A Simple and Fun Approach to an Effective Class Communication

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INTRODUCTION

We are offering a simple and fun approach that can be easily applied by course instructors to provide effective feedback to students. We are inspired by the online video games (e.g., X-BOX) to come up with this approach. For the current generation of students, it is natural for them to see fake names of other online players while playing such video games. They admire those people who scored the highest and have a little fun looking at the profiles of other players. Most importantly, when they understand what the other players have achieved in playing the games they will stop complaining and keep playing the game until they pass the checkpoints. Also, they want the other people to join and/or see what they have achieved and injecting a little peer pressure as well as providing encouragement will be helpful for them to excel in playing games.

It is challenging for many accounting instructors to maintain effective communication in the classroom and provide feedback to their students in a timely manner. The problem for most instructors is that it takes time to keep track of students' performance record, investigate the patterns of common mistakes and communicate their concerns with students. Although typical course management systems such as WileyPlus and Connect have standardized the process of grading homework assignments and providing instant feedback to students regarding the result of their individual homework, many students have individual concerns and want to know whether or not they are on the right track in terms of their learning relative to their peer group or class averages. Also, students may feel sense of pride of their achievement when they receive feedback with personalized genuine insight and comments on their performance from their instructors rather than only a mechanical feedback from an online system (Riccomini, 2002; Gallien and Oomen-Early, 2008; Lipnevich and Smith, 2009). For example, Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) investigate the effect of personalized versus collective Instructor Feedback on student performance in the Online Courseroom settings. They find that "students who received personalized feedback were more satisfied and performed academically better than students who received only collective feedback.," (p.463). Lipnevich and Smith (2009) examined students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the feedback messages. They find that "detailed comments are the most important feedbacks based on students' perspectives" (p347), and unfavorable comments as well as grades provided by the computer are "deemed to be unnecessary if the goal of an activity was to learn," (p.347). For instructors, it is also relevant to identify those students who deviate from the right track and communicate his or her thought to the students as soon as possible for early remediation. This is especially important for introductory accounting courses and will be critical in helping students to succeed.

[Insert Table 1 here]

METHODOLOGY

We apply the same idea to class learning (see Table 1). The required skill is very simple. At the beginning of semester, we ask every student to give a fake name that they only know and we will keep using these fake names for future communication. When a student receives the

performance report from the instructor, he or she will see the comments from the instructor for him or her as well as the comments for the other students in class. They will understand what they need to improve on; what they should avoid by looking at other students' mistakes; and why some other students have been improving. In addition, they will stop complaining about their grades and instead will actively look for solutions to improve their learning. The fake names of students and the real names are listed on an excel spreadsheet.

The advantages of using such a spreadsheet is to keep track of student performance where the instructor can type-in the necessary comments for each student and then email the spreadsheet to all students with **only** the fake names, grades and specific comments for each student. This spreadsheet is continually expanded as more course materials covered and quizzes and exams are given until the end of semester so students can receive continual feedback on a timely and effective manner. Our comments for students must be brief and effective. For example, Ackerman and Gross (2010) investigate the association between instructors' feedbacks and reactions of marketing students. Their results suggest that "when an instructor provides a lot of feedback, as opposed to a small amount of feedback on an assignment, students receive it negatively." (p.172)

The advantage of our approach over the use of traditional Student ID approach is that it is fun for giving students freedom to choose their own identities and enjoy their learning achievement more like the players in the video games. Also, they will feel less intimidated by the instructor's comments as the fake names are only remotely associated with their real-identities unlike their student IDs. According to prior literature, it is important to provide feedback for students in a non-threatening way. For example, Witt and Kerssen-Griep (2011) find that "Instructors routinely provide feedback for students concerning the work the students produce as part of a classroom course. Although such information is required of instructors and expected by students, the communication of feedback creates a potentially face-threatening interaction in which the student's self-esteem may be diminished and/or the instructor-student relationship may be strained." (p.75)

RESULTS

We applied this approach in the fall semester of 2011 after the first midterm exam and found that this approach is extremely useful in improving communication and feedback from instructors to students. The summary results, based on the Course Opinion Survey (COS), show a wide margin of improvement. Question #12 on the COS that ask students if "The Instructor's Feedback on My Work is Helpful" is used to document the students' level of satisfaction on instructor's feedback. Results show that there is an increase in the level of students' satisfaction (strongly agree) by 19% in fall semester of 2011(i.e., an increase from 57% in fall 2010 to 76% in fall 2011).

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 2 demonstrates the assessment result of student performance before and after we implement this approach in the Introductory Managerial Accounting course. Herein, the courses offered in fall 2010 and fall 2011were taught by the same instructor with exactly the same teaching plan and textbook. The instructor is an experienced teacher who had previously won a prestigious teaching award so there is no significant learning effect in teaching. During fall 2011, we noticed a five percent decline of student performance in Exam #1 from fall 2010 to fall 2011 according to the common multiple-choice questions that have been consistently used for our assessment in both years. This decline as indicated by Table 2 although is not statistically significant raised our concern regarding student learning. We noticed that the performance gap between students in fall 2011was enlarging in comparison with the gap in fall 2010. In other words, there were more students who were behind and would require early remediation before they get worse. This observation prompted us to apply the idea in Table 1 as an approach for improving communication. As shown by Table 2, the assessment results indicate significant improvements of student performance in Exam #2 and the final exam.

CONCLUSIONS

We are offering an easy-to-apply and fun approach for improving class communication. This approach has been proved for its effectiveness in our small classroom setting. This idea is also useful to provide practical implications for the designers of Course Management Systems such as *Connect* and *WileyPlus* to consider in their development of the next-generation Course Management Systems. Our approach shows that it does not need to be painful in order to maintain an effective communication channel between instructors and students. It actually could be fun to do so.

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Table 1
Spreadsheet for effective communication

Student Name	Fake Name	Ch1 Quiz	Ch2 Quiz	Comments
Student #1	Superman	8	8	Your performance is on the right track. Note: to improve your performance you need to be aware of the concepts of cost classification for production cost. Suggestion: you should do your homework assignments earlier before the deadlines.
Student #2	Big Bang	10	10	Excellent quiz performance.
Student #3	Tree Lover	10	4	Your performance is going down in the second quiz. Why? You need to improve your understanding concerning calculation of COGS and the SOX. Welcome to talk when you get a chance.
Student #4	Purple People Eater	4	10	Wow! Good improvement in the second quiz. Remember the process you just went through for preparing for quiz #2 and make it your study habits.
Student #5	Math Whiz	3	10	You finally show who you are after our conversation last time. Excellent performance in the second quiz and huge improvement from the first quiz. Keep going.
	Average	7	8.4	

Table 2
Comparison of Assessment Results from fall 2010 to fall 2011

Assessment results	Fall 2010 Mean	Fall 2011 Mean	Change from Fall 2010	t-statistic p-value
Exam #1	82%	77%	-5%	0.136
Exam #2	76%	86%	10%	0.002*
Final Exam	75%	81%	6%	0.007*
Number of students	71	70		

*significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed)