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What is the purpose of feedback on reassessment essays? A language tutor's perspective on students' approaches to resubmission of failed assignments

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Most of this work was completed at the University of Cumbria, although some of the students and tutors discussed in this paper were from different UK universities.

Abstract

Students improving a failed assignment need feedback on necessary improvements, but whether or not those improvements then lead to learning is a highly varied experience. This paper discusses feedback from writing centre tutors to three students who were referred for language support after failing an assignment. Feedback was given in two stages: one was simple correction to enable the assignment to pass, the other was in-depth dialogic feedback which followed “feedback for learning” guidance (Askew & Lodge 2000). The separation of feedback offered a way to explore student engagement with reassessment practices and whether they focused on just doing enough to pass or sought to improve their learning.

Results suggest that many reassessment practices overemphasise student effort and minor proofreading issues. When looking at how tutors responded to resubmission efforts, there was a strong suggestion that a long-term learning focus was not reliably rewarded: tutors are just as susceptible as student to over-emphasising the need to ‘get over the line’. If students are to effectively learn from improving failed attempts, feedback must engage with more than just what students need to do to pass. Academic writing support must therefore engage with course tutors to help students to see resubmission as a learning opportunity and type of formative assessment by better aligning feedback and reassessment expectations and practices.

Introduction

Writing support for university students can have an ambiguous role. Writing centres and their tutors emphatically assert that they are not a proofreading service (Turner 2010), but there is an ‘ever present

pressure' from students to provide exactly that (Booth & Record 2013: 602). More broadly, engaging students with feedback intended to support their long-term learning is equally problematic. For example, some tutors complain that students often fail to even collect their written feedback (Bailey & Garner 2010; Carless 2006), while considerable written comments by tutors, even if read, can still be poorly used by students (Dysthe 2011). It is therefore 'not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly' (Gibbs & Simpson 2004: 20).

Giving high quality feedback which supports learning is consequently no guarantee of students learning, or even engaging with feedback. Withholding what students want in favour of giving them what they need can also be a risky strategy in universities operating within a broader framework of needing to satisfy the student as consumer (Bols & Wicklow 2013). Whilst there are examples of successfully forcing students to engage meaningfully with feedback by making engagement credit-bearing (Withey 2013), such approaches are very demanding of faculty time and risk reinforcing student dependency. The extent to which students are supported is also a difficult ethical decision, balancing the risk of an unfair advantage against the particular needs of disadvantaged groups who might have a legitimate claim to needing proofreading services (Day Babcock 2008). Writing support services therefore have a difficult role, which is made all the more problematic by the rise of online services which offer proofreading and extensive editing anonymously and cheaply (Bartlett 2009). As a result, it is not enough for writing centres to limit the support given to students since such support can be easily found online. Instead, writing support needs to convince students that proofreading will not benefit them in the long-term and that there is real value in engaging with more demanding feedback. This has been highlighted as a particular challenge for feedback on draft essays, as students can perceive improvements as too demanding and time-consuming (Court 2012).

One of the key ways writing support can motivate students to engage is by convincing students that doing so will improve their grades. Nzekwe-Excel (2014), for example, has demonstrated that attending writing support is associated with increased grade performance. Students can also be motivated to engage with support if they feel it will help them avoid procrastination or get past feeling stuck, making it more likely that they will complete an assignment on time. Students might also be motivated by assistance in interpreting feedback from their tutor if they feel unable to understand the language of their tutor's feedback (Deyi 2011), helping them to make sense of what is required.

Failing an assignment brings all these issues into sharp focus: a student has an immediate need to understand what is required and make the necessary improvements to the same task. Feedback is therefore highly relevant as it relates directly to the assignment being (re)produced. The opportunity to repeat work in higher education is relatively rare, but one which can give students significant long-term advantages over peers who pass the task on their first attempt (Proud 2014). However, marks are often capped at the lowest passing grade, creating little reward for students to make significant improvements to their work. At the same time, simply trying to limp over the finishing line can be risky as there are often severe consequences for failing the same assignment twice. The threat of failure therefore creates a unique challenge for writing support, where students are highly motivated to improve their work but have very little incentive to improve it significantly, even though doing so can be highly advantageous to their long-term learning.

