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Case study 4

Authentic feedback through social media in second-year digital media



To watch educator-in-charge Adam Brown provide an overview of the feedback in this subject, visit https://youtu.be/CTI0U_TGt50

Summary

What happens when an educator takes online feedback outside the learning management system and into the world of public social media?

This case shows how social media can be used to involve learners in ongoing feedback interactions with peers, educators and the community. In this second-year digital media subject, learners completed two assignments consisting of blog posts with different kinds of integrated media content, such as images, infographics and edited video. Throughout the teaching period, learners were engaged in ongoing feedback conversations through Twitter as well as comments on other social media sites like video-sharing sites and blogs.

Key features of this case study include:

- A feedback design where learners received input on improving their work from many sources;
- Feedback conversations through a Twitter hashtag;
- Authentic feedback, in that the choice of social media as the context and toolset for feedback was motivated by a desire to involve learners in feedback similar to the real world of their discipline; and
- A gamified approach which was used to reward learners who participated in Twitter and other platforms with points. Learners who accumulated enough points received badge achievements and unlocked optional additional subject content.

Keywords

social media; authentic feedback; Twitter; gamification

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The case

This subject taught digital media through digital media, adopting the educator-in-charge's philosophy of "learning by doing". Learners from across the university took the subject as an elective to learn and experience digital media, and develop their online identity.

The educator-in-charge had tried to get feedback conversations going inside the institutional learning management system, but found the tools did not support the immediate, rich conversations he wanted. In response, he moved much of the feedback to social media – predominantly a Twitter hashtag. In that hashtag, learners post tweets that link to their work-in-progress assignments (blog posts, online videos, etc.) and engage in brief feedback interactions. The social media accounts of members of the public, including industry practitioners, also engage in these conversations.

Getting learners to engage in this sort of informal feedback process can be hard. To encourage learners to participate on Twitter and elsewhere, the educator-in-charge implemented a gamified system through which learners earned points, which he called Tiffits (named after his canine companion Tiffany), for completing particular tasks. When learners post meaningful tweets they earn Tiffits, which unlock additional, non-essential subject content. The Tiffit system incentivises learners to participate, thus establishing a critical mass of communication early on in the teaching period. This early engagement helps to ensure learners remain engaged in the hashtag's feedback interactions throughout the subject. Each teaching period there are thousands of tweets to the hashtag.



An example of a "Tiffit" Badge that can be earned on Twitter by learners in this subject. Photo taken by Adam Brown.

Context

Discipline	Digital Media
Faculty	Arts & Education
Institution	Deakin University
Level	Second year
Class size	200
Mode	Cloud (online) or blended
Contact hours	Weekly seminar (2 hours) Multiple brief (<10m) videos weekly Online engagement

Assessment types

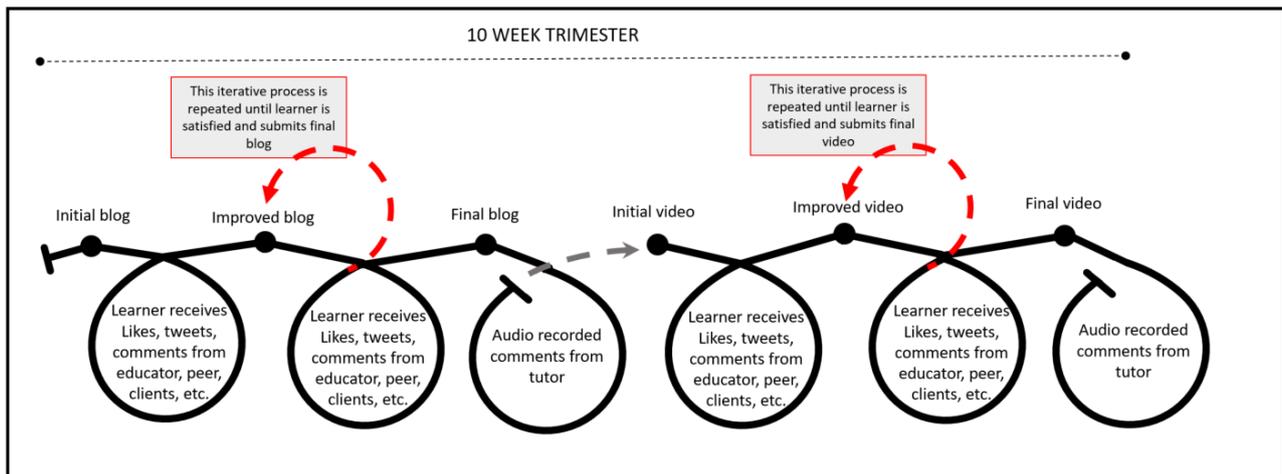
- Blog task, with a critical reflection component
- YouTube video, with a critical reflection component
- Gamification, whereby learners received points (known as 'Tiffits') for completing certain tasks

