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**Students' perceptions of interventions for
supporting their engagement with feedback**

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Michael Parker and Naomi E. Winstone
University of Surrey
n.winstone@surrey.ac.uk

Abstract

Recent approaches to assessment and feedback in higher education stress the importance of students' involvement in these processes, where effective reception of feedback is as important as effective delivery. Many interventions have been developed to support students' active use of feedback; however, students' engagement will be influenced by their perceptions of the utility of such strategies. We presented students with descriptions of ten possible feedback engagement interventions, and asked them to discuss which would be more useful and why. Students clearly articulated the perceived benefits of each intervention, but also discussed issues that might preclude strong engagement. These issues illustrate that students believe they lack the skills required to engage with interventions, and also show how student emotion and cognition are likely to influence their engagement. We offer some recommendations as to how the framing of such interventions could promote stronger student engagement.

Keywords

Assessment; Feedback; Engagement; Educational Interventions.

Introduction

The provision of feedback to learners on their skills and understanding, as well as on the work and assignments they produce, is an essential influence on learning and development (Black & William 1998; Hattie & Timperley 2007). Given the importance of effective feedback to student learning, educators invest a considerable amount of time and effort in their feedback practices (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan 2010). To improve both students' experience, and their ability to learn from feedback, many practitioners and researchers have sought to define and promote 'best practice' (e.g., Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006) and to uncover those aspects of feedback which students desire the most (e.g. Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Menezes, in press). However, it is widely acknowledged that even feedback of the highest quality is not going to have a strong effect on students' development unless they actively engage with it (e.g. O'Donovan, Rust & Price, in press). It is not unreasonable for teachers and lecturers to at least assume that their feedback will be read by their students; unfortunately, some evidence suggests that many students do not even collect their written feedback (Sinclair & Cleland 2007) which would then by definition preclude any further engagement. Even if students retrieve their marked assignments, the depth of their processing of the feedback is often shown to be weak (Gibbs & Simpson 2004).

There is a strong acknowledgment in the literature that a conception of feedback that emphasises its delivery, and minimises or ignores the role of reception, is likely to be limiting in promoting student engagement (e.g. Orsmond, Merry & Reiling 2005; Price, Handley & Millar 2011). Instead, careful thought needs to be given to ways that encourage the use of feedback, and that support students in applying it to their future work and skill development.

Citation

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Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2005) present a constructivist model of assessment, where student activity is seen to be critical. One crucial question that arises from such an approach is whether students possess the necessary understanding of *how* they should actively engage with feedback. Should we necessarily expect them to be able to possess sufficient working knowledge of assessment procedures (commonly termed their 'assessment literacy'; Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Handley & Bryant 2012) to support active implementation of feedback? Or rather, is there an onus on educators to ensure that "students should be trained in how to interpret feedback and the characteristics of the work they produce, and how they can improve their work in the future" (O'Donovan et al. in press p. 3)? To this end, many practitioners have worked to develop tools, strategies and interventions that all serve to develop the role of students as an active recipient of feedback, and support students in making use of feedback, rather than receiving it passively. We recently carried out a systematic literature review of such interventions and identified a range of interventions designed to promote student 'recipience' of feedback (Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, in press).

Interventions to develop students' assessment literacy

If students have superior 'assessment literacy', it is argued that they will be better able to make use of their feedback (O'Donovan et al. in press). For example, typical interventions in this area train students in skills of self-assessment (e.g., Orsmond and Merry 2013) and peer-assessment (e.g., Cartney 2010), with the intention that by acting as an assessor themselves, students will become more proficient in the provision of feedback, and gain a new appreciation of its purpose and the importance of active engagement on their part (O'Donovan et al. 2015). Such interventions also require students to become adept at engaging with and using assessment criteria (e.g., Atkinson and Lim 2013) and to develop skills in the provision of feedback that is itself 'useable'. In addition, self-assessment helps students to benchmark their own work, and as a result, better use feedback as a way of improving their own performance.

