Clickers as performance management tools for student assistants

Faculty of Sciences | Department of Mathematical Sciences

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Learning activity:
Performance management

Learning technology:
Clickers (SUNLearn)

Context

Background overview

In 2014 a better performance management system for Student Assistants was one of the goals identified for the first-year mainstream mathematics courses. There was experimented with clicker technology as a performance management tool. Two modules participated in this intervention namely Mathematics 114 and Mathematics 144. Approximately 380 students were registered per module.

The challenge

Past experience has showed that it is difficult to manage things like punctuality, preparedness and a good demeanour regarding student assistants. These characteristics are essential in giving effective tutor support to the students. Therefore the lecturer recognised the need for a more active, hands-on management system. She wanted to give the student assistants feedback in order to develop their tutoring skills.

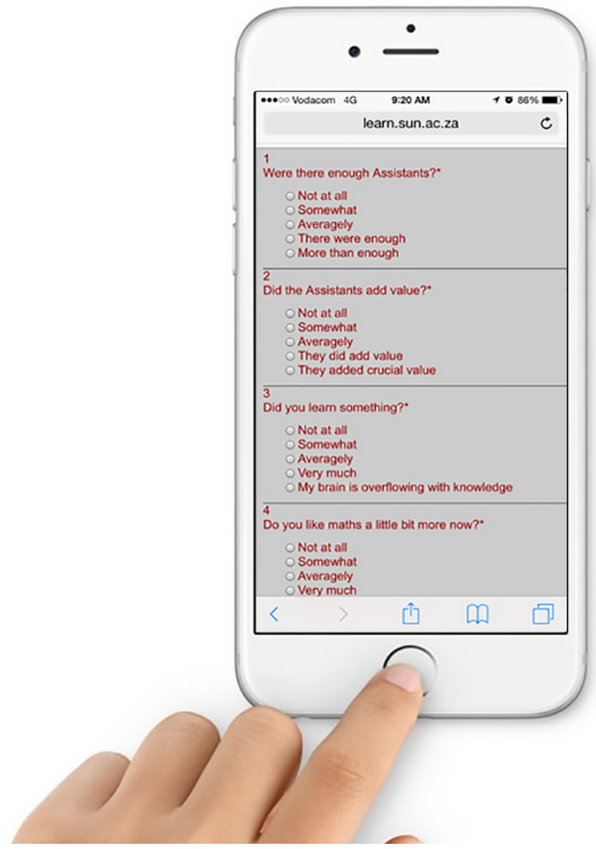
In the past the student feedback form received at the end of the semester was the only feedback received on student assistant performance. It often included complaints related to student assistant behaviour in tutorials, ranging from not being punctual to not being adequately prepared to helping students in a meaningful way. However, as this feedback was only given at the end of the semester an opportunity was missed to develop the assistants as well as improve the support available to students during the semester.

Possible advantages associated with the integration of technology

It was decided to investigate clicker technology as a possible alternative performance management tool. One of the main advantages that clickers allowed was that the assistants' performance could be evaluated on a weekly basis during tutorial sessions. This enabled the lecturer to quickly identify those assistants that were in need of support or an intervention. Additionally, student feedback was easy to collect and instantly available, even from such a large group. It also gave the students a voice and the reassurance that their needs and concerns were addressed. Furthermore, the feedback allowed us to give recognition to outstanding student assistants and made it clear that their positions were taken very seriously. Finally, it served as excellent work experience feedback, which the assistants could incorporate in their CVs.

Learning activity

At the end of each tutorial the senior student assistant in the venue would put up an Excel sheet with multiple choice items for feedback. These items included punctuality, friendliness, preparedness and the favourite Student Assistant for the tutorial. The students would complete the clicker test on their cell phones or other internet enabled devices on the SUNLearn platform. The teaching assistant would then review the feedback at the end of each week and report to the lecturer at their weekly meetings. Struggling assistants were quickly identified and the teaching assistant would meet with them individually and discuss their feedback and ways in which to improve their performance.



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Student experience

The system worked very well, to the point that the tutorial is one of the items listed as the best aspects of the two mathematics courses, for the first time. It is believed that the system mentors better student assistants and will pay off in the long run, with more and better student assistants involved in these modules. It needs to be mentioned that it does take a few minutes at the end of each tutorial to get the feedback, but it is a small price to pay for the improvement in the management and development of the student assistant team.

Conclusion

There is scope for extending this feedback to the course in general, i.e. not just feedback about the student assistants, but feedback on the tutorial each week and the material covered, thus becoming a tool that highlights what works and what doesn't during the course, as opposed to only receiving this feedback at the end of each module. It will also be possible to implement this type of performance development system in other modules where large numbers of tutors or students are involved. This type of feedback system is recommended for any course. It makes the management of a Student Assistant team so much easier and ensures that students are provided with the best possible service in tutorials.