This point was echoed in the NUS Charter on Technology in Higher Education, which states that the use of technology in institutional administration will simplify and improve processes, including assessment and feedback (NUS, 2011).

This summary of student perspectives appears aligned with many of those at the institutional level, which focus on the potential to make administrative and service gains through the application of technologies. Yet, moving assessment online has not automatically equated to greater satisfaction among students. And furthermore, if the processes of setting assessment tasks, developing work for submission, and giving and receiving marks and feedback on this work are understood as core to *learning and teaching*, then the actual and potential digital transformation of such practices must surely be considered, first of all, from a pedagogical perspective.

The HEA’s (2012) report “A Marked Improvement” presents a strong argument for transforming assessment methods in higher education, founded on the principle of Assessment *for* Learning (AfL). The authors highlight a “need for institutions to continue to adopt robust technological solutions to support assessment and feedback”, going beyond administration and replication of established offline practices in online environments. They write:

Effective use of information systems and learning technologies is a precursor to change in assessment policy and practice, efficiencies in staff time and a better experience for students. A range of technologies can be employed to systematise and improve the administration of the whole assessment cycle from submission of work to assessment boards (involving submission, marking and feedback), and including easy access to student work for external examiners. By harnessing relevant technologies, the student experience can be enhanced through better access to assessment information, a broader range of tasks, automated or speedier feedback, student-student and student-staff dialogue regarding assessment, and support for peer and group assessment. (HEA, 2012, p. 16).

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In 2014, the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE)³ Consortium initiated a wide-ranging, two-year-long research and dissemination project focusing on the use of technology in assessment and feedback. The BLE partners (Birkbeck, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [LSHTM], School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS], Royal Veterinary College [RVC], University College London [UCL] Institute of Education and the University of London) are a diverse set of both small and specialist, and larger multidisciplinary institutions, which attract a wide range of undergraduates and postgraduates, including 18–21 year olds, international students and mature learners. In this way, we believe that the BLE is in some senses a ‘microcosm’ of the wider UK higher education (HE) sector. By working collaboratively, the BLE partners benefit from a wide pool of collective knowledge, shared expertise and resourcing to ensure they learn from each other and improve practice in TEL. The BLE was founded upon technological synergies: for example, all participating members use Moodle as their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform. An Advisory Board drawn from the member institutions was convened to steer the work of the assessment and feedback project. In the spirit of openness, we also welcomed participation from additional institutions including UCL, Loughborough University, Oxford Brookes University and the London School of Economics (LSE), as well as organisations including Jisc and the Association for Learning Technology (ALT).

The main purpose of the project was to understand and improve online assessment and feedback processes, practices, opportunities and technologies available to the members of the BLE Consortium. There were three main aims and objectives:

- 1 to identify various stakeholders and their expectations and goals in the deployment and use of technology to support assessment and feedback;
- 2 to assess and evaluate appropriate emerging technologies which would potentially support and enhance assessment and feedback across the consortium;
- 3 to produce documentation and case studies, and organise events in order for academic and support staff to learn and contribute.

As we began to produce and collect overviews of current practice and case studies of both technology-enabled pedagogy and technical development, we realised that these were of potential interest to a wider audience beyond the BLE membership and the idea of collecting them together as an open resource began to form. This book therefore represents the culmination of our third project objective.

We have organised the book into a series of sections. The first section contains three papers, which attempt to capture macro-level snapshots of current practice (at the time of writing); here, we focus on technology use across the assessment lifecycle, the roles played by administrative staff in assessment processes, and technology-supported assessment in distance learning, respectively. The four subsequent sections contain case studies of digital assessment and feedback practices, which operate at the micro-level of specific modules to give insight into the pedagogy underlying the adoption of particular tools, and the associated benefits and challenges. The final section contains case studies of technical developments which have been undertaken locally to support or enhance aspects of practice. As such, the book provides a flavour of the variety and breadth of the BLE’s activities relating to the project theme. The issues raised in these chapters remain as vital now as they were when the project theme was first envisaged, and although the project itself must end, the work must be ongoing. We are therefore

³ www.ble.ac.uk

pleased to offer this compendium as a contribution to the sector's widening conversation about the interplay of assessment, feedback, pedagogy and technology.

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