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**Promoting student engagement with academic  
literacy feedback: an institute wide initiative.**

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**Abstract**

The transition to Higher Education, while often exciting, is demanding for many students. Successful transition necessitates learning the conventions of scholarly conversation, including how to read and create work in an academic context. Knowledge of academic literacy practices is an important part of this process but these discourses and practices are often unfamiliar to students and this has implications for the development of academic identities. In this article, we report on an institution-wide initiative between librarians, lecturers and learning developers, designed to raise awareness of the role of feedback in developing academic literacies. While the rate of participation was low this initiative offered a space outside the formal curriculum and assessment processes to engage with students about feedback. The associated publicity raised the profile of feedback internally and offered valuable opportunities to open conversations about feedback with students and staff. The evolution of the initiative is discussed.

**Keywords**

Academic writing; feedback; first-year; information literacy; transition.

**Background**

Mastering information literacy and academic writing is essential for students who want to demonstrate knowledge, communicate and develop their own active voice. Looking at the process through the lens of 'scholarly conversation' illuminates some of the many skills and dispositions needed to find this place as a student. The Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) identify the concept of Scholarship as Conversation as an essential threshold concept. The process of Scholarly Conversation includes skills and abilities such as citing the work of others; contributing appropriately; the ability to critically evaluate the work of others; seeing themselves as contributors to scholarship and not just as consumers of it; and understanding the responsibility involved when entering scholarly conversations (ACRL, 2016).

The approach brings together information literacy and academic writing skills, both of which are central to learner success. In this context, learning how libraries work, how to find, evaluate and create information ethically becomes paramount. Moreover, the recent concern around 'fake news' has highlighted the importance of information literacy as a life skill as well as an academic one. Indeed, the transformative power of information literacy is increasingly recognised (Wilkes, Godwin and Gurney, 2015), as well as the need to explore how to support its development.

Academic writing is probably the key means by which most students begin to make sense of information and engage in scholarly conversation. It is also the basis for a significant proportion of formal

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assessment for students in Ireland and the United Kingdom. In the case of both information literacy and academic writing there has been a shift from a cognitive focus on skills to an understanding of academic literacies as social practices closely linked to identities (e.g. Gourlay and Deane, 2012).

However academic literacy practices have long been recognised as challenging for many students. As McNaught and Hoyne (2012) explain, learning to write academically is complex and demands competence in two distinct areas. The first they term 'mechanical' and includes aspects such as using and citing sources appropriately, paraphrasing and editing work. The second is more complex. Not only does it include higher order cognitive skills, such as the evaluation, synthesis and transformation of information but it requires the transmission of same via the writer's own 'voice'. Evidence suggests that instruction that focuses on the mechanical or technical skills and under-emphasises process and purpose may be counter-productive (Delahunt et al., 2012; McGowan, 2005). In particular, it can lead to an over-emphasis on avoiding plagiarism that generates anxiety and undermines students' efforts to begin to engage in scholarship (Delahunt et al., *ibid*).

A further challenge, particularly in terms of finding a voice, is the tacit nature of knowledge about academic writing (Elton, 2010; Gourlay, 2009). Despite the central role of academic writing in most disciplines, it has been described as 'invisible' (Coffin et al., 2003), with expectations often implicit. Feedback can help to make these expectations more explicit and understandable. The role of feedback in supporting learning is widely acknowledged (e.g. Black and William, 1998; Carless, 2015; Orsmond et al., 2013), and increasingly is recognised as an important driver in the development of academic literacies. It offers the potential to make 'space' for academic literacies in the curriculum (Delahunt et al., 2012) and has been identified by students as an important driver for improving their writing (Everitt-Reynolds et al., *in press*). Yet, despite the importance of feedback, evidence shows that students are often dissatisfied with it and there are concerns around student engagement with it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Parker & Winstone, 2016). Ali, Rose and Ahmeda (2015) reported that students' perceptions of feedback declined as their studies progressed and argued that early intervention is needed to promote long-lasting engagement with it. This was an important driver for this project: we wanted to send an explicit message, to all first-years, that feedback is important and that engagement with it, commitment and efforts to improve are valued in this institution.

As our understanding of the relationship between feedback and learning has developed, a reconceptualisation of the potential of feedback has emerged. No longer perceived as a linear process, with the lecturer 'giving' and the student 'receiving', current discourse situates feedback as a dynamic and transactional process that ultimately promotes self-regulated learners (Carless, 2015; Sambell, 2015). This challenges us to move away from the notion of feedback as ultimately linked with assessment. Rather we are tasked with new ways of thinking about feedback, beyond the bounds of formal evaluations. This initiative was developed as a case-study for a [Irish] nationally funded multi-institutional project, Y1 Feedback which aimed to enhance feedback in the first-year, using digital technologies. The project offered an opportunity to focus on feedback in a purely formative way, outside the formal assessment processes. Specifically, the aims of this initiative were to:

- Raise the profile of feedback among first years and encourage engagement with it.
- Demonstrate that feedback and effort are valued within the institute,
- Encourage students to view academic literacy development as an ongoing process,
- Foster cross-institute collaboration to promote academic literacy.