Interventions to promote engagement through feedback presentation

Many interventions have attempted to present feedback in a different way or through a different medium, with the aim to make it more appealing to students, and thus enhance their engagement with it. For example, many papers in the literature report the use of technology to deliver feedback (e.g., Crook et al. 2012), for example using audio or video facilities. Other interventions involving feedback presentation include the provision of 'feedback without a grade' (e.g., Jones and Gorra 2013); in this approach, students initially receive their written feedback only and the grade is withheld until the student has had the opportunity to fully engage with the feedback. This is designed to overcome the dominance of the mark in student motivation, and is shown to result in greater learning gains (Black & Wiliam 1998).

Interventions to train students in using and discussing feedback

If students do not know how to implement feedback, we are unlikely to see strong engagement on their part. For this reason, some interventions are designed with the explicit purpose of equipping students with tools and strategies to put their feedback into use. Common methods for achieving this include the delivery of workshops which train students in the fundamentals of assessment and give them the opportunity to learn strategies for the implementation of feedback (e.g., Bedford and Legg 2007), or the provision of resources such as written guides to using feedback, which enable the student to be more independent in putting feedback into action (e.g., Withey 2013). Another common intervention is to provide the opportunity for the student and marker to meet and discuss the feedback (e.g., Van der Schaaf, Baartman and Prins 2013), so that students can better understand the feedback and develop action plans for improvement.

Interventions to develop students' skills of self-regulation

Skills of self-regulation enable students to use feedback to develop action plans and monitor their own performance towards these goals. As students develop in terms of self-regulation, they should become less reliant on external sources of feedback, and better equipped to generate internal feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Interventions have been designed to support students in developing as self-regulated learners; such strategies include training students in action planning and goal setting (e.g., Adcroft and Willis 2013), and encouraging them to track their own progress through the use of a feedback portfolio (e.g., Welsh 2012).

Despite the widely differing activities employed in these interventions, they all share as a common goal the development of attributes that might enable students to more actively engage with their feedback. To this end, research evidence supports their efficacy, with outcomes ranging from improved attentiveness to feedback (e.g. Chen 2010), more proactive feedback-seeking (Cartney 2010), and more sophisticated reflection (Altahawi, Sisk, Poloskey, Hicks & Dannefer 2012). However, nearly all authors, when describing how they have trialled interventions to support the use of feedback, report that student engagement with and use of the interventions is weak at best. If these interventions are likely to help students, but they are not engaging, why might this be the case? We cannot understand poor engagement without first appreciating students' perceptions of these interventions. Can they see their potential utility? Do they show particular resistance to any aspects of these interventions? Such issues are likely to be a strong influence on students' levels of engagement. In the present study, we set out to better understand exactly what students think about possible interventions to support student engagement with assessment feedback.

Background and Method

As part of a project funded by the UK Higher Education Academy, we sought to better understand students' behaviour when receiving feedback, and to develop tools for supporting their engagement with feedback. Our project began with an extensive period of consultation with our undergraduate psychology students, exploring what they do with feedback, what factors prevent them from using their feedback well, and what interventions they thought might help them to engage better with feedback. As part of this consultation we conducted a series of 11 focus groups, each containing 2-4 of our students. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional Ethics Committee. Detailed analysis of these groups' discussions is reported elsewhere (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, & Parker, in press); however, here we focus on a specific aspect of these discussions that we have not otherwise reported. Specifically, as part of these sessions we presented each group with descriptions of the 10 common interventions described in the introduction (i.e., self-assessment, peer-assessment, engaging with marking criteria, technology, feedback without a grade, feedback workshop, feedback resources, discussion with marker, feedback portfolio, and action plan). Students were instructed to discuss the interventions as a group, by thinking about how useful each intervention would be in principle, and how likely they would be to actually use each intervention in practice. In our prior report, we documented the discussions that were provoked by this activity, concerning the barriers students perceive as preventing them from using feedback well. However, in that report we did not focus directly on students' opinions about the interventions themselves. That was the focus of the present analysis.