The subject features two major assignments. For the first assignment, learners create a blog post that creatively represents an element of their own online identity and critically reflect on this by applying theoretical concepts. Learners can share practice posts on Twitter by creating a tweet with a link to their blog, including the subject hashtag #alc203. Teachers and learners in the subject follow these links, and either leave comments on the blog itself or post a tweet about it.

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Learners submit their completed blog to be formally assessed by a member of the teaching team – either the educator-in-charge or a sessional educator. Learners receive audio feedback comments on their blog from their educator, along with a completed rubric and mark. The audio feedback is relatively similar to Case Study 2, so it will not be discussed in depth here. Learners are not required to continue work on their blog past the submission date; however, many continue to write posts after their assessed post is submitted to further enhance their digital literacies and portfolios.

The final assessment task in the subject is creating an online video, which is embedded into a blog post with a critical reflection on the process and experience of making the video. Like the first task, learners are encouraged and motivated to practice relevant media-making (in this case, video-making strategies) by creating short clips and sharing them to Twitter for feedback. Although the formal assessment tasks used different media types, they nevertheless overlap as they both address all of the subject's learning outcomes. Learners report that they use what they learn in the first blog task to improve their work on their final assignment.



Series of feedback loops for tasks in this digital media subject.

This subject involves extensive online interactivity. Learners and educators we spoke with told us that they often wake up to many notifications on their phones about new interactions on Twitter, such as people retweeting them or replying to their tweets. To make space for so much online interaction, the educator-in-charge has removed lectures from the subject, replacing them with several brief videos and podcasts each week.

This case represents an example of authentic feedback. As in authentic assessment, where assessment is meant to resemble the real-world application of a discipline, authentic feedback occurs when feedback practices within the university more closely match feedback practices of the discipline and related industries. The educators in this subject have implemented this by shifting feedback interactions to the spaces where digital media work happens: Twitter, video sharing sites, blog platforms, and other online locations. Rather than being monolithic and staged, feedback information in this subject is a continual flow of bite-sized tweets and comments. And rather than restricting feedback conversations to an educator and a learner, feedback takes place in the online public sphere. These are ordinary features of how digital media professionals engage in feedback, and by bringing them into the subject the feedback is arguably more authentic.

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Why it worked

The design

In this case, feedback was considered to be successful particularly because of the following key elements:

- **Engagement was incentivised:** the gamified approach used by the educator-in-charge got discussions going early in the teaching period, which led to ongoing peer-to-peer interactions. The educator-in-charge commented that he had seen the use of Twitter be considerably less successful in the past without the incentives provided by the Tiffit system.
- **Ongoing feedback was directed towards learner work-in-progress:** by sharing learner work publicly as it was being created, rather than privately when completed, it attracted comments from a broad community and helped learners develop their work.
- **Feedback involved multiple sources:** rather than relying solely on the educators, this subject also incorporated feedback from peers, community members and industry practitioners.
- **The feedback design was authentic:** using digital media tools for feedback in a subject about digital media represented how feedback is enacted in professional practice.
- **The feedback design was coherent:** the two major tasks addressed the same learning outcomes, which encouraged learners to use what they had learnt from one task to the next.



To watch educator-in-charge Adam Brown explain what worked in this subject and why, visit https://youtu.be/m3M_jAZh8bo

Enablers

Some of the enabling factors for this feedback design included:

- **Learning about digital media was part of the subject curriculum:** many learners in the subject had little prior experience with being active on social media, so they needed to be motivated to use social media tools and engage in/with an online community. If educators in other disciplines wish to implement this sort of social media feedback design, they may need to consider learner capability with, and attitudes toward, the relevant tools.

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- **The educators were able to move beyond the learning management system:** going beyond institutional boundaries may not be for everyone, but doing so enabled the educators to use the same tools that professional digital media practitioners use. Flexible technology policy environments are necessary for educators to be empowered to do this.

