

Hepplestone, Stuart, Glover, Ian, Irwin, Brian and Parkin, Helen J. (2016) Setting out the role of feedback in the assessment process through both the student and tutor perspective. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 10 (1). pp. 81-90.

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Setting out the role of feedback in the assessment process through both the student and tutor perspective

Practitioner Research in Higher Education
Special Assessment Issue
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University of Cumbria
Vol 10(1) pages 81-90

Stuart Hepplestone, Ian Glover, Brian Irwin, Helen J. Parkin
Sheffield Hallam University
s.j.hepplestone@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite assessment and feedback being important elements of the student experience, it is not clear how students connect these two elements together to improve their learning. What are students doing with the assignment feedback that they receive from tutors, and how do they make use of this feedback in their future assessments? A research study was undertaken to deconstruct feedback from the perspective of the tutor giving the feedback and the student receiving the feedback in order to explore the connections that students are able to make between the feedback received and future assessments. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with tutor and student participants, during which they were invited to articulate their practices and interactions with feedback at each stage of the assessment process. This paper reports on both student and tutor actions at each stage of the assessment process and discusses the implications of these behaviours for enhancing student engagement with feedback.

Keywords

Assessment, feedback, curriculum, student engagement.

Introduction

Assessment and feedback are important elements of the student experience, in terms of both student learning and student satisfaction. There is a general belief that assessment drives student learning, while feedback is one of the most important ways in which to develop student learning (Black and Wiliam 1998, Biggs and Tang 2007, Sadler 2010). Much effort is put into providing feedback by tutors (Carless 2006, Price et al 2010, Sadler 2010). Nonetheless, it is clear that students are not effectively acting on the feedback that they receive (Yorke 2001). The timeliness of feedback is probably the greatest factor impacting upon students' ability to make use of feedback in their future learning and assessments (Irons 2008, Parkin et al 2011), with universities introducing feedback turnaround times to attempt to address both student dissatisfaction and improve learning from feedback (Boud and Molloy 2013). However, a further interesting factor identified in a small-scale qualitative study undertaken by Hepplestone and Chikwa (2014) found that students were only making use of feedback where connections can easily be made between the feedback that they received and future assignments. It was not clear whether this was a choice on part of the students (i.e. that they looked only for 'surface connections' or specific conditions such as applying skills-specific feedback or selecting the best work when preparing portfolios), or whether future assignments did not provide students the meaningful opportunity to apply more content specific feedback.

A recent research project at Sheffield Hallam University advanced Hepplestone and Chikwa's (2014) study by seeking to deconstruct feedback from the perspective of the tutor giving the

Citation

Hepplestone, S., Glover, I., Irwin, B., Parkin, H.J. (2016) 'Setting out the role of feedback in the assessment process through both the student and tutor perspective', *Practitioner Research in Higher Education Journal*, 10(1), pp.81-90.

feedback and the student receiving the feedback, and to explore the connections that students are able to make between the feedback received and future assignments at different parts of the assessment process. Previous studies by Carless (2006), Maclellan (2001), Murphy and Cornell (2010), Orsmond and Merry (2011), and Poulos and Mahony (2008) have attempted to explore the different perceptions of tutors and students in the assessment and feedback process, with findings primarily focusing on the perceived usefulness of feedback by each stakeholder. This qualitative study invited tutors and student to articulate their practices and interactions with feedback at each stage of the assessment process, whilst exploring in detail the actual understanding, intended use and actual use of a specific piece of feedback.

This article reports on the findings of this study in two sections, 'the Student Perspective' and 'the Tutor Perspective', describing in detail the actions taken at each stage of the assessment process.

Methodology

The objectives of this research project were to:

1. Understand the intended purpose and meaning of assignment feedback given by tutors;
2. Investigate student understanding, intended use and actual use of feedback received by students;
3. Identify any disparities between the intended meaning of feedback and the actual understanding of feedback;
4. Explore the connections that students are able to make between the feedback that they receive and future assignments;
5. Identify any technological interventions that might help students to make connections between the feedback that they receive and future assignments.

