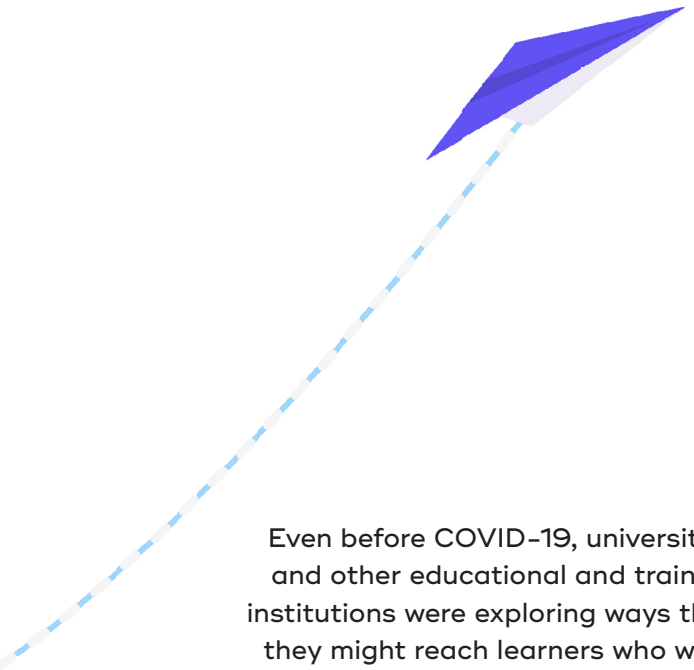
MICROCREDENTIALS AND AUTOMATED FEEDBACK:

A PERFECT MATCH?

BY KEITH HEGGART



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Even before COVID-19, universities and other educational and training institutions were exploring ways that they might reach learners who were increasingly time-poor. Microcredentials were – and still are – touted as a possible solution by providing learners with the option to undertake study at a pace that suits them, with no long-term commitments required.

THE RISE OF MICROCREDENTIALS

When the pandemic drove more learning and development work online, microcredentials become even more topical as a way to reach and engage potential clients – now separated by geographical, as well as temporal, limitations.

Of course, short courses have been offered by many organisations for a long time, but higher education institutions have been much slower to embrace microcredentials, possibly fearing that they might be devaluing their other credentials or uncertain how shorter forms of learning might articulate into award courses.

The differences between short courses – or short forms of learning – and microcredentials are generally not clear. Usually, microcredentials are linked to accredited educational bodies – such as universities or RTOs – whereas short courses can, in theory, be offered by anybody. However, these divisions are porous and it's not uncommon to see, for example, universities offering both uncredentialled short courses, often in the form of taster courses, and microcredentials.

In addition, there are related factors, such as digital badges and e-certification that further confuse the issue. For example, Adobe offers, through its EdExchange platform, a range of digital short courses, all of which provide a digital badge (which can be shared via social media) upon completion. Other educational technology companies, like Apple and Google, have long offered similar kinds of credentialling and professional

development for educators, such as the Apple Certified Teacher credential.

SOME AREAS OF CONCERNS

There are significant benefits to microcredentials. After all, the opportunity to undertake study at a pace that the learner chooses is an appealing one to many. So too is the prospect of gaining a meaningful certification for smaller, 'bite-size' study, rather than committing to months or years of study to gain a qualification. However, microcredentials are not a silver bullet when it comes to solving learning and development's ills. Indeed, they fit the saying that 'every new solution breeds new problems'.

There are two key concerns related to the implementation of microcredentials as alternative training packages - although it should be noted that these criticisms may also apply equally to other short courses.

Firstly, there is the question of the role of educator presence and involvement. This is related to how involved the educator should be in the delivery of the training. In some microcredentials and short courses, there is no teacher presence at all or, at least, no *active* teacher presence - although some effort may be made at peer engagement and support. In other courses, such as those hosted on platforms like EdX, the teacher presence is generally pre-recorded and supported by limited educator interaction via discussion boards.

Secondly, there are questions about the timing and pace of microcredentials and short forms of learning. How long is a microcredential? There is no single answer to this question and it is likely to be related to the type of course being offered, but the length of a short course has an effect upon expectations of educator presence and also how the course might be assessed.

Both of these challenges are linked to notions of feedback and assessment within microcredentials. Indeed, this is perhaps the most significant challenge: with limited teacher presence, assessment can often be entirely absent or of limited value to the learner (for example, through overuse of multiple choice quizzes, which are easy to automate).

Certainly, there are few options for ongoing formative feedback due to the lack of teacher presence and the short timeframes involved. Some courses have tried to employ peer feedback – but that's often a case of the 'blind leading the blind' and can be more frustrating than helpful for learners.

A POSSIBLE (PART OF THE) SOLUTION

A possible solution to both of these issues might lie in the use of learning analytics tools to provide learners with automated, personalised feedback.

Although still in its infancy, learning analytics has already promised to change the way learning and

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instructional designers develop and sequence instruction by providing them insights into how learners are making use of the material. This is especially the case in the online space, where students leave 'digital exhaust trails' behind them that document their interactions at a granular level.

While there are some significant ethical issues that need to be considered in any application of learning analytics, learning designers can also glean important information which can then be used to craft personalised messages for students.

REAL-LIFE APPLICATIONS

This was a central feature in the design of microcredentials that were offered at the University of Technology Sydney. These microcredentials contributed to a graduate certificate, but also existed as standalone short courses.

In order to provide the students with meaningful and timely feedback, educators made use of a tool called OnTask which took data harvested from the LMS and used it to configure individualised messages to learners. These messages were based on the different interactions that students had engaged in over the previous week. For example, whether they had accessed the content, whether they had posted in the discussion board, how they had performed in quizzes and so on. From this data, learners received personalised messages, providing encouragement or further guidance, as required.

These messages were so effective that learners thought that the educator was emailing each of them personally every week. In addition, there was a marked increase in engagement after students started receiving the emails from OnTask. In fact, the number of participations in the discussion board almost doubled in the two weeks following the first email.

Of course, while OnTask has some interesting applications, it's by no means a perfect solution.

Firstly, it's still very much in development. Secondly, a number of students reported feeling nervous about the emails they received – as if they were being 'checked up on'. And thirdly, there are interoperability issues between learning management tools, some social and engagement tools and OnTask itself, which means that the data that is collected may not be as valuable as one might hope due to missing observations.

Nevertheless, the tool is a useful addition to the ways that learning and development professionals might effectively design for personalised feedback in short courses and microcredentials.

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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

OnTask
https://www.ontasklearning.org

UTS Microcredentials
https://open.uts.edu.au/uts-open/study-area/education/design-designing-for-learning/