The effectiveness of students redrafting continuous assessment tasks: the pivotal role of tutors and feedback

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In order to improve academic language competence, students in two academic literacy modules at the University of Johannesburg were given opportunities to resubmit continuous assessment tasks utilising tutor feedback to improve performance. Despite the potential benefits to the students, not all of them were taking advantage of this opportunity. The main purpose of this study was to establish the reasons for this and to describe a strategy that could be used to enhance learning. Performance records were kept on each student to determine the number of students resubmitting and whether or not marks subsequently improved. Data was also gathered through a questionnaire to establish the reasons for taking advantage or not of the opportunities provided. Small group interviews were conducted to follow up on some questionnaire results. It was found that when students are provided with an opportunity to resubmit assessment tasks, they do benefit, provided that they are sufficiently motivated; clear, specific, constructive feedback is given; and tutoring is of a good quality.

Keywords: continuous assessment; tutor development; feedback; motivation

Introduction

Proficiency tests taken by entering first-year students at 11 South African universities between 2008 and 2009 reveal that only 47% are proficient in academic literacy (Blaine, 2010). This suggests that a majority will require support in order to be successful academically.

In order to assist with the transition between high school and university and, at the same time, develop those attributes deemed essential for success, various foundational courses are offered by South African universities to first-year students who are identified as underprepared, as part of 'extended degree' programmes. In these courses, learning is scaffolded to assist students to acquire academic language competence.

This article describes a study involving two academic literacy courses at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2009. In order to improve performance and enhance learning, students were given opportunities to redraft and resubmit continuous assessment tasks for reassessment and, possibly, higher marks.

This practice of providing an opportunity to resubmit assessment tasks is not unique to UJ. Evidence from case studies (Wesley Institute, 2009; James Cook University, n.d.; University of the Western Cape, 2003; Tipperary Institute, 2005), as well as research by Chuck and Young (2004) and Alam (2004), indicates that it is practised worldwide. Wherever it is found, the aim seems to be the same, namely to support student learning and progress. What differs from one institution to the next is the criteria for determining which students are allowed to resubmit tasks and whether to apply the full range of marks or place a cap (usually 50%) when marking resubmitted tasks.

The present study was motivated by the fact that it was not clear why not all students were taking advantage of this opportunity to improve their performance on each worksheet. Resubmissions were received each week by the tutors, but it seemed that not every student was making the expected effort. Further, on occasion, resubmitted tasks were no better in quality than the original ones. Some students did not resubmit any tasks. It was thus necessary to establish the effectiveness of this method.

This article aims to describe a strategy that could be used to improve the academic literacy competencies of students and thus enhance student performance. It will also be explained why certain elements must be in place in order for the resubmission process to be successful.

The description of this strategy is followed by an examination of factors that have an impact on the success of this process, namely motivation, utilisation of feedback and, especially, tutor competence. Finally, the significance of and reasons for the importance of these other factors are discussed.

Theoretical framework

This study was informed by theories on motivation, feedback and learning benefits of a tutor system.

Levy (2008) maintains that academic motivation derives largely from the social cognitive motivation theory, which posits that the role of students in the education process is (potentially) a fairly dynamic one, requiring that students take ownership of their own education and become actively involved. Ahmed and Bruinsma (2006) mention several other pertinent factors such as self-concept, self-determination, interest, attribution and goals. According to Ahmed and Bruinsma (2006, citing Ryan and Deci, 2000), self-determination theory postulates that behaviour is driven by intrinsic, extrinsic or even a-motivation, with the last of these being fairly synonymous with 'learned helplessness' and the least self-determined. This implies that only when students have a desire to learn do they engage meaningfully with learning activities.

Deci (1992) believes that the complex relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is influenced by other factors such as interest, competence, self-determination/autonomy, personality characteristics, cultural conventions and various situational elements. Ultimately, however, intrinsically motivated students generally perform better academically than their extrinsically motivated counterparts do. Also very relevant here is the "central role that social and emotional learning can play in enhancing developmental outcomes" (Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003:63). This suggests that students with a solid sense of self and the concomitant emotional and social skills are more likely to be motivated and to succeed academically.

Some of the above factors probably influence students' attitudes towards or understanding of their tutors' feedback. In a process of resubmitting tasks, feedback is essential for accelerating learning and for enabling better learning outcomes (Hounsell, 2004). Ramaprasad (1983) and Sadler (1989) maintain that quality feedback helps students recognise shortcomings in their own performance compared to the standard required and assists them in attaining that goal.