The study, undertaken in 2013, used a qualitative approach and worked with both tutors and students to identify any disparities between the intended purpose and meaning of feedback from the tutor perspective and the actual understanding and use of feedback from the student perspective. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten tutors and twenty students from across all four faculties at the University. The project worked in accordance with the University's ethics policy and procedures.

Tutor participants were invited from across the University with the condition that they must currently be teaching a Level 5 (second-year undergraduate) module with at least six students studying on the module. From the ten tutors (six female and four male) who were interviewed, four (three female and one male) were selected for further investigation based on getting a good variety of assessment and feedback practices and at least one cohort from each faculty. Students studying on the four selected modules were then invited to participate in the research. This allowed us the opportunity to explore in depth any disparities between the intended meaning and actual understanding of feedback, and to explore the assessment and feedback process from the perspective of both the tutor and the students. Between three and six students from each cohort participated in the research, with an overall total of 20 student participants (11 female and nine male).

Tutor participants were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Using a semi-structured approach allowed a greater richness and spontaneity of responses from the participants (Oppenheim, cited in Hepplestone and Chikwa 2014). Interviews were designed

to explore the assessment and feedback process generally, and then specifically the feedback that they have given to their cohort of Level 5 students. Student participants, recruited from the modules of participating tutors, were then interviewed, again using a semi-structured approach. Interviews were designed to explore how students approach assignments, following the entire process from the planning and setting of an assignment to the receiving of feedback and beyond, and then to specifically discuss the feedback provided by the tutor participant. Interviews with all participants were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Data were thematically analysed during a two day workshop. This provided an opportunity for the research team to immerse themselves in the data and provide different perspectives. The workshop was interactive and intensive and allowed the team to reach consensus about the outcomes of the project through a series of activities designed to focus attention on specific areas of interest.

The study acknowledges that the tutors and students involved were self-selecting and as such, the data obtained is from a biased sample. In addition, it is acknowledged that only a small number of courses were involved in the study. The findings in the section below do not claim to be representative of the entire academic community.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed in two sections, (1) the Student Perspective and (2) the Tutor Perspective. This paper focuses on findings relating to the first four objectives stated in the methodology above. Findings relating to the fifth objective, identifying technological interventions that might help students to make connections between the feedback that they receive and future assignments, are described elsewhere (Glover et al, 2015).

(1) The Student Perspective

During interviews, students were asked to describe their behaviours and interactions with feedback at different stages of the assessment process.

(a) Assignment Creation

Students made use of a wide range of both electronic and hard copy resources when creating assignments. Essential resources referred to as a matter of routine included the assessment brief and the assessment criteria. Ease of access to these documents was a necessity and students needed to know where they would be able to find them.

‘The first thing I do is I’ll bring up the assignment brief so I know exactly what I’m looking for. I’ll also bring up the marking criteria (...) I’ll go through the assignment brief and I’ll pick out the key words that they’re looking for, the key elements of it and I usually highlight them and quite often annotate it as well. Then I’ll do the same with the assessment criteria so I can cross-reference the two. (...) I always keep my assessment criteria and brief with me as I’m writing the assignment and constantly refer back to it.’

Students did refer to some feedback in the process of creating assignments, particularly where they were struggling with the current assignment or could see clear links between the current assignment and a previous one. This will be discussed in more detail in section 1 (d).

(b) Receiving Feedback

Students received feedback in a variety of formats, including verbal feedback and written feedback presented in grids and annotations on transcripts. Feedback was also received through different mediums including audio, hardcopy and electronic. Students had preferences for how feedback should be presented and received, and they exhibited different behaviours at the time of receiving and subsequently acting on feedback depending on whether it is in their preferred format or not. Where written feedback was favoured, some students preferred this to be written against specific points on their scripts whilst others preferred paragraph style feedback. Whatever the preference, students valued feedback that was directly linked to assessment criteria as this enabled them to clearly identify where they have performed well and areas where they needed to improve.

Students articulated a preference for receiving feedback online. As well as providing convenience and ease of access to their feedback, students valued the opportunity to read their feedback in privacy. Students regarded feedback as personal and wanted to have the chance to reflect on their feedback privately before discussing with their peers.

'It's personal to me, if I'm a bit embarrassed that I've not got as good a grade as I had expected, I quite like to go away and read it on my own. I don't like the whole idea of people asking 'What have you got? What have I got?' and comparing.'