The initiative is distinctive not least because it involved partnership between librarians, the Learning and Teaching Centre and lecturers. Our collaborative efforts occurred in a 'space' outside the formal

curriculum and were motivated by a collective understanding that we had an opportunity to enhance information literacy and academic writing skills through focused feedback. Collaboration between librarians and faculty is identified as a means of providing an enriched learning experience and lifelong learning skills (Bennett and Gilbert 2009). However, despite the increasing emphasis on collaboration, inherent complexities, well documented in the literature, pose a barrier (see for example, Pham & Tanner 2015). What is certainly unusual is the three-way partnership approach (Einfalt & Turley, 2009) that occurred during this initiative.

### **The Information Literacy Prize for use of feedback**

The Library had run a bi-annual *Information Literacy Prize* since 2012. The prize was open to all students and awarded to the most information literate piece as assessed by a panel of librarians, rewarding the best use of information. In 2015/16, as a result of the Y1 Feedback project, the focus fundamentally shifted to engagement with and use of feedback. A further difference was the composition of the judging panel, which now included lecturers, as well as librarians. All first-year students, across the institute, were invited to submit a piece of written coursework, or a piece they wrote specifically for submission, and they would receive feedback on it. They received feedback on information literacy and writing only and not on discipline specific content. This was made clear to students at the outset. Three prizes (i-Pads) were awarded: best use of feedback, best engagement with feedback and most improved piece.

### **Approach to feedback**

There are many ways to promote engagement with feedback (Y1 Feedback, 2016) although some, such as separating grades and feedback, are only meaningful in the context of an assessment process, rather than an initiative like this. We chose to implement a staged approach, using a rubric. As Carless (2015,192) points out '*information only becomes feedback when used productively*'. Given this, it was important to us that the students had an opportunity to apply the feedback. The students were also asked to reflect on the feedback and how they used it (or chose not to). Evidence indicates that reflections on feedback may be particularly beneficial and positively perceived by students (Jackson and Marks, 2015) and such reflection is essential in terms of the learning process (Quinton and Smallbone, 2010).

### **The rubric**

As rubrics can help to make expectations more explicit (Carless, 2015; Y1 Feedback, 2016), a rubric was an obvious choice given the tacit nature of academic literacy expectations. In addition, developing a rubric together allowed the team to develop a shared understanding of expectations and standards. This was important given the different backgrounds and perspectives. It also helped to ensure consistency in the feedback given, a further advantage of rubrics (Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

The rubric was developed to provide feedback on the identification and use of information, including aspects of academic writing such as paragraph use and structure. The criteria were adapted from Rubric Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (RAILS) project (see <http://railsontack.info/rubrics.aspx>). The rubric criteria included attributes like referencing, use of information, writing, quality of engagement with feedback, sources used to support argument, variety of sources, and quality of discussion all had a synergy that all the project participants could relate to. The standards also deliberately emphasised the positives for entrants to shift the focus from judgement to a shared dialogical progression of their work. They were defined as 'on the way', 'achieved' and 'awesome.' Additional written feedback was provided on aspects such as 'flow', the presence of the students' own voice, and so on. It should be acknowledged that it was important to all of us that the feedback move away from a sole focus on

academic or information literacy conventions and instead encourage involvement, engagement and ownership of the process of writing.

### **The process**

All first-year students were invited to submit a piece of written work via the Library section of our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Each piece was read by the panel, feedback agreed using the rubric and then provided electronically with additional comments. Students also had the option of getting additional face-to-face feedback and eight availed of this. In the second phase students applied the feedback to rework the written piece. They were also asked to complete a 'Reflections' form that asked them to explain any changes made (or not) as a consequence of the feedback.

The 2016 IL Prize for First-Year was launched in semester 2 of the academic year 2015/16 and this is the focus of this report. At the time of writing, the third iteration, the 2018 IL Prize for First-Years is complete and we discuss the ways in which this latest iteration is informed by the evaluation of the first. A second iteration ran in 2016/17. However as this focused on third-years, for reasons of space, it is not reported in detail in this paper.

### **Evaluation**

The evaluation focused on both outcome and process. The evaluation of outcome considered the level of participation and the impact on those who completed all the stages. The process evaluation was based on a series of reflective discussions held by the team. We took a formative approach (see Robson, 2017) focusing on understanding and improving the project. The evaluation was approved by the Dundalk Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee.