The ability to acquire and apply appropriate learning strategies does not come naturally to all: it must be learned. According to Gibbs and Simpson (2002, citing Saljo, 1982), many students have an unsophisticated surface approach to learning which hinders understanding of feedback. Some feel that tutor feedback is only sometimes useful in helping them understand their marks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002, citing Maclellen, 2001). This appears particularly true for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, where the norm is overcrowded, under-resourced schools, an authoritarian, teacher-centred style of teaching and an emphasis on rote learning (Grayson, 1996).

The benefits of feedback do not depend solely on the quality of tutor feedback. Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald (2003) maintain that some students do not even bother to read it. Such students need to be encouraged to read feedback and to use it to improve their work. In their research, Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald identified several approaches as helpful in focusing student attention on feedback. For example, providing feedback with no marks or using two-stage assignments, where feedback is provided for the first part but not for the second. It is clear, however, that in order to improve performance, students must actually read and then act upon the feedback given. The importance of ensuring that students understand

why they receive the marks they do and what constitutes quality work for a particular task cannot be underestimated. Many students struggle with what constitutes 'good' work. This lack of 'evaluative expertise' (Sadler, 1989:119), or an inability to come to a concept of quality roughly equal to that held by the tutor, constitutes a significant stumbling block for many students. In order to improve, students must develop the capability to engage in the measures required to close the gap between their own work and the desired standard.

If feedback has not resulted in improved learning, Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald (2003) suggest several possible reasons for this. Feedback might come too late to be of any real value because the student has already moved on to something else. In fact, "imperfect feedback from a fellow student provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later" (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002:12). Alternatively, feedback might be 'backward looking' as opposed to 'forward looking' (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002:16). In order to be effective, feedback needs to provide guidance for future learning. Furthermore, feedback might be too vague to be of any real value to the student. Some students, however, might simply choose to ignore the feedback entirely, either because they do not understand it or because they assume nothing will happen to them if they decide to ignore it.

Well-trained tutors also play a pivotal role in the facilitation of student success (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). The major benefits of a tutor system are that tutors and students are usually peers and tutorial groups are far smaller than lecture classes. There is, therefore, a less intimidating and more informal atmosphere which is conducive to enhanced engagement, interaction, participation and concentration. Research has also shown that many students are more receptive to feedback provided by peers who have been trained to peer assess than feedback provided by more 'expert' lecturers who are sometimes perceived as 'overly directional' (Niven, 2009:280).

In a tutor system, students can receive holistic, individualised instruction as well as considerable content clarification (Goodlad, 1998). They also get the opportunity to practise nascent academic skills and are assisted to acquire the specific discourse of their discipline. Tutor feedback is both more immediate and extensive – which promotes the assumption of individual responsibility for learning as well as increased confidence, motivation and commitment (Topping, 1998). Tutors constantly monitor students and, hence, are in a position to detect and appropriately address any learning problems. Overall, the potential benefits of intellectual and psychological support by tutors are enormous (Falchikov, 2001).

Methodology

This study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative research. Records of student performance and improvement were kept. In order to gather information about students' perceptions and experience of resubmitting tasks, a questionnaire was used, followed by small group interviews.

All students enrolled in two academic literacy courses on one UJ campus in 2009 were targeted. The courses were Language for the Economic Sciences (LES) (a core module in the first year of an extended degree programme in the Faculty of Economic Sciences) with 84 students and English for Law (EFL) (a full-credit mainstream module in the Faculty of Law) with 109 students.

Two of the authors of this study coordinated these two modules. At the beginning of the week, they each delivered a lecture on some aspect of academic literacy. This was followed by three tutorials, facilitated by tutors, in which groups of 20 to 25 students were given various tasks and worksheets aimed at applying the concepts covered in the lecture.

Performance records

Both modules employ continuous assessment which allows students' progress to be assessed on the basis of work completed throughout the year, with a wide variety of assessment opportunities rather than final examinations. According to the relevant UJ policy, traditional summative assessment opportunities in the form of examinations may be included in a continuous assessment schedule. Only one of the modules, EFL, had a combination of class exercises and examinations; for LES, students were required only to complete class exercises. Tasks in both modules consisted of short as well as more extended assignments

which were marked and filed in student-compiled portfolios for final evaluation at the end of each of the four terms. The aggregated marks (which include the examination marks in EFL) were then used to calculate each student's final grade. This type of assessment also provides opportunities for extensive written feedback to be given in order to scaffold and promote learning. During the first semester, between eight and eighteen tasks were completed by students. Each task was marked and returned with written feedback. At the beginning of the year, lecturers announced that any task could be resubmitted within a given time period for remarking. Tutors kept a record of students' marks for each task, as well as marks for any resubmissions.

The survey

A pilot study was conducted with 15 randomly selected students in LES who completed the questionnaire, after which adjustments were made to it.

The final survey questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Did you take advantage of the opportunities to resubmit work? (Students were required to answer either YES or NO).

2.1 If you resubmitted work, did your marks improve?

2.2 If your marks did improve, why do you think they did?

2.3 If your marks did not improve, what do you think the reasons were for this?

3. In what ways was tutor feedback helpful/not helpful? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Do you think it is helpful to offer students opportunities to resubmit work? Give reasons for your answer.

The questionnaire was completed by 76 LES students and 92 EFL students. The LES students completed hard copies of the survey because it was not possible to separate the research participants online from the larger cohort based on a different campus. All of the EFL students were on one campus and were able to complete the questionnaire online.

Small group interviews

Three small group interviews were conducted: two with LES students and one with EFL students. For the first group, eight students were identified from two LES tutorial groups. Two students from each of the following categories were included per interview: those who took advantage of the opportunity to rework, those who did not, those whose marks improved and those whose marks did not. Where possible, consideration was also given to gender and ethnic group representation. Each interview was conducted by a researcher who had not had any previous contact with the students involved.

The interview questions were designed based on the questionnaire results. These were: to what extent and how students understood the written feedback; how relevant and useful the feedback was; how they dealt with the feedback they did not understand; and how they incorporated the feedback into redrafting. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed.

Data analysis

The data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively because the researchers were interested in finding out not only the numbers of students using the opportunity to improve their performance, but also the reasons for their actions. Because the responses on the questionnaires consisted of text data only, these were summarised into themes and the frequency of occurrence was established.

Principles of content analysis were applied, with the focus being on both 'manifest and latent content' (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004:105) in order to identify both conscious and unconscious messages conveyed by the text that was obtained through transcription of the interviews. The data was coded according to a number of 'meaning units' (ibid.), which were subsequently abstracted into categories and then themes: these being students' reasons for submitting or not submitting assessment tasks, the role of feedback and the role of tutors. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings, all three researchers analysed the data and reached consensus on the categories as well as themes.

Results and discussion

In both groups, many students took advantage of the opportunity to resubmit tasks for reassessment at the beginning of the term, but failed to maintain the same level of participation as the term progressed.

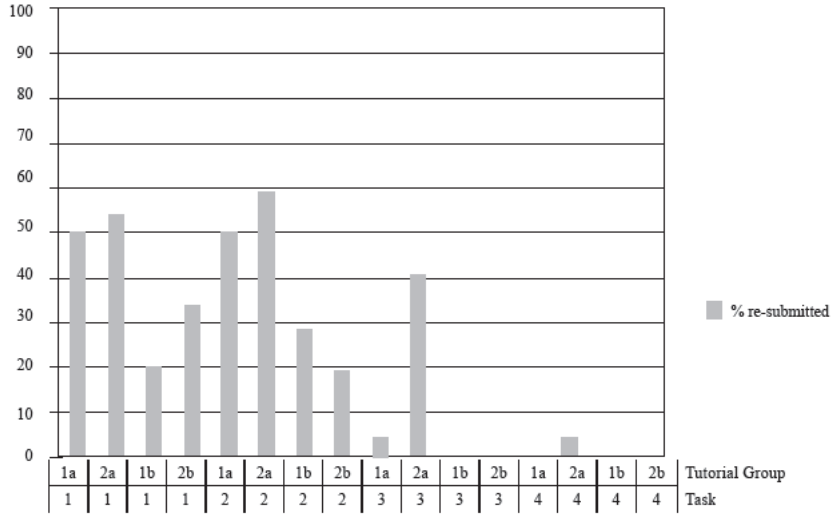

Figure 1: LES resubmissions.

