Annotation tool: Supporting online interactive peer feedback.

Online peer feedback has a great potential to increase the quality of students’ learning process, but this potential is also difficult to realize. Students (who are neither expert on the subject, nor on the didactical level) find it difficult to provide good quality feedback to their peers. Hence a good learning effect by a successful reception and use of the peer feedback is by no means guaranteed (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006).

The Annotation tool, developed by Jakko van der Pol and IVLOS, offers a functionality that effectively supports online peer feedback by increasing the quality, reception and use of students’ feedback in three different ways. Compared to traditional peer feedback, it guides students to provide each other with more Specific, Useful, and Criteria-oriented feedback.

1) More specific feedback by Annotating

The Annotation tool displays the peer feedback alongside the students’ text. Feedback messages, or ‘annotations’, can be simply linked to specific passages in that text. Thus, a particular message on the left refers to a particular passage from the text on the right.

2) More useful feedback by Interacting

Students can react on the received feedback to ask for more elaboration, explanation or argumentation. Thus, both provider and receiver of feedback jointly arrive at a piece of feedback that will be more relevant, meaningful and useful for the receiver.

In addition (as shown in the image on the right), it is possible for multiple feedback givers to complement, elaborate, and specify each others’ feedback to jointly increase the quality of their feedback.
3) Guided feedback by integrated Criteria

The Annotation tool allows the teacher to formulate different criteria for the peer feedback process. This form of ‘didactical presence’ guides and helps students to provide each other with appropriate and useful feedback.

The teacher can easily formulate, copy, and manage criteria at different levels.

Empirical results

According to students, the Annotation tool offers a more usable and motivating tool than for instance the Blackboard discussion forum. Especially the possibility of showing directly on which parts of the texts their feedback is aimed was highly valued (Van den Berg, 2009).

An experimental study by Van der Pol and Van den Berg (2008) comparing the Blackboard discussion forum and the Annotation tool demonstrated that:
- The Annotation tool generated significantly more constructive comments (concrete suggestions for revision), whereas the Blackboard discussion forum generated more evaluative comments.
- Constructive comments were (the only type of comments that) significantly correlated with actual use for revising the product.
- The usefulness of feedback (according to the receiver) was evaluated significantly higher in the Annotation tool than in Blackboard.

Finally, this study has shown that in order to generate effective peer feedback, students (without being confronted with the Annotation tool!) naturally feel a need to annotate specific parts of a text and to react on received feedback, both offered by the Annotation tool.

Practical

Apart from this scientific confirmation, the Annotation tool has proven itself in practice as an effective and intuitive tool. It can be used easily and without much instruction in advance, both by students and teachers. The Annotation tool is a web-based independent tool that you can link to from within any online learning environment (you can even send your students directly to the right course, group or discussion page). The tool is freely testable and useable (for non-commercial purposes) on www.annotationtool.com. > Log in as ‘guest’ for a quick impression, or ‘Sign on’ to create your own course. With any questions, please mail Jakko van der Pol.

Literature