

Using Emoticons in Written Online Assessment Feedback

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With the increase in online courses comes frequent use of online written assessment feedback. In spite of the importance of online feedback, students consistently report dissatisfaction with its quality and usefulness. In addition, the transactional distance between the instructor and students can be impersonal, which can decrease student engagement and responsiveness. One solution is to include paralinguistic cues, which are nonverbal signs that convey social information, such as emoticons or typographical marks (e.g., :)). Such cues increase perceptions of positivity and soften the negative impact of written critiques, thereby boosting student commitment to following advice. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether student reactions to feedback differed by the number and valence of emoticons included in online written assessment feedback.

Participants were Australian undergraduate students, the majority of whom were women in their first year of college who volunteered as part of an online course-related activity. The researchers employed a 3 x 3 between-subjects experimental design by manipulating two variables: the number of emoticons (1, 3, or 6) and their valence (happy, sad, or confused). Students were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions or a no-emoticon control group and then responded to questions designed to measure five dependent variables: 1) feedback social presence, 2) feedback quality, 3) marker competence, 4) marker warmth, and 5) marker professionalism. Student attitude toward online marking was used as a covariate to control for pre-existing biases, favorable or unfavorable.

All students accessed an electronic link to view a one-page written essay that included written feedback from a marker (i.e., grader). Written comments and a summary paragraph were identical across all groups and included both positive and negative comments. Emoticons were embedded in strategic locations amid the comments and summary paragraph according to the experimental condition.

The statistical analysis revealed a significant Frequency by Valence of Emoticon interaction effect on competence. Students rated the competence of the marker higher when three happy faces were included rather than three sad or confused faces. In addition, ratings of warmth were higher when happy face emoticons were used compared to sad, confused, and no emoticons.

The study indicates that use of paralinguistic cues can influence student perceptions of the marker even when written comments include both positive and negative comments. The non-significant effect on competence of using one or six emoticons, relative to the positive influence of using three, may suggest a Goldilocks effect. The key takeaway is that including a small number of happy emoticons can enhance perceptions of marker warmth and competence without damage to marker professionalism and feedback quality.