According to Figure 1, an average of 39% of students reworked Task 1 for LES. However, results differed significantly for each tutor. In Tutor A's classes, 1a and 2a, an average of 53% resubmitted, while in Tutor B's classes, 1b and 2b, only 26% did so.

Similar trends in EFL are illustrated in Figure 2. Fewer students resubmitted tasks closer to the end of term and differences emerged across the various tutorial groups, with differing results achieved.

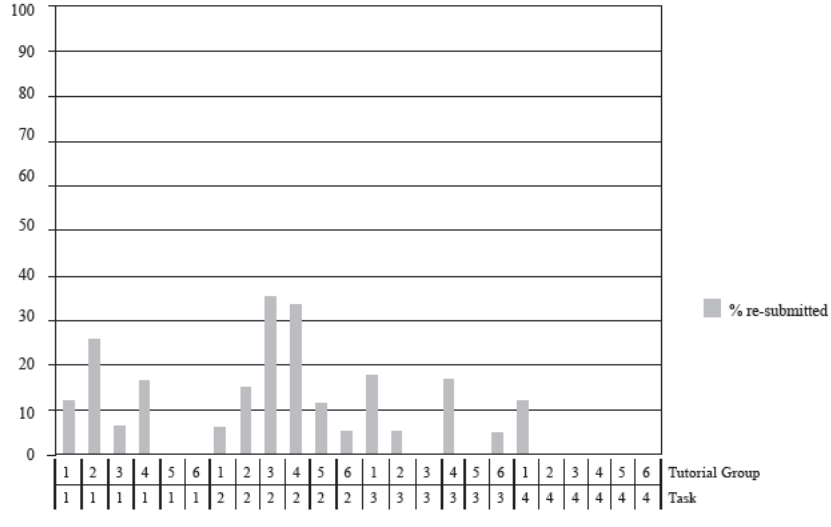

Figure 2: EFL resubmissions.

According to Figure 2, for Task 1, 10% of students redrafted, with no submissions from Tutor D's groups (5 and 6). A total of 17% of students, representing all the tutorial groups, resubmitted for Task 2; 7,2% resubmitted for Task 3 (with none from Tutor C's Group 3 or Tutor D's Group 5); and for Task 4, at the end of term, only two students, both from Tutor A's Group 1, chose to resubmit.

Figures 3 and 4 indicate that the majority of students who revised and resubmitted continuous assessment tasks improved their performance.

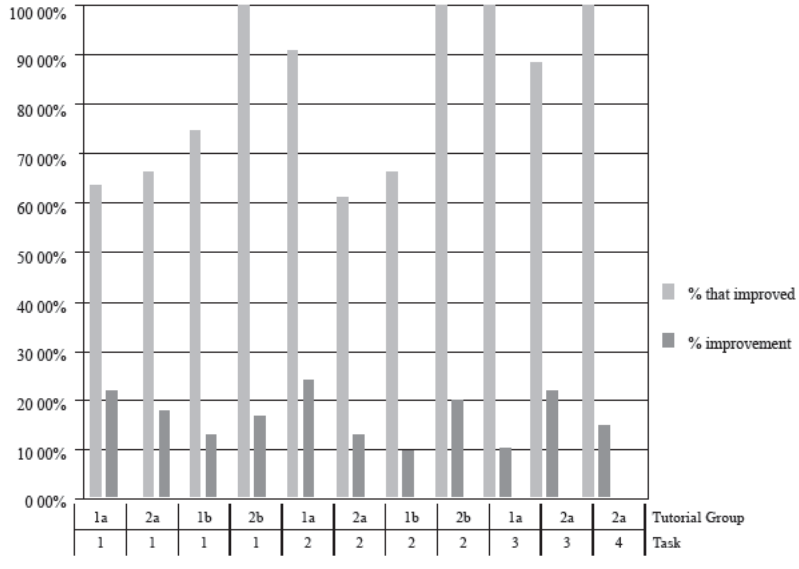

Figure 3: LES resubmissions – % that improved & % improvement.