Some students did prefer hard copy feedback but the reasons given for this related to aspects that could be achieved electronically. For example, some students stated a preference for hard copy feedback as they preferred the feedback to be written on their script. It was perceived that it was only possible to do this by hand, however this can be achieved by using Comments and Track Changes in Microsoft Word for instance. Another reason given was that they had logical systems for storing hard copies of their feedback together, but again easily achieved electronically.

Some students received their marks online but their feedback hard copy. This separation of between the grade and the feedback created a range of issues. Where marks were being issued in advance of feedback, students commented that they often experience anxiety and concern as they were unsure why they achieved the mark they received.

'There's a bit of a gap at the moment, you get your grade first and then your feedback. But say you got a grade that you weren't expecting it was quite low it would be quite nice to have your feedback straightaway because in between the time of receiving both you'd be thinking 'Well what have I done wrong? Where could I have done a little bit better?' But instead there's that gap where you can't really do anything about it.'

Students were less likely to engage with their feedback when marks were issued first. Where students received marks online and then had to make a special journey to collect their feedback, the feedback lost importance. The same applied where there was a time delay between publishing of marks and issuing of feedback. Students have already moved on to subsequent assignments.

'We get this grade back and we're sat there worrying 'What have I done that's lost these marks?' and we finally get [the feedback] back and it's something stupid and we're already in the middle of the next assignment so it's not really helped us with the next assignment, which has kind of defeated the purpose of the feedback.'

Many students stated that their initial reaction was to focus on the mark and skim the feedback to understand why they had achieved the mark that they had been given. Many students' immediate reaction to feedback was dependent on whether they had achieved the mark that they were hoping for or had performed particularly poorly. Where students performed well and were happy with their mark, feedback would be read and then put to one side. Where students had performed poorly, they were more likely to pay closer attention to their feedback.

(c) Storing Feedback

All students felt that feedback was important and would never throw it away. Some had logical systems for storing the hardcopy feedback that they received. All knew where to find feedback that had been issued online and most valued the ease of access that this offered.

There was a clear need for feedback to be 'in one place'. For those with logical storage systems, they wanted to be able to find all of their feedback in the same place, and this meant printing out electronic feedback to store alongside feedback issued in hard copy. If all feedback was electronic then feedback would be automatically stored in a single place.

'I think on Blackboard it would be quite good if there was one place where you could access, there might be already so, but if you could access all your feedback in one place I think that would be useful. I don't know if there is.'

Whilst these students had a preference for hard copy feedback in terms of storage, this appeared to be a product of circumstance (i.e. wanting all feedback in one place) rather than perceived usefulness. Students reported that they were most likely refer to feedback at the point of writing their next assignment if it was accessible to them, and that it was most accessible when available online, alongside the rest of their learning materials.

(d) Using Feedback

Students valued feedback at the point of receiving it, and referred to feedback when they were struggling with the current assignment or when they could see clear links between the current assignment and a previous one (e.g. where a similar format was required, where it is the second assignment from the same module, or when using a particular skill such as referencing). Generally, students did struggle to identify any connection between the assessments on each module that they were studying, and therefore struggled to apply feedback given to an assessment in one module to assessments elsewhere.

'Well this is a level 5 module and we've done the same module at Level 4, so it is a very similar sort of thing, but I didn't find that I was able to take much from my Level 4 into my Level 5. They're totally different kind of assessments so it was hard to take anything from the previous year and build on it for this module.'

There were some exceptions and those students were clearly able to identify links between modules and state how knowledge and skills that they had learned in one module might be applied to assessments in other modules. Students identified several aspects of feedback that they felt were transferable to future assignments. Feedback on structure, layout, referencing and academic writing were tangible skills that students felt that they could improve upon for future assignments. Students were less confident about feedback on content of assessments as they were not always able to see the connections to future assessments.

'The feedback given is more specific to the content of the assignment rather than things that could be applied to other assignments so, and with it being a report, there's not many reports that I have to write, they're mostly like essays or presentations. The feedback given I can use but not as much as I'd like to be able to use it.'

Further, some students actively looked for patterns in the feedback that they received and made a conscious effort to improve in areas that are consistently commented upon.

