Adding the Personal Touch:

Using a TabletPC to Provide Feedback in Online Classes

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Abstract

Providing feedback to students in the increasing number of online classes in higher education has presented some challenges for both students and faculty. Using a tabletPC to provide hand written feedback on documents using digital ink allows faculty to efficiently provide precise feedback on student document files. Students indicate that feedback provided with the tabletPC conveys the human touch as well clear information regarding their work.

Growth of Online Instruction

There has been rapid growth in the number of distance education (DE) classes in higher education. A comparison of the data from the 1997-1998 and the 2000-2001 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports on *Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions* shows increases in the number of courses and programs offered (Lewis, Snow, Farris, & Levin, 1999; Waits & Lewis, 2003).   During the 1997-98 school year only about 1/3 of the nation's post-secondary institutions offered any distance education courses. In 2000-2001, over 1/2 of these institutions reported that they were offering distance education courses. This growth was accompanied by increased enrollments and expansion in the number of separate or different course offerings.

While students have welcomed the expansion of distance education classes, they have also expressed concerns about feelings of isolation in online classes and difficulty with promptness or clarity of feedback. There are additional concerns that some students learn best through direct interaction with the instructor and other students, and that the impersonal nature of distance education may be a disadvantage (Beard & Harper, 2002). Among the factors believed to support effective web-based instruction are clear feedback and interaction with the instructor (Swan, 2001).

Providing Feedback

Providing feedback to students in online classes has presented some challenges for instructors and students. Faculty members have found that providing feedback in

online classes can be more time consuming than providing feedback for face-to-face classes. Some students taking online classes have indicated these classes seem mechanical and impersonal. In some cases, students have reported that they received limited feedback in online classes. We know that providing timely feedback is always important, but we don't know which formats of feedback are most effective for online students.

In addition to traditional feedback formats for online classes (i.e. email and typed comments), faculty members in our department have been providing hand-written electronic feedback on assignments through the use of a tabletPC. This has enabled the instructors to write with digital ink on student document files and return them to the students as email attachments. The early tabletPC technology required that the sender and receiver of digital ink comments have specific software programs or viewers. While this was a huge step over only using typed comments, the software glitches and prohibitions on software downloads in some work settings prevented some students from easily receiving the digital ink comments. Using Adobe Acrobat to convert the files to PDF made the digital ink comments accessible to all of the students, but this also resulted in very large files and additional conversion and download time. Technology advances related to tablets have removed these barriers.

With current tabletPC technology, it is possible to write with digital ink directly on a Microsoft Word document and save it as a Word file. The file with digital ink comments can be sent as an email attachment and viewed by anyone using Microsoft Word. The ease of doing this with a tabletPC has reduced the amount of time required by the instructor to provide precise feedback.

This enhanced technology seems to benefit both student and instructor. Instructors have indicated that they felt they provided more detailed feedback on papers submitted to web-based courses when using a tabletPC to provide comments directly on the student file. They also indicated a reduction in time required to provide feedback. It also seems possible that using this technology might convey a more personal touch for students because it is more evident that a person has read their paper and actually written comments.

In an effort to determine if students perceived hand written electronic feedback as being more personal and to determine which format of feedback they preferred, a survey was sent to students from two Spring 2004 semester online special education classes. The following feedback options were surveyed: typed comments on document, email with typed comments, phone conversation, face-to-face discussions, phone conversation, and hand-written electronic file (via tabletPC). Student comments indicated that the feedback received through the use of digitally hand written comments enabled them to

see precisely what corrections needed to be made. Comments also indicated that "the human touch" on their "papers" was evident to the students.

Following this pilot survey, classes taught by other instructors have also been surveyed. In addition to determining if students liked the hand written feedback, we expanded the survey to ask for student comments regarding the relationships between types of feedback and feedback format. We will continue to gather student and faculty comments on the use of this technology for providing feedback.

Summary

As we continue to gather information on the use of tabletPCs for feedback, we hope to learn more about how to better match feedback formats with assignments. Finding ways to provide precise feedback while also conveying the "human touch" may be one of the ways to address some student concerns regarding online classes. Providing this feedback in a way that is also effective and efficient for faculty would further meet the time concerns of online faculty. The tabletPC technology has the potential for being a very useful tool in online classes.

References

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