The threat of failure

Before looking in greater detail at how students respond to or are motivated by the threat of failure, it is worth considering how this threat is experienced by students. Surprisingly few higher education students actually fail their courses in the UK, particularly when compared with failure rates at secondary level or in further education. Indeed, Floud argues that non-completion is much wider concern than those failing assessments as the number of students failing 'are very small indeed: it is probably more difficult to fail British university exams than it is to get a first class degree' (Floud 2002: 59). Recent

figures support this point: whilst failure is not reported separately from non-continuation, 251,168 students left UK institutions in 2014 without any qualification whilst another 16,604 were awarded third-class honours and 15,011 unclassified or 'ordinary' degrees, compared with 574,504 students who obtained first-class honours (HESA 2015).

Failure is similarly unlikely to result in removal from a course, instead non-continuation is still largely seen as a decision by the student, with failure being only part of their decision. For example, only 30% of respondents gave lack of academic progress as a factor in their decision to leave their course in a study by Yorke (2004), while none of the students surveyed reported being forced to leave because of failing an assessment. A similar study of postgraduate trainee teachers found that only 1% of the sample was actually forced to leave due to repeated failure of an assignment compared with 8% who did not complete the course, the majority of whom 'cited unspecified personal reasons' (Gorard, See, & Smith 2006: 83). The apparent unlikelihood of failing a university degree therefore seems at odds with the significant number of students who are recorded as leaving voluntarily without any qualification: either they feel unable to complete a task which it seems they would likely pass, or the failure acts as a trigger for students considering leaving a course for other reasons. Either way, it is far more common for students to not resubmit than it is for their resubmission to fail.

Students' reflections on their progress when they receive a failing grade therefore seems more likely to prompt their non-continuation than actually failing the resubmission attempt. Nevertheless, resubmission remains high stakes - many university policies only allow one attempt at reassessment, after which students must pay to retake an entire module, potentially costing around £2000. In addition to these high-stakes, there is low reward as resubmission is typically capped at the module pass mark. This is of particular concern for large-credit modules, where capping can contribute to 'unduly lowering a student's overall degree classification' (Bloxham & Boyd 2007: 170). Resubmission policy might therefore indirectly contribute to a student's decision to withdraw by either financially penalising them or reducing their motivation by acting as an anchor on their grade average, despite the risk of outright failure being so low. These resubmission policies create a high-risk, low-reward situation: there are severe sanctions for a second failed attempt, but even a first-class resubmission would give no more benefit than a bare minimum pass. Indeed, no amount of hard work on a resubmission can remove the effect of a capped mark on a student's average.

Writing support needs to appreciate the emotional impact of failure on students, including feelings of helplessness. It seems that the greatest risk to students when preparing for resubmission is their own lack of confidence or inertia resulting in a failure to resubmit. As a minimum, writing support must help students to see that completing the resubmission is within their ability and encourage them to do so. Ideally, support would go further than this and help to address any feelings the student might have that they are failing to make progress. Given the limited incentives for significantly improving any one resubmission piece, it is important that students see improvements as feeding forward into future tasks so that they will learn something valuable from the resubmission in terms of their long-term goals.

Reassessment practices in HE

Allowing multiple attempts at the same task has been reported as having mixed results in how students respond. Making multiple attempts low-risk, such as by removing mark capping, would logically provide a more formative focus to assignments. However, an attempt to do so found that for more than half of students the first attempt was perceived 'as a 'safety net' rather than an opportunity to learn' (Covic & Jones 2008: 82). Consequently, students who achieved good grades on the first attempt had little interest in improving and resubmitting, whilst other students submitted work which was weaker than normal (and which failed to pass) in an attempt to get through the assessment. Whilst some students in Covic and Jones' study evidently did make good use of the feedback opportunity to drive their learning, the overall conclusion was that many strategic student approaches to assessment will take a long time to change. Similarly, challenging students to engage with feedback beyond simple referencing

or grammatical issues requires coaching. Somewhat surprisingly, an example of achieving this closer engagement with feedback was found in Bland and Gallagher (2009: 722), where removing reassessment chances resulted in 'closer working relationships with lecturers, to ensure that their one and only submission was their best work'. The effect of resubmission options on attainment is therefore complex, particularly when students attempt to leverage the system.