### **Participation**

There were 15 initial entries to the first phase. While this appears low in the context of approximately 1,400 first year students, it is in line with similar prizes in the institute. However, of the 15 original entries, only 6 submitted reworked pieces. As our student questionnaires are from those who completed both stages, they do not allow us to identify reasons for dropout. However, as students entered writing undertaken as part of their programmes, this work would have been formally assessed and graded at different stages throughout the semester. It is likely also that, for the majority, of these students, by the time they had received their feedback from us, they had already submitted the final piece for assessment or perhaps even had received a grade. It is reasonable to assume that, for many, reworking the original piece might not have been perceived as a good use of time, particularly given other assessment demands towards the end of the semester.

Given this, and a similar experience in the 2017 iteration (for third years), we concluded that the staged approach was not well suited to an institute-wide initiative. While this approach works well within a module, where students have a single deadline and all get feedback in advance of this, it simply wasn't possible to identify appropriate dates for submission and feedback at an institute level. Consequently, the process was revised for the 2018 Prize to emphasise assessment literacy rather than application of feedback and this is considered in more detail when we discuss the evolution of the prize.

### **Student Experience**

Students completed a short questionnaire as part of their final submission. This asked for their perceptions of the feedback, how they used it and their intentions regarding use of feedback in the future. There were additional questions about their experience using the technologies, for the Y1 Feedback Project, but these are not reported here.

The student responses indicated they found the experience motivating and supportive:

The feedback, both positive and negative helped me greatly, if it was all negative I might not have resubmitted, if it was all positive I would not have learned anything. I was enthused by the feedback and this made me determined to resubmit

All those who resubmitted had engaged with the feedback and used it to improve their work. It was clear to the panel how and where the feedback had been used:

what I found most useful were the parts which suggested rethinking the emphasis I gave to certain parts of the assignment.....I significantly shortened the section of the assignment outlining... as it did little to support my main point...

A rewarding and helpful process. I was able to learn from the feedback about how to elaborate on points and to intrigue people, to make them want to continue reading my essay.

All students agreed that, in future, they would use feedback on one assignment to inform work on others.

### **Project Team Reflections**

The team engaged in a series of discussions loosely guided by Gibbs' reflective cycle. From the perspective of the team the experience was largely positive. In particular, all involved valued the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other areas of the institute. It enabled genuine dialogue with students, and each other, about academic literacy.

Developing the rubric in particular, was a very useful process that allowed us to clarify and agree our expectations, creating shared understandings between academics and librarians. We developed a common language that we could use to relate with each others' areas of concern. Interestingly it was also the catalyst that initially focused librarians' attention on how similar their approach to information literacy was to the lecturers' approach to academic writing. Given that we were coming to the task from different perspectives, and with different assumptions, it was very helpful to make explicit all the criteria we were using to judge the work. The issue of developing an academic presence impacts on the experience of librarians in much of their day to day work (see McGuinness, 2011). This initiative required librarians step into the place of reading, assessing and giving feedback on student work. These new practices naturally generated levels of anxiety expressed before the process began. The rubric however demonstrated to Library staff that their approaches, assessment and feedback were similar to those of other academic colleagues and that we all shared much common ground.

The first criterion in the rubric was concerned with referencing and, on reflection, we felt that this over-emphasised the mechanics of writing relative to the process. However, feedback from students indicated that they valued feedback on referencing as it was a key area of concern and this kind of feedback was the most used. Given this, it was important to keep the referencing criteria, but for the 2018 Prize, the rubric was restructured to flow from higher level criteria, such as structure and flow, finishing with the more technical referencing criteria.

The initiative itself was much more time-consuming than anticipated. As it was the first time we had worked together all of us read all the work and met to agree feedback. Students were also offered additional face-to-face feedback and eight entrants availed of this. While this was very valuable for both

parties it did add to the workload and would be difficult to sustain with larger numbers. The additional face-to-face feedback was valuable for both parties but again added to the workload. Given this experience, efforts were made to manage the workload for the 2018 iteration at the outset. This was timely as this year the number of submissions increased to 30. Notably, the number of both librarians and lecturers has increased. This enabled us to divide the panel into pairs that reviewed and provided feedback for 2-4 pieces of work. This was effective in reducing the time commitment while maintaining the dialogue between librarians and lecturers.