Challenges

Some of the challenges for this feedback design included:

- **The subject required a rethink of time commitments for staff and learners:** although the subject did not, strictly speaking, require more time from staff or learners than traditional approaches, it required that time be used in different ways. Most notably, the subject required briefer but more frequent interactions, across a broader range of hours. This matches the communication patterns of the technologies; people expect shorter but quicker replies to tweets when compared with email.
- **Workload models did not recognise some parts of the subject as ‘teaching’:** engaging with learners on Twitter and making videos, blogs and podcasts is more difficult to quantify than a two-hour lecture; however, over the course of a week it can take considerably more time. The educators spoke of the difficulties they encountered in getting all elements of their subject design recognised as teaching.
- **The subject design uses technology that is not officially supported by the University:** moving beyond the University’s official technology environment provided many additional possibilities for learners, but brought with it a need to carefully consider privacy, data storage, and interactions with the general public.

What the literature says

This case contains elements of Boud and Molloy’s (2013) Feedback Mark 2. Boud and Molloy put forward a range of critiques of feedback practice, some of which are addressed in other cases. This case particularly addresses Boud and Molloy’s desire for learners to be agentic in feedback processes. In this case, learners are the key actors in the feedback process: learners share their work publicly and request feedback. Boud and Molloy also express concern that feedback is traditionally a unilateral act of communication from educator to learner; this case addresses that concern through involving a range of peers, educators, former learners and community members as active partners in a dialogic process of commenting about learner work.

The use of social media as a site for assessment feedback has not been explored in depth in the literature. Some existing studies have documented learners engaging in feedback conversations with members of the community, such as through learners making contributions to Wikipedia (Di Lauro & Johnke, 2017). However, in the broader higher education literature there are discussions of the use of these tools in teaching and learning.

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Moving forwards

Advice for educators

This case offered several suggestions for educators wishing to trial the feedback design:

- **“Learn by doing”**: the first steps an educator needs to take in implementing a similar design involve joining the relevant social media platforms and engaging in them. A range of online guides show how to get started using Twitter and how to use it in teaching and learning.
- **Consider how authentic feedback works in your discipline**: if the specific model of feedback used in this case doesn't seem appropriate to your context, consider this case as an example of authentic feedback. This case shows a feedback design for a digital media subject that builds in the tools and cultures of feedback in that discipline. How does feedback work in your discipline? How do professionals in your field provide feedback information to each other? What tools, contexts and cultures of feedback will your learners engage in when they graduate?
- **Consider other ways to encourage early engagement with feedback**: this subject demonstrates that there are ways to encourage learners to participate in formative feedback conversations beyond building them into grade-bearing assessment processes. The gamification approach got the conversation moving on Twitter, which in turn got learners engaged in feedback. Are there any alternative ways you could motivate learners to talk about the quality of their work outside of grade-bearing assessment processes?

Advice for institutions

This case offers several useful insights for leaders within institutions wishing to support similar feedback designs:

- **Educators need clear policy directions about technology**: in some contexts, the design featured in this case would breach institutional policy; however, in many contexts it may fall into a policy grey area. The educators in this case were bold enough to navigate this terrain; however, other educators may require explicit permission before even considering using social media in their teaching. Institutions should provide clear policy summaries specifically targeted towards the use of social media in teaching, although achieving the right balance between prescriptiveness and permissiveness in policy may be challenging.
- **Educators need to be empowered to reimagine their workload**: in contexts where workloads are overly prescriptive, the design in this case would not be possible. These educators succeeded because they were able to view their teaching and learning time as one large chunk of time that they could divide as they wished, rather than being forced to spend set amounts of time on face-to-face teaching, marking, coordination, etc. Institutions should consider if their workload models allow educators to use time as they see fit.
- **Departments should consider how feedback works in practice in their disciplines**: in this case, digital media was both the content and pedagogy, so it was natural to conduct feedback through tools like Twitter. Departments should consider how feedback actually works in the world of work of their field, and how well this is mirrored in feedback in their courses. Are learners equipped to engage with the feedback tools and cultures of their discipline on graduation?

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Resources

Due to the rapidly-changing nature of social media platforms, the best way to learn how to use a particular social media platform is to search for how-to guides for that specific platform. This will help to ensure you are using a current guide. To get some general ideas on the benefits of using social media such as Twitter and video-sharing, check the following links:

- [Teachers on Twitter: why you should join and how to get started](#)
- [Pedagogical benefits of video for teaching and learning](#)



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References

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