'If you look at all my modules you can see that it's always the same things, like good punctuation and then it's my checking that I seem to lack on. So at the end, making sure that I do read through it, spellcheck it.'

Where students had never referred to feedback, these students did acknowledge that referring to feedback prior to writing an assignment would be a useful exercise, but it was something that they had not considered. When students did read their feedback, they stated that when they were unsure or did not understand their feedback then they sought further advice or support from their tutor, and felt that they could approach their tutors to discuss feedback when they needed to.

(2) *The Tutor Perspective*

During interviews, tutors were asked to describe their behaviours and practices around feedback at each stage of the assessment process. For tutors the assessment process begins much earlier than it does for students, at the course design stage.

(a) Course Design

Assessment and feedback are important considerations during the design of courses. It was evident that tutors had a good understanding of the assessments that their students would take across their own modules, but were less confident about the assessment diet across the course meaning it was difficult for them to write feedback that students could feed into specific future assessments.

'We don't meet to discuss the assessment across the course (...) I know the kinds of things that students do but I'm not really very up-to-date with exactly what other people are doing.'

Current assessment regulations at the University require each module to have a maximum of two assessment tasks. There were concerns that this task limit restricted the opportunity for early feedback, and took the control away from academics to make decisions on assessments based on their judgements about what was best for their particular module.

'One of the reasons why the first year module I did 20 very short pieces of work was I wanted to be able to get them feedback within a week and I think it works really well (...) So the idea that someone decrees you can only have one assessment task, I think surely that's got to depend on the module, the subject, what it is you're trying to assess.'

Some tutors did provide formative opportunities for early feedback. Often this was facilitated using *Turnitin* (electronic text-matching) to provide automated objective feedback to students on their academic writing and referencing via 'originality reports' on draft submissions, an approach valued by students.

(b) Marking and Feedback Generation

Tutors employed a wide variety of techniques for marking assignments and generating feedback, a process they describe as being 'time-consuming' (particularly within the constraints of a three-week turnaround policy in place at the University) and requiring a quiet space in order to focus on the process. All tutors stated a particular preference for how they mark work. Depending on their particular preference, some tutors wrote their feedback directly onto scripts providing 'in context' feedback, others provided handwritten cover sheets, some provided typed feedback either electronically or hard copy, while others made use of marking grids. In the same way that tutors have personal preferences for the way in which feedback is generated, students also have personal preferences for the way in which they receive feedback: the challenge is to accommodate both sets of preferences.

(c) Issuing Feedback

The method of returning feedback was determined by how the assessments were marked and how the feedback was generated. Where feedback was delivered hard copy, students were either expected to collect their feedback from their assessment hand-in point, or the feedback was given out in a designated lecture or seminar. Concerns were raised that where students were expected to collect feedback, they did not always do so, meaning that some feedback remained uncollected. This was particularly the case where marks had already been made available online. This resulted in a separation of the marks and feedback which caused several issues for students. In some cases, where current practice on the course was for feedback to be delivered hard copy, tutors felt that delivering feedback electronically to students would be beneficial. Whilst delivering feedback online did involve a certain amount of administrative work, such as uploading marks and feedback for students to view or download, tutors articulated that the administration burden involved in online feedback was no more cumbersome than the amount of work involved in creating and delivering hard copy feedback. Tutors were aware that students experienced frustration where feedback was not delivered at the expected time.

Assessment Regulations at Sheffield Hallam University currently necessitate that feedback should be returned to students within three weeks of the assignment submission deadline. There were concerns raised that this time limit could affect the quality of feedback given to students, and the ability to meet the three week turnaround deadline where tutors had more than one assessment due at around the same time. There was evidence that in some areas, marks are being issued within this three week period in order to meet this target, but that feedback was being delivered later. This resulted in a disconnect between the grade and the feedback which caused issues for students (as discussed in section (1c) in the Student Perspective).

(d) Future Use of Feedback

Several tutors reported that they had provided both formal and informal opportunities to discuss feedback with their students, giving them the chance to clarify anything that they did not understand. In so doing, tutors were encouraging students to engage with their feedback and think about how they might use it in future assignments and beyond.

