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Student assignment feedback

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a small scale action research project in which a group of seven Year 2 undergraduate initial teacher education (ITE) students experienced three interventions which were concerned with feedback on essay assignments—provision of traditional written tutor feedback; completion of a tutor feedback analysis worksheet; and an experience of peer marking, with an opportunity for resubmission of work. After each intervention students were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of the intervention. The paper presents a brief overview of recent research on the topic of assignment feedback, and the results of this project are considered in the context of this.

Introduction

After hours of concentrated work I would often wonder, just what, if anything, all of this detail meant to Joe Student-Teacher. I had read, corrected, and offered suggestions for improvement, then completed a six-point analysis, along with key strengths and future targets. Was I wasting my time? When I was his age I cared only about the final grade. All I really wanted to know was, had I done enough to get me through and on to the next hurdle towards qualification?

One year into my work as an HE lecturer, and needing to find a topic for my Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PgCTLHE) action research, I decided that this would be a helpful area for further exploration. My core question was this

*How can I ensure that my students take seriously, and learn from, my written assignment feedback?
And, as a corollary to that, What could I learn from my students about giving better feedback?*

My procedural method was to experiment with various feedback interventions, and then to question students about which of these was most effective.

Literature review

There is a growing literature on the subject of student assessment and feedback. Swann and Arthurs (1998), Ecclestone (1988), and Becker et al (1968) all claim that students have an instrumental view of learning, seeing assignments as obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of a university qualification. Ding's 1998 work concludes that even if tutor comments are read, little is actually done with them to affect future learning. More recent work by Higgins et al (2002) proposes that, although students may rightly be considered as having an instrumental or mechanistic view of education, they are actually *conscientious consumers*, who really do care about the learning process. My own experience with a small group of students at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, Lancaster, was to confirm this more optimistic perspective.

Another body of research tries to understand and explain the possible reasons for the dissonance between what is written by tutors and what is received by students. Winter (1993) points out that we cannot assume that feedback is a straightforward '*transmission of information*'. Rather the tutor is in a position of both power and authority. Chanock (2000) shows that certain words and ideas (such as '*too much description—not enough analysis*') have totally different meanings between different tutors and their students, and indeed, between different academic disciplines. Rust (2003) and Higgins (2000) show that much that is presented by tutors as learning objectives and assessment criteria is of a complex, tacit nature, which tutors find very difficult to pass on to students, and students find very difficult to grasp. Lea and Stierer (2000) describe this

as a specific form of '*academic literacy*' which academics assume, but that students struggle to understand.

Many of the more recent studies on assessment are concerned with the importance of getting students engaged with the processes of assessment. Elwood and Klenowski (2002) propose that only as students themselves participate in the typical activities of academic *communities of shared practice* can they be absorbed into the culture of those communities. So, for instance, as students engage in peer assessment of ideas, and practice other conventions used by the community, so they become inducted as full participants and become practicing members. Rust (2003), in a study of a Business Studies group, suggests that activities which actively engage students with assignment feedback result in improved grades in other similar assignments. Bloxham and West (2004) suggest that students, with appropriate preparation, are able to use marking schemes accurately, and that peer marking helps them to better understand what is required in set tasks. Furthermore, Bloxham and West claim that students are very positive about the experience, and gain a greater appreciation for the usefulness of marking criteria. Van den Berg et al (2006) and Rust et al (2003) both warn however, that peer feedback is likely to focus on content and style, rather than structure, and so may not be relied on to fully replace assessment by the tutor.

Development of the action research

My initial research proposal consisted of three interventions and then an analysis of the impact of each. Firstly, students would be provided with essay feedback in the format traditionally used with our secondary Religious Education (RE) trainees (this consists of a typed (or sometimes hand-written) feedback sheet with a breakdown of the assignment into 5-6 elements, with each being graded on a scale from *Very Good* to *Limited*, then a section for *Strengths* of the assignment, and another for *Targets* for future work). Secondly, they would receive both oral tutorial feedback as well as the traditional written feedback. Thirdly, they would be given a task requiring them to engage with the feedback from several past assignments, by asking what they could learn from past feedback, and requiring them to set targets for future work.