### **The institute**

Senior management support was important in ensuring visibility and demonstrating that engagement with feedback is valued; the prize was launched by the Registrar and prizes were awarded by the President. The promotion of the prize offered a valuable opportunity to start a conversation about feedback with first-years and the support of the Students' Union was important in this. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the prize helped to raise awareness of feedback, certainly among some groups of first-years, however we have had no way of measuring this. While the promotion included visiting class groups to talk them about the prize, this was only feasible for a fraction of first-year groups. Other channels included the Students' Union social media and emails to first-year students, however emails are not a very effective way of communicating with our students. Given this, it is likely that, while the initiative did raise awareness of feedback among students and staff, this was uneven and difficult to measure.

In order to address this, the 2017/18 prize was launched at first-year induction and used as an opportunity to talk to students about feedback. All incoming first-years attend a number of centrally organised sessions and the session on learning development focused on feedback. As part of their induction pack, each student received a copy of the 'How to use feedback' guide for students from the Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit (DEFT <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft>). In these sessions, the prize was used as a lever to prompt discussion of feedback and draw attention to the guide. Certainly this seems to have had an impact on participation – there were 30 initial entries this time compared to 15.

### **The evolution of the prize**

As discussed earlier, the prize is now launched as part of induction, the team has been expanded and the rubric revised. Perhaps the most significant change has been to the nature of the task. As explained, the staged approach was not a good fit for an institute-wide initiative and the 2018 Prize focuses on assessment literacy rather applying the feedback. Students now were asked to submit a short self-assessment together with the piece of work. The self-assessment also asked students to identify where in particular they would like feedback. The feedback we gave was informed by this self-assessment. The final stage required students to engage in a structured reflection on the feedback they received and to develop an action plan based on this for future academic assignments. This is more authentic in the context of information literacy and academic writing as this feedback is often applicable to other tasks. As Hounsell (2007) argues, this applicability makes feedback particularly valuable.

In terms of the future, we hope to expand the partnership to include students in more meaningful ways. As a first step, previous prize winners were invited to join the final judging panel for the 2018 Prize. The prize is now an established feature of institute life and we hope that it will continue to develop and grow.

## **Conclusion**

The space or place where this initiative occurred is outside the parameters of the formal curriculum. Like-minded individuals (librarians, academics and academic developers) who believed in the potential of feedback to improve and even transform learning came together in a partnership approach to collaboratively address the promotion of key skills and attitudes in our undergraduates. This partnership approach worked very well with none of the usual barriers or problems, identified in the literature, emerging. For us, perhaps because of a shared vision of enhancing student-centred learning, the space we created outside the formal curriculum, and mutual understandings and respect of each other's roles and strengths we supported and learnt from each other whilst providing meaningful feedback.

To continue learning and growing as professionals we debrief after each iteration of the prize to see what works well (or does not work) and why. Across the varied parties there was agreement that working in this manner deepened confidence in our own skills, abilities and capacities to work and learn from each other. For librarians, the process created a crack in which it was possible to see information literacy in a different light, namely as a scholarly developmental tool rather than a mechanistic one to avoid plagiarism. There is a sense that the process not only developed librarians' skills in feedback and assessment but also deepened their confidence in their own skills and capacities and their value. For academics, the process resulted in a re-examination of the feedback usually provided and the reaffirming that it needs to be both specific, appropriate and relevant for first year students.

One of the aspects of the project that we have been asked about is whether the low number of final entrants means the project has failed. For those of us involved, the number of entrants was never seen as evidence of success. Given the exploratory and pilot nature of the initiative we would have been challenged to respond effectively if the response rate had been high. This perhaps illustrates that the initiative was developed as a 'hot spot' or crack. It never intended to create an avalanche. We wanted to explore, learn and hopefully cultivate good practice in the use of feedback. Knowing the culture of our organisation we felt that creating this 'hot spot' could promote a deeper discussion among both students and staff about our practices in relation to learning and assessment. Nonetheless in terms of whether the stated aims of this initiative were met in relation to raising awareness among first years about the importance of feedback the answer is yes. The significance of engaging with feedback has been embedded in the first-year induction programme and all students received email notification and a 'blurb' about the 2017/2018 initiative. The increased submissions for this iteration suggests that there has been more focus and visibility on the potential of feedback, but a lot more work remains to be done in this area. Feedback efforts are valued within the institute and this is evident from the support of senior and middle management.

While the workload involved in the initial iteration was greater than expected, experiences has enabled us to reduce this significantly. Nevertheless, there is considerable work involved in an initiative like this and it would be very difficult to manage if the number of entrants were much higher. For us, the process has always been as important as the outcome. In these terms the benefits are considerable, particularly the opportunity to start a conversation about feedback at an institutional level and create a space for meaningful collaboration.

In conclusion, this initiative offered a space outside the formal curriculum and assessment processes to engage with students about feedback. It raised awareness of feedback at the level of the institute and was largely successful in achieving its aims, so much so that it is now an established feature of institute



life. The strong partnership between librarians, lectures and academic developers is central to its success.

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