Findings

Students' discussion of each individual intervention yielded important insights into the perceived benefits of the intervention, as well as perceived difficulties with employing it themselves. Below, we present findings pertaining to each intervention in turn. Individual students are represented by alphabetic identifiers to preserve their anonymity.

Assessment Literacy Interventions

Self-Assessment

When considering the use of self-assessment, students could see that it would be useful, but only in terms of a 'tick box' approach to check that they had covered everything in an assignment brief prior to submission. They did not appear to recognise the potential benefits of self-assessment to their broader skill development. This limited use of self-assessment may be a result of students perceiving that they do not possess the necessary expertise to assess their own academic ability and skills:

- (1) C: *Self - assessment. I don't think that's helpful.*
B: *Again, - I wouldn't find it helpful.*
A: *No.*
C: *Because you don't know how... you don't know how to assess.*
A + B: *No.*
B: *Cos I'm not a marker, I'm not a trained marker...*

Students also recognised that their own self-preservation biases and lack of objectivity might make the exercise less useful, particularly if they were motivated to protect their own fragile self-perception:

- (2) X: *Because I do lie to myself.*
- (3) B: *Yea, because you have the tendency to make yourself feel better than you are.*

Taken together, there is evidence that students do not recognise the full potential of self-assessment, and also lack the objectivity to make strong use of this intervention to develop their abilities to put feedback into action.

Peer Assessment

Peer-assessment was believed to overcome some of the concerns surrounding self-assessment, as students recognised that the issue of self-preservation bias was not applicable to peer-assessment (4). However, there was also an awareness amongst students that their peers lack the necessary expertise to provide useful feedback (5-6):

- (4) T: *You're not as biased, are you?*
- (5) G: *Like, I would prefer to get feedback from a guy who has a PhD, than - my peer, if that's okay?*
- (6) M: *I know that someone has written it that doesn't really know how to mark something. If you know what I mean? It's kinda harder to trust.*

This issue of expertise also extended to their own perceived ability to provide feedback to peers:

- (7) Y: *Yea. I just don't think...if you can't even assess your own work against the marking criteria, how are you going to assess a peer's work?*

Whilst peer-assessment was considered useful, it was also assumed that peers would only pick up on "surface issues" within work, rather than more nuanced areas for development:

- (8) M: *I think it's good for proof reading.*
O: *Yea, proof reading, but probably nothing else.*

- (9) *O: I say it might be helpful for, like... if you're worried about a specific paragraph. You're like, 'Does this make sense?' So it might be helpful because they're saying the same thing and they'd be like, 'Well no, that doesn't' or 'Yes that does.'*

Rather than recognising that both peer- and self-assessment offer opportunities to develop assessment literacy, students seem instead to see the limited assessment literacy possessed by themselves and their peers as a barrier to effectively engaging with these kinds of interventions.

Engaging with Marking Criteria

Unlike peer- and self-assessment, participants did see the potential benefit of engaging with the marking criteria to the development of their own assessment literacy:

- (10) *C: Um, engaging with the marking criteria.
B: I think that's a really good one, because I found as well...because sometimes I don't actually know what I'm meant to be doing.*
- (11) *M: The engaging with the marking criteria, cos then at least you know, if you know what's on the mark scheme, you know what you need to put in.
O: Yea, I think that's really helpful.*

However, there was evidence that any potential benefits to engaging with marking criteria might be precluded by students' difficulty understanding the terminology they contain:

- (12) *Q: Engaging with the marking criteria would be useful if I understood it.*

If students do not possess the ability to understand the terminology within marking criteria, expecting them to engage with criteria in order to improve their use of feedback may be counterproductive if it simply feeds into a vicious circle of misunderstanding that will limit students' willingness to look at them in the first place.