In the course of my research however, I decided to substitute the oral feedback with a peer-marking activity. This was largely on the basis of time-considerations (the time taken to organise and offer individual tutorials), but also because peer-marking as an activity seemed to hold several other benefits for trainee teachers as a means of inducting them into the *community of shared practice* (Elwood and Klenowski, 2002) referred to above. Hopefully, it would offer students practice in assessment and offering feedback; it would allow them to become engaged with the use of learning outcomes and marking criteria; it would nurture skills and attitudes in collaborative working; it would encourage self-assessment and self-evaluation; and it would nurture greater ownership of their own and others' learning.

This new activity replicated a similar intervention carried out at the University of St Andrew's in 1995 (Jawah et al, 2004, Case Study 6, p28-30). Students were asked to grade and give feedback on an anonymous piece of work by a fellow student. Detailed guidance for the activity was provided, including an ethical framework, proposals for use of the marking criteria and suggestions for procedure. The peer-marked work was then returned to its owner and the students allowed a further period of time to resubmit their work if they so wished. As an added incentive, they were informed that their best piece of work (out of the original or the resubmitted one) would count as their final grade. In other words, they had nothing to lose from the activity, but possibly something to gain.

Results of the three interventions

Rather unexpectedly, feedback after the first intervention (traditional written feedback from the tutor) revealed that the majority of students (92% of the 5x Yr 2 UG and 20x PG students) found the feedback helpful or very helpful. 88% said that they read and re-read the feedback very carefully. In addition, all of them could remember aspects of the feedback, and all of them were able to note down one specific thing from the feedback that they remembered. Students said that they felt *helped* (20), *encouraged* (18), *pleased* (11), and *relieved* (4) by the feedback. These results were not as I had expected and were not in keeping with the research described above. However, this was the first piece of RE tutor feedback received by both groups of students and may have been exceptional in that respect.

My second and third interventions were with the smaller group of seven Year 2 BA/QT undergraduate students only. The second intervention consisted of a worksheet activity in which students summarised the feedback from three or more past essays, identified any elements of the feedback which they could not understand, and then identified 2-3 specific things which they could do to help improve their grades on future essays. I also made copies of the actual tutor feedback used, so that I could assess the accuracy of the students'

own summaries. Figure 1 shows a typical example of the summary of tutor feedback written by one of the students, and, alongside it, my own summary of the same tutor feedback. The student summaries provided a generally accurate reflection of what tutors had written. In the example provided, it can be seen that the student had identified the main gist of what tutors said, even if s/he had missed some of the specific details (shown in italics in the tutor summary section). In response to the question about elements of the feedback which students had not understood, 4 references were made to legibility, 3 to inability to understand the meaning of tutor comments, and 1 to an inconsistency between the grade given and the accompanying comments.

Figure 1 Chart showing results of student 3 for intervention 2 question 1, in which students were asked to summarise the tutor feedback provided on 3 or more past essays.

| Student 3 (Student summary) | Student 3 (Tutor summary) |
|---|---|
| <p>The feedback says that...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well research and written • Organised. Should argue more. Light Bibliography. • Good research/referencing. Attention required in areas of primary sources/literacy. | <p>The feedback says that...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well researched and written. Good knowledge/ understanding and critical discussion. • Clearly organised. Bibliography a little light. Read more- to uncover your position in order to critically defend it, and to penetrate issues deeper so that you can argue alternative positions. • Detailed and well researched/referenced work. Pay attention to aspects of punctuation and sentence structure. Engage more with primary sources and provide evidence of critical reflection. |
| <p>Writing in italics indicates elements of tutor feedback which were less accurately summarised by the student.</p> | |

In my second questionnaire, each of the students concluded that this had been a helpful activity, and that it had helped to clarify thinking about what lecturers had said about their work. They were very positive about such an activity being conducted with all students at the end of year 1.

Unfortunately, my third intervention (voluntary peer marking) was carried out at a very busy time of year for both students and tutor, and centred around an assignment for which three of the seven students sought, and were granted, extensions. As a result, only two of the students carried out the full peer marking activity, and only one of them chose to resubmit the assignment. The resubmitted essay did not result in an improved grade, although there was some improvement in the general literacy and presentation of the essay. Analysis of the peer feedback provided by students confirmed the claims of Vandenberg et al (2006) and Rust et al (2003) that such feedback is likely to focus on content and writing style rather than on issues of accuracy and essay structure.

