How can technology support verbal feedback, and impact on both teachers' workload and pupils' learning in a 3-16 school?

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Staff and pupils at Ysgol Bae Baglan, a 3-16 'all through' school in Neath Port Talbot, explored the use of technologies to support formative assessment strategies. Their particular focus was developing effective verbal feedback strategies.

Research recognises the importance of effective feedback to pupils, and their active involvement in the learning process as crucial. Digital technologies play a key role in teaching and learning in Ysgol Bae Baglan and all teachers are equipped with a Surface Pro computer. The school decided to focus on developing mechanisms for providing effective verbal feedback using digital technology. Teachers in all subjects made use of the collaborative digital notebook, 'OneNote' (part of the Microsoft Office 365 suite). For the purpose of this action research, pupils from Year 5 to 10 uploaded their work to OneNote and teachers were able to record personalised feedback on this, using a program called Office Mix.

'The most powerful educational tool for raising achievement and preparing children to be lifelong learners, in any context, is formative assessment' (Clarke, 2017:3)

Aims

The school wanted to explore the impact of verbal feedback on teacher workload and learners' engagement with their own learning. They also wanted to explore the benefits of using technology to provide this feedback.

What did learners say?

At the start of the study, only 34% of pupils asked said that they felt comfortable having ICT-assisted feedback. They were unsure about how to access, understand and revisit feedback in this format. Verbal feedback, as opposed to written comments was new to them, and as such they felt unsure as to its value.

By the end of the study, 70% of pupils of all ages reported that verbal feedback was something that they felt happy to receive. They were happy that the feedback gave them clear messages of what they needed to address. They also felt that the verbal feedback was personal to them, and felt that this personalisation came through more in verbal compared to written feedback.

'Teachers are talking to me about me'

'The feedback helps me understand how I need to improve'.

Older pupils in particular were also positive about the verbal feedback via technology allowing them to revisit and review comments. This was a perceived advantage of the use of technology – because it meant that the comments were captured. Students studying Business Studies were particularly positive about digital feedback.

'Learners will use methods of electronic communication and know which are most effective' (Digital Competency Framework, Wales 2016)

What did teachers say?

Before the study, teachers reported that they typically spent 7-15 hours marking every week. All teachers felt that they spent too long completing their marking. Not all of the teachers at the start of the study felt confident about their own personal ICT skills, and wondered if the aims of the project would be a challenge for them.

During the study teachers enjoyed the chance to talk to the pupils in depth about their learning. Verbal feedback was seen as being more informal and personal – and this was viewed as a positive. They felt that the verbal feedback process 'opened a dialogue about learning between themselves and the child'. In some cases this helped to build better relationships with individuals that went beyond the lesson context.

Teachers also felt that their workload had become more manageable and that their personal ICT skills had improved as a result of the study.

'Pupils make better sense of verbal feedback because I can explain the point and emphasise aspects more clearly than through a written comment. I can show them exactly what I mean, and that is powerful'.