'I wanted the students to have their [marks] and at least the main feedback but then the opportunity to go through their scripts, and I didn't want to just hand them back their scripts in a session and them to just take them away with them (...) I wanted them to be encouraged to read through the feedback that I had provided.'

Although tutors were offering, and students were aware of, these formative opportunities, it was apparent that these chances to discuss feedback were not always taken.

'I did say to all the students I'm just on my second round of seminars, that if they wanted to talk about the feedback to bring their assignment in and the feedback and see me. Nobody has.'

Tutors discussed how they hoped their feedback would be used by students in future assignments and into their careers, and highlighted particular skills that they hoped the student has developed through the module:

'If they're thinking about carrying on with it for their dissertation then I think they certainly will use the feedback, even if it is only to take on-board what I've said and then do something differently (...) They might use it to rule some things out for their dissertation.'

There was a general view that whilst tutors might hope to see an improvement in student work from one assignment to the next, they were not specifically looking to see that feedback had been applied. They claimed that it was the students' responsibility to ensure that they are using their feedback properly:

'On this module I'm encouraging them to use [the feedback] for their personal development plan so it ties in with the next assignment well. I don't know if all students do but that's the hope anyway.'

Despite this, there were a small number of tutors employing techniques to monitor whether students were using feedback:

'What we do as a course is they have to do an online log and we assess that partly for evidence that they have reflected and acted on previous stuff (...) We're looking for them saying 'I got this feedback this is what I'm going to do about it'.'

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this research project was to better understand the connections that students make between the feedback that they receive and future assignments. This paper reports on practices and interactions with feedback within the assessment process from the perspective of both tutors and students.

It is apparent that our tutors work hard to provide high quality feedback that is valuable to students. The methods that they use to create and issue feedback vary, and often this is due to personal preferences. For students, they must rationalise the different forms and mediums through which they receive feedback in order to understand and engage with it effectively and this can be problematic. Our challenge is to achieve consistency from the student perspective whilst embracing the variety of practice from the tutor perspective.

This study identified a need for further discussion around the more philosophical aspects of tutor and student attitudes to feedback. There are tensions between the way in which tutors and students view the purpose of feedback, and providing quality feedback in a timely manner. The authors intend to explore these issues in future research.

The authors have considered the implications of these findings, and recommend the following observations for enhancing student engagement with feedback within the assessment process:

1. Have an awareness of all the assessments that students are likely to take across the course and how the assessments on their modules fit within the overall assessment diet may enable tutors to consider how their feedback feeds into other modules. Whilst conversations at course level are essential, a course level 'assessment map' would be a useful tool to achieve this goal.
2. Share the course level 'assessment map' with students to help them better identify links between assessments and modules. If this map contained deadline dates and other assessment information it could help students in their academic planning.
3. Ensure all assessment resources that the student needs to complete the assessment to the best of their ability (such as assessment briefs and assessment criteria) are available in a central location. If the resources available online will facilitate ease of access and give students the choice of how they prefer to view them, i.e. print them if they feel it is necessary or read online wherever they are working if they are comfortable to do so.
4. Advertising 'feedback dates' in a similar manner to which assessment deadline dates are displayed will make clear to students when they should expect to receive their feedback and reduce their anxieties. Where these dates are likely to be missed, students should be informed at the earliest opportunity.
5. Whilst having the freedom to mark student work in a way that suits individuals, tutors should ensure that the end product for students should be consistent in terms of delivery so that they are able to store all of their feedback in one place, preferably alongside the rest of their learning materials. For students, inconsistency in the way in which feedback is delivered can result in a disconnect between feedback that is issued online and that provided hardcopy.
6. Students value feedback that is closely aligned to the assessment criteria. Marking grids can help to achieve this alignment and help students to clearly identify their strengths and weaknesses. Students also value 'in context' feedback (i.e. feedback written on scripts), therefore ensure that feedback offered in this way reinforces feedback offered in grid format.
7. Feedback and marks should be issued together (i.e. at the same time and through the same medium) keeping the feedback timely and relevant.
8. Although students do not always pursue opportunities to follow up on their feedback with their tutor, they do place value upon the opportunity being available to them if they wish to do so. A clear pathway to seek further help and support from tutors should be made available to students.

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