Feedback Presentation Interventions

Technology

Students appeared to be largely receptive to the addition of technology, such as Virtual Learning Environments and audio/video feedback, to the assessment process. Some students felt that this brought the assessment process in line with their typical means of communication; others also thought that the move towards technology in assessment was simply inevitable, and that it was futile to oppose it. However, there was a perception that receiving feedback via email or text message technology would be overly invasive. Interestingly, some concerns with innovations such as video feedback were for the lecturers rather than students themselves. Students recognised the extra workload involved (13), and felt that lecturers might be uncomfortable with this form of feedback delivery (14). Perhaps for these kinds of reasons, some students expressed a preference for typical written feedback (15 & 16):

- (13) *E: ...they're not gonna have time to do it for everybody.*
- (14) *E: I think that'd just be really awkward. Some...some lecturers aren't ...that kind of camera happy.*
- (15) *O: No, it doesn't feel as, like, professional.*
- (16) *N: ...at the end of the day, written is better than technology, I think. [Laughs]*

Thus, whilst students might be accustomed to using technology in their everyday interactions, they may experience discomfort in receiving feedback in this way.

Feedback Without a Grade

Students appeared to recognise the utility of receiving feedback in advance of the grade and articulated clear benefits to this approach:

- (17) *EF: I like the idea of getting your feedback before you get your grade. Cos then you actually have to sit and think about it.*
- (18) *O: The only thing I can see that is positive with [feedback without a grade], is that you'd actually focus on your feedback, rather than just look at your grade...*

However, despite showing this level of insight, it was clear that students did not feel this would be a useful intervention for them personally, as they would be first and foremost interested in the grade they had received:

- (19) *H: I think, although it might make you read the feedback more, potentially... I think the grade still tells you where you are in the marking criteria.*
- (20) *M: I think I'd just find it really frustrating!*
N: Yea! [Laughs]
M: Like, I just wanna know how good it was...
N: Mm.
M:...to begin with.

It also became evident that whereas withholding the grade might mean that the feedback was read in depth, this would be unlikely to facilitate use of the feedback. Instead, the focus on the feedback would be to try and 'guess' the grade that had been awarded:

- (21) *AB: It'd be distressing!*
Y: I'd be so anxious about what was the actual grade. Especially if it had been negative feedback, I'd be sat there thinking...
- (22) *V: Imagine if you get bad feedback, and then it's just apprehension...*
X: Yea.
V: ...until the grade.

It seems that students cannot fully dissociate the feedback and the grade and, in the absence of a concrete grade to measure their success, they might speculate about the mark on the basis of the written feedback. There is also the honest assessment that they believe the grade to be of greater importance than written feedback.

Training and Dialogue Interventions

Feedback Workshop

Students believed that attending a workshop to support the development of concrete strategies to put feedback into action would be beneficial (23), but seemed to view such an intervention as being assignment-specific, rather than enabling them to put their feedback from any assignment into action (24):

- (23) *CF: I think this is quite a good idea, the workshop on using feedback.*
- (24) *R: Yea, I think it would have to refer to a specific essay, and be for like, --from that lecturer.
S: Yea.
J: So, maybe like a workshop for each module? Or—
S: Yea, perhaps, yea...*

These perspectives suggest that students 'compartmentalise' assignments and that their perception of interventions to support engagement with feedback might be limited to what they might do to support the implementation of specific pieces of feedback, rather than their potential to support ongoing review and application of feedback.

Feedback Resources

Participants expressed that resources for use when engaging with feedback would be informative (25-26), but also noted that their utility would depend on students' own use of them. This seems to be in comparison to an interactive workshop where staff are on hand to guide learning (27):

- (25) *Q: Resources for using feedback.
P: That'd be good.
Q: Yea, cos I sometimes just don't understand how to use the feedback effectively*
- (26) *X: Because it's all well and good knowing what to do, but not how to do it.*
- (27) *D: I think they're less useful than the workshop, cos it's not interactive.*

Interestingly, students also noted that their ability to use resources to support their implementation of feedback relies on receiving clear and accessible feedback from their lecturers (28):

- (28) *R: That'd be useful. But it does rely on the feedback being good in the first place.*

Participants also noted that they were already given lots of "stuff" over the course of their degree, and that receiving more resources might be perceived as overwhelming.