'Feedback is information given to the learner and/or teacher about the learner's performance relative to the learning goals which then redirects or refocuses actions to achieve the goal' (Sutton Trust report (2011).
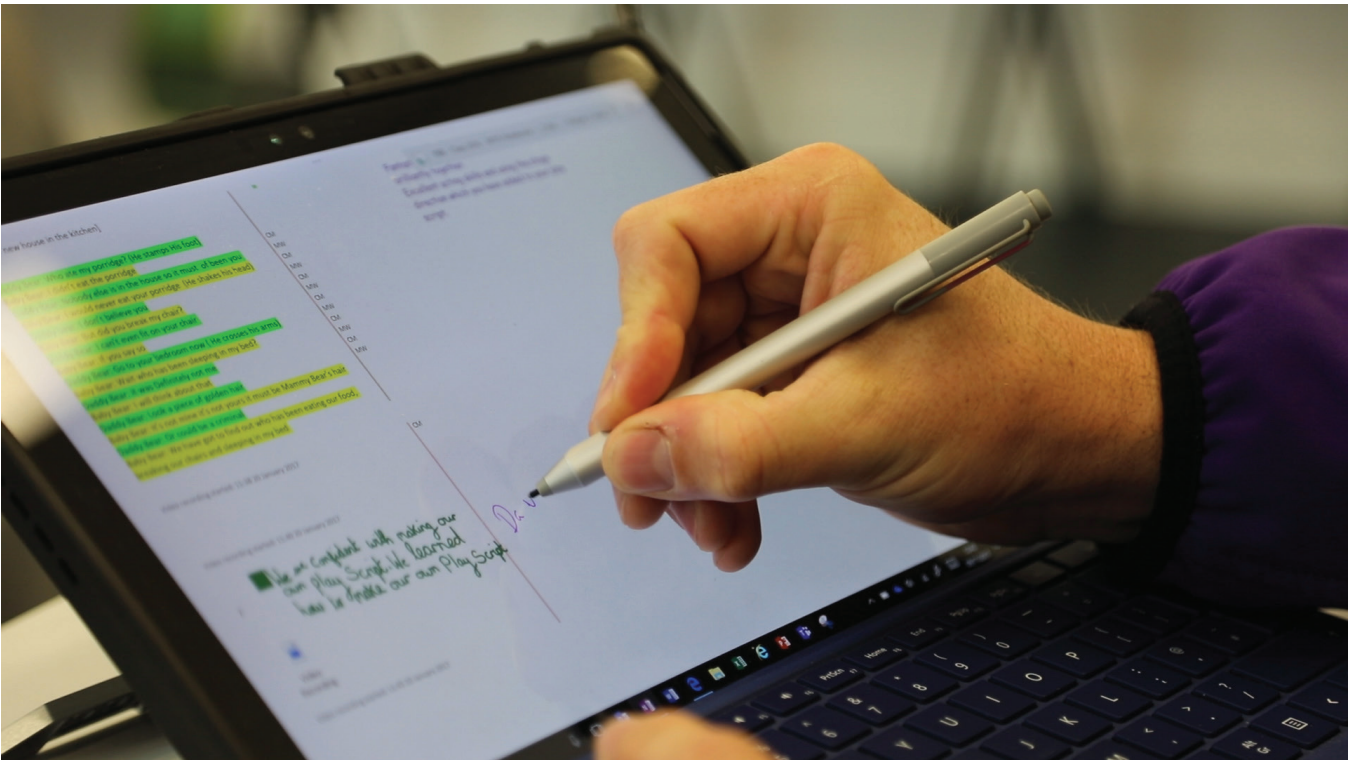
What was particularly memorable?

The enthusiasm pupils showed for the personalised approach to feedback was notable. They were particularly impressed with teachers using their name whilst recording the feedback as this added a personalised feel to comments.

Being given a demonstration of how to mark and record feedback using OneNote by one teacher facilitated knowledge transfer within the school, and was of benefit for the research team as well as other teachers and pupils.

What were the main challenges?

Accessing feedback did rely on the pupils being online, and some of the older pupils said that this could be challenging when they wanted to revisit feedback when they were not in school.

Finding the specific comment was more challenging on lengthy pieces of work – unlike a written series of comments, which you can scan, accessing specific verbal comments involved listening to the whole piece of feedback again. Older pupils therefore suggested that verbal feedback worked best on shorter pieces of work, or as an overarching summary to accompany short written comments throughout the work.

Key facts

Ysgol Bae Baglan is situated in the Aberafan area of Port Talbot. There are 1500 pupils on roll, about 25% of whom are entitled to free school meals. Approximately 35% of pupils are identified as having additional learning needs. This project involved 6 staff, one in the primary and five in the secondary phase of the school, plus 130 pupils from Years 5-10.

- Year 5 used the feedback strategy across a range of topics.

- Year 9 used the approach for ICT, History, Science and Mathematics and had access to their own device throughout the school day.

- Year 10 used the project in for Business Studies.

Teachers used Office Mix (an add-in for PowerPoint) to record their feedback and uploaded this to OneNote, allowing pupils the opportunity to immediately access the feedback.

Summary

Although there is a need for teachers to demonstrate some written marking of work, research indicates that the most effective feedback is that which is given immediately, and which makes 'invisible' processes visible.

In Ysgol Bae Baglan, moving from detailed written comments to verbal feedback using technology decreased teacher workload and helped pupils feel that feedback was personal to their individual needs.

A strength of the approach was the flexibility it brought for teachers and pupils alike. The digital feedback could be adapted to the different requirements that teachers throughout the school had – whether these related to the pupils' age and stage of development or because of the subjects they were teaching.

Different teachers used the feedback approach in different ways. However, all felt positive about the process.

Recommendations

• Verbal feedback opportunities should be incorporated into a repertoire of feedback processes.

• Teachers and pupils need opportunity to explore the possibilities that technology can provide with regard to verbal feedback, for example relating to the personalisation of feedback.

• Teachers also need time to reflect upon the times when technology is not the best way to give verbal feedback, for example when feeding back on very lengthy pieces of work.

• Systems for sharing good practice need to be established to support those teachers and learners who are new to using technology to support feedback.

References

Clarke, S. (2017) *Outstanding Formative Assessment: Culture and Practice* London: Hodder Education

Sutton Trust (2011) Teaching and Learning Toolkit accessed from https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit

Hear from the teachers and pupils by following this link:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLzs6uGJJD_F8irHLpXJu5bGPT2ZPzwotK

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