Whether or not reassessment improves learning, it has been demonstrated to improve performance. Pell, Boursicot, and Roberts (2009) offer four possible explanations for an improvement of 2 standard deviations in their study (bringing the reassessment mean equal to the mean cohort score): students have had an extra assessment practice, reassessment typically occurs at a time of reduced workload or assessment bunching, reassessment students receive additional tuition, and the higher stakes can increase motivation. Pell et al. (2009) argue that this represents an unfair advantage for reassessed students, which supports the argument either for demanding a higher pass mark for each reassessment attempt (also recommended in McManus & Ludka 2012) or penalising the student in some other way (such as mark capping). In extreme cases, such as the modular A-level, overly-strategic approaches can be employed in unlimited reassessment situations, leading to a host of undesirable and unfair consequences (Scott 2012). However, students who take reassessment seriously as a learning opportunity can derive significant and long-term learning gains, later surpassing peers who passed first time (Proud 2014). How students approach reassessment opportunities therefore seems to be a vital consideration for evaluating reassessment outcomes.

When responding to feedback on a failed attempt, students typically have very specific and instructive advice intended to produce specific improvements in their work. This high level of detail represents a very direct form of feedforward (Walker 2013), where students are expected to make the necessary improvements and have the information necessary to do so. Reassessment might therefore focus as much on how well this advice was followed rather than being a full reassessment of the work. Using PhD theses as an example, Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, and Dally (2004) found doctoral examiners were 'prepared to concede if their own knowing is acknowledged in the revision' even if they remained unconvinced that the candidate had improved. In this way, 'examiners are usually happy to grease the hinges' (Holbrook et al. 2004: 114), so that effort and improvement is credited even if the standard is still not strictly reached.

To summarise, motivating students to use reassessment feedback to improve their learning is highly problematic and can lead to unintended overly-strategic student behaviours. Allowing reassessment can improve learning, but it can also unfairly reward students who have not made the required improvements. To add to the complexity, prohibiting reassessment can also have both these outcomes. Another issue is that assessors might be overly influenced by how well the student heeds their advice or shows an increased effort, which again might incentivise students to strategically display these behaviours. Tutors might also be tempted to reward a student's effort if they have almost reached the required standard. Feedback on reassessment is therefore a highly complex area where there are no clear best practice recommendations and a wide range of potential negative outcomes for student learning, making it disappointing that the topic has received very little attention outside of medical education.

Procedure

Planned changes to the role of writing support tutors prompted evaluation and reflection using Norton (2009) as a framework for action research. As part of this process of examining my own role, data was gathered to look at the effect of feedback on student learning. This was originally intended to help make tough financial decisions about the level of support tutors could offer, but instead has led to the discussion in this paper of reassessment practices. Whilst I had previously thought of my role as helping students to pass the reassessment by making sense of feedback from their course tutor, it seemed more important that students feel they are making progress and that the reassessment is a worthwhile

learning opportunity rather than just an exercise in improving their work just enough to pass (plus whatever buffer they felt prudent). It was also an absolute priority that students actually completed the reassessment task and could feel confident that it would pass, even if it would only barely do so. The experimental change to my practice was therefore to split support into two separate tutorials which aimed to remove the threat of failure as a motivation, to reframe support as a learning opportunity rather than being assessment-driven, and give students more control of the support. If one type of feedback was found to be much more effective than the other, then the writing support service could make a relatively painless budget cut.

Following ethical approval, the next three students to be referred for support were offered the changed structure, replacing the current model of a one-hour tutorial talking through their feedback and then offering brief email support on a redraft. Instead, the first session would guide students closely through making simple improvements (drawing on feedback on the task from their course tutor) which would all but guarantee a minimum pass. Improvements were minor, including fixing simple grammatical and referencing errors and simple layout improvements such as consistent font use.