A final questionnaire revealed that those students who did complete the activity found it very helpful. They were also much more positive about completing the activity again than were those who had not fully participated. Asked what they gained most (or thought they would gain) from the activity, students highlighted, *the chance to see how others have approached the essay (4); practice in using marking criteria (4); and, the chance to resubmit the work after feedback (3).*

However, the most telling element of the questionnaire feedback for me was the responses given to the final question on each of the last two questionnaires. After the second intervention, students were asked, *“Which of the following have you found important in helping you to learn from tutor feedback on your assignments?”* Figure 2 shows the responses.

Figure 2 Student responses to the question, *Which of the following have you found important in helping you to learn from tutor feedback on your assignments?*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | Opportunity to comment back to the tutor on the feedback | 2 | Tutor comments which relate directly to the course learning outcomes and marking criteria |
| 3 | Tutor comments which offer specific targets for improving future essays | 1 | Comments on the essay draft itself to show specific mistakes or weaknesses |
| 0 | Opportunities to discuss and compare tutor feedback with other students | 2 | Opportunities to discuss the feedback comments with the tutor concerned |
| 3 | Opportunities to see 'model' answers to the essay questions, in order to compare these with my own work | 2 | Opportunities to 'work with' the tutor feedback, such as the above exercise |
| 2 | Opportunities to discuss the essay in class after it is marked and returned | 0 | Feedback is received asap after essay is completed |
| 0 | Other (Please give example/s) | | |

In spite of previous claims that the students have benefited from such engagement, here they indicate a disinterest in activities requiring them to work with the feedback, and a clear preference for explicit feedback from the tutor. Likewise, after the third intervention, in spite of claiming that the peer marking was (or could be) beneficial, when asked to rate what would be most helpful for improving their essay-writing skills, their preferences were, in order

normal written tutor feedback; seeing 'model' answers to similar questions; tutorial feedback with the tutor; more activities like the peer-marking one; class discussion on the marked/returned essays

Clearly, these students feel very dependent on the tutor's feedback, and very uncertain about the benefits of alternative individual or peer-related engagement.

Conclusions

It would be very unwise of me to attempt to draw any major conclusions from such a small scale study as the above. Likewise, the lack of full participation by students in my final intervention (peer marking) precludes any ability to make assumptions about the potential benefits of such interventions. However, I would tentatively propose the following, both from the evidence collected and from my own more qualitative (though informal) encounters with the students, firstly, that this brief study accords with the research of Winter (1993), Chanock (2000), Rust (2003) and others, that students struggle to understand the written feedback of tutors. Although they are reasonably proficient at summarising feedback, there are some details of the feedback that they miss, but, more importantly, there are some comments which they are aware of not understanding, even though they may do nothing to pursue this with the tutor concerned. Secondly, the study supports Higgins et al's (2002) more optimistic view of students, that they are *conscientious consumers*, who are concerned about improved learning rather than just seeking to achieve satisfactory grades. This second claim may seem to be in contradiction to the first. However, in this study students indicate that they often do go back to tutors for clarification of feedback - particularly if this relates to issues that were relevant to future modules. Where the feedback was not followed up this was usually because the feedback was late in coming and the student was now busy with other modules and other assignments. Thirdly, the work supports the claims of Van den Berg et al (2006) and Rust et al (2003) that peer feedback is likely to provide feedback of a particular type, and so may not be considered as an alternative to tutor assessment and feedback but as a complement to it.

Finally, the work accords with the conclusions of Bloxham and West (2004) that students are generally positive about the experience of peer marking, believing that this supports their understanding of assessment tasks, and gives them a greater appreciation of the usefulness of marking criteria. On the other hand, there is a suggestion that students would not appreciate this as an alternative to tutor feedback, which they value most highly. Rather, they appreciate it as an additional means of support in the task of writing college assignments.

Because of the somewhat incomplete nature of the third intervention in this study, I propose to experiment further with the practice of peer marking, using it as a way of providing additional systemic feedback to students for ongoing skill development in the writing of academic essays. I also plan to take this one stage further, by allowing my students to engage in a more open discussion of their academic writing through the use of academic writing workshops, much in the style used by creative writing teachers (Flann, 2006). These sessions will be incorporated into the planned weekly programme, and will allow students space to reflect together on the nature of good academic writing in their subject specialism.

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