Discussion with Marker

Students held a clear understanding of the utility of discussing feedback with the marker, as a way of clarifying their current level of understanding and developing strategies for future development:

- (29) *B: Yea, I feel like you can never get... you'll always get so much more information from speaking to someone, than reading what they've written.*
- (30) *O: ...you can clarify, and you can also go into more, like, depth of like, say they've just written something. If you actually talk to them, you can then ask them more about it and...yea, it's just clarification and you can get more detail where you want - the detail.*

Their appraisal was not entirely positive, however, with one participant stating "I think I'd try and exhaust all the ways I can understand the feedback by myself, before I go and see a lecturer". Lecturers and markers were seen as a "last resort" for students, to be spoken to only once all other options had been exhausted. Others also expressed concerns about the judgement they might receive from the marker during the face-to-face discussion:

- (31) *D: That's something I'd do, and it helps.*

F: Mm. But then, if it's negative, and then you get the person that's saying 'You're making no sense, you should not write again!'

E: Well, hopefully they would be more polite.

It therefore seems that students see value to this intervention, but feel more exposed to potential criticism than they would from written feedback.

Self-Regulation Interventions

Feedback Portfolio

The feedback portfolio was well-received by participants, with some revealing that they already kept one. Students felt that a portfolio of feedback on assignments was a good way to keep organised, to track their progress through the years, and to see what they were doing right and wrong across different assignments:

(32) *M: ...we said a couple of times that the assessment portfolio, you can have a look through and see what's, like, common in all of your bits of coursework. Which, leads onto an action plan...*

(33) *S: I think the assessment portfolio will be...it would be handy to have it, um, organised and, like, so you can check your progress.*

(34) *EF: Cos that's easy, just putting them in one folder. And you can look at them, 'cos I just chuck mine somewhere and then can't find them again.*

Students did express concern that tracking feedback implementation across assessments would be complicated by the common modular structure of University courses, where assignments are not always seen to link to one another.

Action Plan

Participants often discussed the utility of the action plan together with the portfolio, as they could be used in conjunction. They liked the idea of having clearly structured targets for their academic progression, so that they could more clearly see how they could develop:

(35) *C: Action plan. "Developing a concrete action plan of targets to improve your work." I think that could be helpful.*

A: That's good! I think that's a really good idea, yeah!

(36) *E: I think the action plan is just, sort of, the clearest means of improving, really.*

(37) *E: It feels like a solution, rather than a...*

F: Yea.

E: ...a stab in the dark.

(38) *H: I think action plan would be the most useful, because it would give you really... just, extremely clear feedback and it would be personalised to you. So you'd know exactly what you've got to do, and I think the fact that it would be really useful makes it more likely to be used.*

Students would need to understand how to improve on the areas that they have identified, which cannot always be addressed in an action plan. They also noted that it would take considerable effort to write an action plan after each essay, thus adding to assessment stress:

- (39) *S: - Um. I would use an action plan to refer to, but, um, it wouldn't necessarily help us much.
R: I think... it depends, like if you've put in the effort to develop your action plan as well.*

Discussion and recommendations

The aim of the present study was to gain insight into students' perception of possible strategies and interventions to support students' engagement with and utilisation of assessment feedback. In addition, the study aimed to develop our understanding of the reasons why, despite clear evidence of their utility, student engagement with these interventions can often be weak.

Assessment literacy is believed to be a strong foundation for using feedback, and engaging with feedback further develops students' assessment literacy (Price et al. 2012). However, our data suggest that students might be reluctant to engage in activities which would enable them to develop stronger assessment literacy, such as peer- and self-assessment, because they believe they lack the competence and status to themselves act as a 'marker'. Training in these skills is essential if students are to be active participants in the feedback process (O'Donovan et al. in press; Sadler 2010). It is also likely to be important that the rationale for engaging in peer- and self-assessment is made explicit to students, so that they can come to recognise the potential to develop the competence and confidence in appraisal that these interventions afford. Likewise, the potential for students to benefit from engaging with marking criteria requires them to be able, at a very basic level, to understand the language in which they are written. There is a key role for educators to provide this training, such that students can then independently engage with the criteria to develop their implementation of feedback.