With the assurance of being able to pass the assignment, a subsequent tutorial would be offered which would take a highly dialogic approach in which students could talk through their work and improve it until they were happy that they had identified and met their longer-term learning goals. Improvements could be judged by the reassessment mark given by their course tutor, the feedback from that course tutor, and through a more general reflection from both the student and myself on their learning and how they felt about the course.

This research took place near the end of the academic year, with one male postgraduate business international student, one female undergraduate mature medical student, and one female undergraduate social science student. All had narrowly failed their assignment, with marks between 33 and 38 and a pass mark of 40. In all cases, the resubmission would be capped at 40 but the student should be told what mark it would have achieved if not capped.

Session one: superficial improvements

All three students seemed highly stressed by the thought of failing. They were glad of any support and keenly accepted the changed format for tutorials, which would give them much more contact time with their writing support tutor. My first observation was that simply offering this extra time made a difference to the learning climate, particularly with the mature student who visibly relaxed when I assured her that we did not have a strict time limit. Taking time for a cup of tea already seemed to make a significant improvement to her approach to the reassessment. The lack of time constraint seemed to have a negative effect, however, on how the international business student viewed me as a tutor, seeming to take this as a cue that I would be doing most of the work for him and would extensively rewrite and correct his work. This may well have been a sign of the stress he felt under - he had previously offered to pay hundreds of pounds for this service, and I had to work hard to persuade him that this would not be beneficial.

With this unexpected development of a cash offer, I felt it was ethically important that the change in how I offered support should be completely beyond reproach. The first session was therefore careful to make no changes to ideas or add any content. An example of significant correction is given below (minor changes have been made to all examples of students' writing to protect anonymity):

Tesco is the biggest private sector company in Great Britain, and it was established in 1924 by Jack Cohen, ~~and~~ Tesco recently has be ~~the~~ come one of the most successful ~~of the~~ food retailers s in the UK, ~~since~~ Since its ~~established~~ establishment it was known as ~~innovation~~ an innovator in its industry; ~~and this company it~~ opened the first super stores in England (about (90000 sqft) ~~also it opened~~ and the first self service grocery in the US. ~~and~~ Tesco also made the decision to ~~make~~ ensure its future ~~company~~ by modifying its technique by starting to act in the market ~~as quality~~, and in the 1980s Tesco efficiently ~~increases~~ increased its range of ~~the products~~ and customer basis bases. improved equipment and presentation ~~means~~ of its store ~~as and well as its~~ customer service (Ajami, 2012).

Figure 1 Editing of a business student's essay

These corrections were made whilst talking to the student, although his input was minimal and he was quite clear that he would rather have the changes made during our session than be given something to think about later. In contrast, the example below is from another student who appreciated being talked through the issues and simply asked for comment bubbles to help her understand and remember the necessary changes later.

<p>Let's first focus on the importance of Assessment for Learning in the teaching practice through the Teachers' Standards expectations. Then, let's analyse the different impact of the two types of assessments on pupils' achievements. Finally, I will explain on which aspect I would like to focus on during my practice in my second placement.</p> <p>Assessment for Learning is a true challenge for teachers. Being able to check pupils' knowledge and understanding <u>all along</u> the lesson is the main tool to be able to complete at least four of the Teachers' Standards expectations. For instance, the standard 6 of the Teacher's Standard is very clear when it stipulates that "A teacher must; make accurate and productive <u>assessment</u>".</p> <p>Indeed, teachers should try to include strategies to assess pupils' achievements all along their lessons. Using a range of assessment techniques will allow the teacher to keep track of the</p>	<p>Comment [MC2]: "let's" is very informal, avoid using it in writing. I think it would be better to just make your point directly.</p> <p>Both types have different impacts on pupils' achievements and different expectations of trainee teachers as expressed in the Teachers' Standards.</p> <p>Comment [MC3]: again, too informal. 'throughout' has a better tone.</p> <p>Comment [MC4]: you will need to give a citation here as you're making a direct quotation</p>
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Figure 2 Editing suggestions on a social science student's essay

These examples already illustrate that the more discursive approach had better potential to feedforward into long-term improvements as the social science student would be able to reflect on the formality of her language and make simple checks that direct quotations had citations. In contrast, the business student was unwilling to engage with the reasoning behind amendments. He might plausibly be able to use the text as a model for sentence and paragraph construction in future, but would have to seek further support to avoid similar problems on his next assignment. At the very least, however, it was hoped that he would now have an example to compare his work against when deciding if he needed more support before submitting the work to his course tutor.