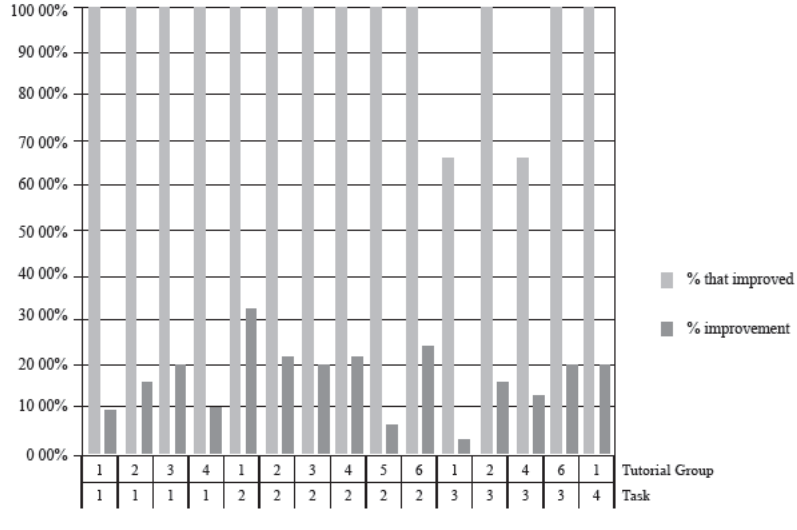

Figure 4: EFL resubmissions – % that improved & % improvement.

In both modules, the overall average improvement in marks was 16%, although results varied across the different tutorial groups. This indicates that, in most cases, participation in the redrafting process leads to improved performance (and marks).

Reasons for resubmitting

The results from the group interviews revealed that the main reason for students' resubmission was that of trying to attain a higher mark, as evidenced by statements such as: "For me it's all about improving my marks." This is unsurprising, given that there is such an emphasis on marks throughout the schooling system. However, several students expressed a desire to clarify or improve understanding of either the requirements of a specific assessment or of tasks in general. This substantiates the value of small group instruction (ideally with a maximum of 20 students), with the concomitant one-on-one interaction and provision of detailed individual feedback.

There was also a perception that resubmitting work would enable students to cope better with future assessments, as shown by statements such as: "You have better skills on how to tackle the next task [sic]." Such a comment emphasises the importance of scaffolding work for students.

Affective factors, such as self-perception, were mentioned. For example, one student stated: "The reason why I want to do better is to show myself that I can really write good in English ... So it's like a challenge for me to do better [sic]." Other students referred to their self-image/esteem and their desire to maintain their own standards. There were remarks, too, indicating strong appreciation of positive, motivating comments by tutors. This supports the findings of Ahmed and Bruinsma (2006) about the positive relation of intrinsic motivation and other such affective factors to student performance.

Reasons for not resubmitting

Several reasons for *not* resubmitting were provided. Students who were satisfied with their original mark did not resubmit, as is shown by this student's remark: "I was satisfied with my marks, so there was no reason for me to resubmit the work."

On occasion, students did resubmit, only to find that there was either no or very insignificant improvement in their mark, which was unlikely to inspire them to resubmit again. There were also instances when students received lower marks for a resubmission, which could have a demotivating effect.

Some students commented that no matter how hard they tried, it appeared that they would never be given full marks, as indicated by: "Even if the tutor told you to follow these steps … you won't get a total mark [sic]." The students found this frustrating and ultimately demotivating.

One or two students said they had not needed to resubmit as they had obtained peer feedback before their initial submission: "Once I'm done with it I ask a friend to go through it, just to see whether it makes sense. Is it relevant to what I'm asked?" Such peer interaction plays an important role in the development of learning communities.

Some students mentioned that they had ensured that they had followed instructions, so that they did not 'lose their way' while completing assignments, while others sought assistance at the Writing Centre and, having done so, worked through their tasks prior to submitting.

Being given insufficient time was also referred to, for example: "Because when we are told that we can resubmit, they always say, but tomorrow is the last day, so …" It seems likely that this particular student had missed some classes, which caused the lack of time for additional research before redrafting.

A lack of time appears to be a significant factor, because many students lack basic time management skills. One student claimed that all assessments for resubmission were given back to students simultaneously. This seems very unlikely, as resubmissions happen after each individual assessment. There also appeared to have been a lack of uniformity among tutors in the amount of time allocated for resubmission. Connected to the lack of time was the pressure of work in other subjects, which increased during the year: "So when we went to Term Two, we were approaching the exams, so I didn't have a lot of time like in the beginning of the year to rework my assignments and tasks." One student claimed ignorance

of the resubmission practice: "I didn't know about this resubmission that we can actually resubmit … we are not encouraged to resubmit work."