It is not surprising that educators have attempted to encourage students to more deeply engage with feedback by manipulating the means of presentation of that feedback. With regards to the use of technology to deliver feedback, students clearly recognise the limits to the feasibility of this endeavour. Interestingly, students seemed to convey a preference for written feedback, which, to them, seems more 'professional'. This may be symptomatic of students' limited conception of what feedback entails, where written comments dominate in their mental model of feedback over verbal comments (O'Donovan et al. in press). The provision of written feedback in advance of receiving a grade was strongly disliked by students. Whilst they recognised that teachers may implement this in order to make them read the feedback in more detail, in practice such an intervention may not have the desired effect as it seems that any engagement with written comments prior to receiving the mark will not be supporting implementation of that feedback, but rather would facilitate 'guessing' the mark that will be received. Thus, innovative presentation of feedback is not necessarily going to lead to stronger engagement with feedback.

Students evidenced a clear perception of the utility of interventions incorporating training and dialogue, but some interventions in this category were viewed as possessing greater utility than others. In order for a workshop on using feedback to be useful, students felt that they needed an individual workshop for each assignment. This is an illustration of how modularised curricula can lead to a compartmentalised view of assessment. Some students do not see individual assignments as part of an overall trajectory of skill development; thus, such a workshop might lead students to focus on how to use the feedback on the next assignment only, rather than how to develop broader skills that can be used across their degree. Discussing feedback with the marker was seen to be more useful than being given resources to use on their own to make better use of feedback; students seem to feel they would struggle to be self-guided in their application of resources. Students saw the 'added value' to having a face-to-face discussion with a marker about the feedback they had received.

Finally, in terms of self-regulation, students saw the potential efficacy of actively monitoring their development through engaging with feedback, with the aid of a feedback portfolio and action plan.

The idea of using feedback to develop an action plan for one's own development seemed to be quite a novel idea to students, rather than being something they could easily do themselves. Instead, students seem to take a 'stab in the dark' as to how they could improve and saw that setting concrete targets would offer an improvement on such a strategy.

It is crucial to note that our analysis here is limited to students' *perceptions* of the utility of interventions to support the use of feedback, rather than evidence of the utility per se. As we discussed earlier, there is much evidence in individual papers that such interventions do achieve the desired effects, but engagement is typically poor. Here we have uncovered some potential reasons for this low engagement, which we can summarise as encompassing three issues:

1. Students may have low levels of assessment literacy;
2. Assessment may be a source of anxiety for students;
3. Students may struggle to see the 'bigger picture' in assessment, and instead focus too intently on individual modules or units.

Having identified these issues, we can offer some tentative recommendations as to how we might enable students to be able to engage with interventions:

1. Ensure that students clearly understand the rationale underlying any suggested intervention, and that they are fully aware of the skills and attributes that intervention is designed to target. Students should also be provided with clear evidence for the efficacy of interventions, or perhaps view other students modelling successful implementation. Developing students' assessment literacy is crucial.
2. Students need training in how to harness assessment anxiety in a positive way, and need to appreciate that written comments are not inferior in terms of their utility to a numerical grade. They also need to recognise how it 'feels' to receive feedback, and to have these emotional reactions validated and shared.
3. Ensure that students understand how individual assessments within a level of study converge to assess broad learning outcomes. O'Donovan et al. (in press) also recommend building into course design a requirement for students to evidence that they have implemented feedback from one assignment when working on the next.

It is clear that if students are to fully benefit from feedback, it is essential to consider ways to better promote their active engagement (Price et al. 2011). Many innovative resources and practices have been developed that offer clear potential to achieve this end. However, it is important to understand why students may not utilise interventions that are offered to them. The findings from this small-scale study align with recommendations from those who emphasise the importance of student engagement with feedback: students need to be trained in making use of feedback, and the affective dimension of engagement with feedback needs careful consideration alongside the cognitive processes involved.

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