Helping students to interpret feedback from their tutor was also varied as students had different levels of feedback. One had copiously detailed notes whilst another only had a few general comments. In one

case, a medical student, the tutor was clearly irritated and commented that the student's work was 'annoying' and that she 'couldn't be bothered finishing reading it', offering very little advice for improvement. Whilst this may seem alarming practice, similar comments on PhD theses were reported in Holbrook et al. (2004). The student also did not seem upset by these comments and was keen to please her tutor with the resubmission, happily deleting vast sections of irrelevant text. Unsubstantiated comments were also culled as this was simpler than trying to find support for them, and the whole assignment was shortened to make sure it was below the word limit where it has previously been well over the 10% grace allowance (and so less 'annoying' to read).

The three first sessions for these students lasted around 90 minutes on average. The international student decided that he was happy to barely pass and that he would submit this draft, and therefore he would not require any further support (I should have just taken the money). The undergraduate social science student felt confident to make the necessary improvements but would come back afterwards for more support, whilst the undergraduate medical student felt that she should completely rewrite the assignment with a new focus and come for support once she had completed a draft.

Session two: redrafting

The social science student made several additional changes to those highlighted in comments bubbles, including some extra reading recommended in her tutor's feedback and some extra reading she had found herself. Some grammatical and typing errors which I missed had also been corrected, and the whole assignment read more concisely. We had previously discussed that finding reading to support assertions was a short-term fix which missed the point that her assertions should develop from broad, unbiased reading. Her understanding of this seemed evident in some changes which took a more balanced (if linguistically formulaic) approach to the reading, whilst the effect of time pressure could be seen in some assertions which were simply cut and the argument simplified. Simple checks I had recommended were also in evidence, such as checking for a common thread between the first and last sentences of each paragraph. Her independent changes therefore reflected a broader understanding of essay writing conventions, including making a clearer argument, and her subject knowledge showed some small but still significant improvement from the extra reading and clearer expression of previous reading. I estimated that this new draft was a significant improvement, possibly in the first-class band.

The medical student decided that she had originally chosen a poor incident to write about for her reflective assignment, and so we talked through several key events in her course to find something more substantial. I also advised her that her previous reflection seemed too critical of her peers and did not really get to the key issue of what she had learnt from the experience. I prompted her to repeatedly ask herself what was the real explanation behind her observations. Her first draft of this new reflection read as far more meaningful, and she was able to talk more around the topic and make more notes while we talked. She was still concerned about writing style and frequently asked for my help to cut her word count, and she was almost entirely dependent on me for citations and referencing as she was adamant that she could not understand how to do it. As a compromise, I did one of each type and then supervised her amending other references. Trickier tasks, such as searching online to find the publication city for an old Open University Press text, were done by me with a running narrative. I believed that this draft was a significant improvement but still had some key weaknesses and so would score high in the 2.2 or low in the 2.1 band.

Support for the medical student was more time consuming at nearly 3 hours over another two sessions compared with just one hour in one additional session for the social science student, but there are some signs that this is already being recouped as early drafts I have seen for future assignments already seem much stronger in general and future tutorials should be much shorter.

Results

I had reflected that the medical student had made significant learning gains and resolved some key misconceptions, resulting in a 2.2/2.1 borderline mark, that the social science student had made substantial improvements and may gain a 2.1 or even first, and that the business student had learnt very little, possibly nothing, and would barely pass. However, this matched poorly with their tutor's grades on the reassessment. Whilst the social sciences student did get a first, the business student was given a 2.1 and the medical student was given an ordinary pass/third.