To sum up, the main reasons given for resubmitting were to achieve higher marks or to broaden understanding: both relate strongly to affective factors such as motivation and self-esteem. Students chose not to resubmit if they were satisfied with their original mark or thought they were unlikely to be given a significantly higher mark if they resubmitted.

The role of feedback

Feedback played a major role in determining students' responses to the opportunity to resubmit assessment tasks. Some students mentioned that the feedback given was effective as it was both clear and specific; as a result, they were able to apply it directly to those parts that needed attention when redrafting a task.

Effective feedback also helped students understand tasks and assessment criteria better. At the same time, because it focused on both strengths and weaknesses, it served as motivation for students to do even better in the future. Communication between tutors and students was thus facilitated. As one student pointed out: "It all comes back to the fact of laying a basic, a strong foundation of understanding … the main theme of the assignment."

It was only when the students were able to read and understand the feedback that they were able to use it effectively. Those students who took note of the feedback and used it to guide the redrafting process were able to improve their performance. Many students linked improved performance to their ability to use the tutor feedback: "I think it's because we took into consideration all [our] tutor's comments … [doing so] put us in advantage [sic]."

However, not all students found tutor feedback effective or easy to apply. There were a few negative comments suggesting that some tutors' comments were either not clear or not specific enough. In addition, some tutors did not individualise their feedback, so that almost everyone in the class had the same comments. Students' dissatisfaction in this regard was reflected in observations such as: "She just goes on and on, almost everybody … has the same comments, or similar comments, she just changed a word here and there."

In some cases, when students had difficulty understanding the tutor's feedback, they sought the assistance of fellow students instead. This suggested the need to provide opportunities for peer feedback, which some students find easier to understand and relate to than that given by the less competent tutor.

The role of the tutor

What also emerged from the study was that the role of the tutor and level of tutor expertise were crucial to the success of this strategy. The extent to which tutors understood, 'bought into' and encouraged the redrafting process appeared to relate to the degree to which students in the various tutorial groups engaged with the process themselves.

The quality of feedback provided by the tutors was clearly instrumental in determining whether or not students were able to evaluate their work critically and take the steps required to improve upon it. As Gibbs and Simpson (2002, citing Maclellen, 2001) have pointed out, many students experience difficulty in understanding feedback and do not find it particularly useful in helping them understand exactly what is expected of them. Although tutors do undertake training in the provision of feedback at the beginning of each academic year, it emerged that not all tutors achieve the optimum level of proficiency and that ongoing training, mentoring and supervision are required if the redrafting process is to achieve its goal of improving student performance.

Furthermore, it became apparent that strong facilitation skills and the ability to establish a rapport with students also have an impact on the success of this strategy. Students mentioned repeatedly in the discussion groups how much they valued positive comments written by tutors about their work. This ability on the part of the tutor to encourage and use feedback in a manner that is constructive yet non-threatening appeared to motivate students to become more engaged in the process and was more likely to lead to improvement.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight some important issues with regard to the effectiveness of a strategy designed to improve the academic language competencies of students, by using continuous assessment opportunities. Overall, the resubmission process proved successful for many students. Feedback was read, understood and applied effectively by some to effect those changes, which resulted in an improved piece of work. Other students, however, struggled to make sense of the feedback provided by their tutors – seemingly unable to grasp how to use it to improve performance.

Still, other factors appeared to come into play in determining whether or not students in the study chose to participate in the redrafting process. First, the desire to achieve, learn more or simply improve oneself can be a significant motivating factor for students and this sentiment was expressed by many during the small group discussions. Second, the motivation to resubmit often seemed linked to other affective factors as well, namely individual personality characteristics and self-esteem. Third, feedback is an integral component of the resubmission process, provided that it is both clear and specific and comments focus not only on weaknesses but also on strengths in students' writing. In order for it to be of use, students must actually read and attend to the feedback they receive. In the end, however, it was the role of tutors that was identified as being pivotal to the success of this approach to continuous assessment. An ability to understand and support a process approach to learning while, at the same time, communicate its importance to students was instrumental in its success (or failure). Similarly, the ability of the tutor to establish rapport with students and provide timely and effective feedback also proved decisive. These findings could be of interest across disciplines wherever tutor involvement is a key component of academic programmes.

To conclude, the practice of allowing students to resubmit tasks for reassessment can add value to the teaching and learning process, provided that students are sufficiently motivated, that clear, specific and constructive feedback is given and that tutoring is of a high quality.

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