SURF project: Improving students' argumentative essay writing

Dr. Omid Noroozi as the project leader and Dr. Harm Biemans as the senior advisor from Wageningen University and Research (WUR) received a grant (sum of 200.000.00 Euros) from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science in cooperation with WUR to improve students' argumentative essay writing through supported online peer feedback. This competitive grant was granted by SURF under the online education pillar.

In this project, we aim to explore the effects of an online peer feedback support tool on various aspects of learning and writing where students with authentic essay writing tasks engage in thoughtful criticism of the work and/or performance of their peers using given criteria. The tool allows students to provide structured feedback to their peers' essays reciprocally based on the characteristics of a high-quality argumentative essay. The various feedback features in this tool will contain question prompts about the peers' actual work and/or performance (how am I going/doing?), or indicate a direction by delineating a goal to be achieved (where to go next?).

In this project, the relationships between argumentative essay writing, online peer feedback and students' learning and writing quality will be explored. Students will use feedback features designed in this project to interact with and provide structured feedback to their learning partners. The outcomes of this project will improve the overall quality of education by helping students writing high-quality argumentative essays, not only for courses at WUR but potentially also for many courses in different disciplines at other universities that deal with controversial issues and complex problems.

The online peer feedback support tool will be implemented in five courses with different domains at WUR. These courses are chosen in such a way that the Beta domain (Food Safety Management and Global Health), Gamma domain (Environmental Economics and Environmental Policy), Beta-Gamma domain (Dilemmas in Food Safety and Security) and General Skills domain (Academic Argumentation in Scientific Writing and Debate) are covered. In this way, the usability of our approach can be implemented and evaluated in a broad context. Such large samples with diverse disciplines and study programs would enable us to understand the extent to which we can expand the outcomes of this project to other courses at WUR and other Dutch universities which deal with controversial issues and complex problems. The outcomes of this project will not only help students but also teachers who are nowadays more and more overloaded with different tasks and teaching duties while the number of students has rapidly increased. With this project, we aim to help teachers who do not have time to provide detailed and elaborated feedback to each student' argumentative essay.

This project will be carried out within two years (from September 2020 up to September 2022). All the scholars and teachers who are interested in this project and would like to incorporate our ideas in their courses are kindly invited to contact me (omid.noroozi@wur.nl).