These grades may well have been given more for motivation than as a realistic grade, as each student was capped at 40 due to the resubmission policy. Nevertheless, the grades for the business student and the social science student seemed unfair to me as one had made far more fundamental changes than the other and would be much less likely to fail subsequent assignments. The medical student used feedback both to both feed forwards into the specific improvements she needed to make, and also fed back into improving her general approach to assignments. She explained later that her tutor 'flicked through' the assignment during a tutorial and then said 'Better, that's a pass'. In contrast, the tutor for the business student explained to me that language issues had prevented him from understanding the student's points, and that fixing these issues was enough to get the content across. The social science student's tutor actually contacted me to say how pleased he was.

Reflections and conclusions

Writing support tutors can often feel frustrated that their knowledge rarely feeds back to improvements in assessment and teaching on students' main programmes (Devet 2011), so it was important not just to evaluate how well students engaged with my support but also to see how this change in my practice would be reflected in feedback from course tutors. My first reflections were that tutors had been too easily fooled by superficial improvements, and that their feedback and grades would encourage surface approaches to learning in the future. I was particularly disappointed that the medical student put significant effort into improving her work and received very little praise for doing so.

More charitably, however, it should be remembered that the marks were capped. It may well be the case therefore that marks were used for encouragement more than being a legitimate attempt to re-grade the assessment. Meer and Chapman (2014), for example, have written of the importance of building confidence through low-stakes assessment. Since there is no difference in a student's actual grade based on the resubmission mark, giving the impression of significant improvement might simply be an effort at repairing self-esteem to balance the experience of the original assignment failure. Similarly, the medical student needed to learn the basic point of remembering her audience and focusing on the question, so more detailed feedback or praise would distract from reinforcing that point. The tutor therefore wants to celebrate this specific success and promptly get the student back on track - the 'quick flick through' was perhaps a tacit 'job done, move on'.

Reflecting on the changed format for resubmission support, it seems that proofreading might help both tutors and students to get past some of the routine aspects of academic writing and engage in deeper dialogue. This type of support might also be usefully provided by support staff, helping to maximise the time students get with their course tutor by removing distractions from their writing. Students might also be usefully told that taking greater care over these issues themselves will save them a great deal of wasted effort in the future, and they will benefit from their tutor spending more time on more meaningful

feedback. I was also reminded of the advice that attempting to control students' strategic approaches is often counter-productive:

Let us abandon the goal of manipulating students into doing what the faculty desires and settle for something more modest. We can take as a reasonable proximate goal that we at least do nothing (or as little as possible) to interfere with whatever tendency students might have to engage in academic activities...instead of trying to get students to do what we want, we look only for ways of not encouraging them to do what we do not want. We ask how a college might be organized so as not to provoke or coerce students into forms of activity that interfere with what we might want to achieve.

(Becker, Geer, & Hughes 1968: 138)

From this perspective, it is vital that reassessment practices are careful not to support the idea that superficial improvements are all this is required to get a student over the finishing line, as the student is effectively told that reassessment is not a learning opportunity. This also has important implications for how writing support is evaluated. For example, Nzekwe-Excel (2014) demonstrates a significant achievement gain for students who attend writing workshops, but the value of such gains is questionable if they are an unreliable measure of student learning.

With the rise in commercial proofreading services in HE (Turner 2010), and its ambiguous role in supporting learning (Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay 2011), it is important that tutors are aware of the message they convey by the reassessment practices described in this study. If students believe that their work is basically sound but simply needs some polishing, the fees for proofreading services appear insignificant compared with the risks and costs of retaking modules. When a writing support service explicitly refuses to offer this support, students will be further driven towards these commercial services. I believe that this research has highlighted a timely need for feedback to differentiate between the learning aspects and the professional aspects of assignments. Changing my practice to separate these types of feedback brought this effect into sharp focus, highlighting disproportionate rewards for a professionally presented essay free of simple errors. Students need to understand the importance of presenting themselves effectively in assignments, but also need a clearer message that this is not a proxy for learning. This message needs to come from their course tutors as well as writing centres, with clear demonstrable benefits for students who take the time to engage more meaningfully with draft revisions. If we are to avoid overly strategic approaches to reassessment, feedback and assessment practices need to engage with the fact that students who fail assignments need significant support and feel under immense pressure, so simply rewarding effort sends the wrong message - particularly when that effort can so easily be bought.

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