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Title of article: 'Could do Better?': students' critique of written feedback

Keywords: summative written feedback; humanities; essays

Abstract: This feature starts with the observation that current research into university assessment feedback has a tendency to conclude that students want 'more feedback' but in general, don't know what to do with it. Likewise, related research notes the mismatch of expectations between tutors' and students' perceptions of the purposes of feedback.

Drawing on findings from a project at the University of the West of England, this article discusses students' expectations and experiences of feedback: what do students expect feedback is going to be like? How do they prepare for it, and does it match those expectations? And what do they do with it, once tutors have handed it back?

In considering these findings, the feature will argue that 'more feedback' is both problematic and too simplistic as a solution. Instead, we need to reconsider conventional systems of assessment in Arts and Humanities. Tutors need to become facilitators of the learning process rather than gatekeepers of knowledge, and students need more encouragement to reflect on their own learning journeys.

Main text:

This article reports on research into Humanities students' attitudes to feedback, specifically, summative, written feedback from tutors on students' essays. Currently, in our faculty essays are routinely handed back within a three week marking period, in a seminar, with a covering feedback sheet on which the student receives a grade and two short paragraphs stating what the student has done well, and how the student could improve.

In our faculty, we were aware that whilst students routinely said they wanted 'more feedback', in practice, a significant number of students did not pick up their essays at all. Through questionnaires and interviews, we investigated what students expected from feedback, what uses if any they made of it, and what 'feedback' meant to them, in order to establish what were the key factors in the processes of feedback exchange which needed addressing by the institution. In presenting our key findings here we echo Blair's observation in the first issue of *Networks* that students' interpretations and understanding of feedback (whether formative or summative) are not always shared by their tutor, and consider what might be learned in comparing her findings of students' experiences of verbal, formative feedback with our own research on written, summative feedback.

Our discursive analysis of interview transcripts suggests three dominant themes of talk concerning students' perceptions of how this feedback exchange itself could be improved. These are: the content of written feedback, the feedback exchange when essays are handed back, and one-to-one tutorials.

The content of written feedback:

Students' critical comments concerning the feedback content are exemplified below:

Sometimes you get a vague handwritten comment like 'expand on this' – well what does that mean, if I knew I would have done! Identifying the problems isn't the same as helping you solve them.

Sometimes the comments don't connect with the marks – you can get really good mark but lots of negative comments; sometimes they can be too negative which is depressing.

We type essays so we should get typed feedback – a few scribbles and a paragraph at the end isn't good enough, you can't always understand what they say.

Feedback works best when it makes a clear statement of intent, is focused, and constructive. It doesn't work when it is vague, negative and obtuse. So far, so obvious. Yet this chimes with wider discourses concerning the 'mismatch' of tutors' and students' perceptions of learning. For example, Clerehan (2002, p.80) describes the problem of tutors' 'vague exhortations' when it comes to assessment advice, and Blair's own warning about tutors' somewhat complacent assumptions that students shared their perceptions. This mismatch can be explained when one looks at the wider issue of the shifting culture of higher mass education - whilst traditionally tutors see the learning process as one of debate and challenge, students, it is argued, increasingly demand support in order to get results. Thus whilst tutors employ the dominant discursive mode of 'critique' when it comes to giving feedback, students crucially lack awareness of that discursive mode and its key role in 'giving feedback' – a situation which can be characterised in one of our students' plaintive cry, '*give us a straight answer – what do you want?!*' We will return to this question, later.

The feedback exchange...

Secondly, another significant aspect highlighted by those students we interviewed was the way in which feedback is given out:

One girl had her essay back, and it was a crap mark, right in the seminar just before she did a presentation, that was awful, they don't have to just shove it back at the start of the seminar unless there's time to talk about it with the tutor.

If we DO want students to learn to engage more effectively with feedback, we need to consider how handing work back without offering the opportunity to discuss it, or acknowledging the potential tension of the assignment hand back, can give a powerful message that, as one student put it:

It's too late now to do anything about it, so why bother!

The very ways in which work is handed back can reinforce students' negative thinking that each piece of work is 'done now' and no longer relevant to learning. The 'why bother' attitude is the instrumental/superficial approach to learning that we as tutors tend to deplore. Indeed, much has been written about the so-called commodification of learning and the conceptualisation of the student as consumer, leading to superficial learning 'to get results' (see for example, Grisoni and Wilkinson, 2005; Furedi 2003). However, our findings suggest it is more complicated than that: perhaps we do need to appreciate that the very systems of assessment feedback, such as the vague remarks on feedback sheets, the rushed hand-back at the end of a seminar, and the limited time and opportunities for retrospective discussion, may actually encourage that very instrumentalist 'superficial learning' approach.

In Issue One of *Networks*, Blair highlighted the emotional aspects of studio crit and how anxiety and fearfulness can adversely affect the feedback process. Likewise, although reading written feedback involves no public performance, it can nevertheless engender an emotional reaction, perhaps when students are given their marks in a group and inevitably compare them, or as in the case above, students are required to 'perform' straight after the hand back, without the opportunity to absorb the information. One should not assume that 'feedback' is simply an exchange of information and academic advice, but that the process of the exchange – whether individual, written or studio crit – is an intense, emotional experience for students, if not to say, staff as well.

One-to-one tutorials

Overwhelmingly, students' main critique of assessment feedback was the need for more one-to-one tutorials. Typical comments were:

Feedback sheet comments are easy to forget

One-to-one discussions are really valuable...they motivate and engage you emotionally

A few words of encouragement face-to-face can make all the difference between dropping out and staying

It seems that students are telling us here that they want the opportunity to have the comments explained to them, and perhaps the chance to discuss or debate the mark – as one student put it, *‘the chance to air my grievances!’*.

These replies are significant in two ways. Firstly, as typified above the emotive language students used to explain why they wanted one-to-one tutorials as ‘valuable...emotionally engaging...making all the difference’ strongly suggests that students are not simply talking about a straight forward exchange of information and advice on academic work, rather their talk seems indicative of a powerful discourse of belonging and connection. If a ‘few words of encouragement’ can make ‘all the difference’ when it comes to student retention, this perceived need for one-to-one tutorials could be part of a wider need for more of a sense of belonging.

Secondly, anecdotal evidence from talking to colleagues in our and other faculties suggests that when students *are* offered one-to-one tutorials in the form of pre-assessment tutorials and office hours, students in the main tend not to take up these offers, despite being clearly dissatisfied with the way in which work is currently handed back without much discussion, in seminars. Thus there is a tension here between the talk, and the practice. Some of this can be explained by the findings of our other study on students’ transition to uni (Brooks and Kelly, 2006) in which students stated that they often felt too intimidated to go and see the tutor in their office:

Even if you do try and see them, they look rushed off their feet...It’s not very inviting

Clearly students can find the shift from supported learning at 6th form to independent learning at uni an alienating and bewildering challenge, whilst tutors can find their demands overwhelming. Again, current literature suggests this is indicative of a wider cultural clash. However offering *more* one-to-one tutorials is an impractical solution. Tutorials can be labour intensive for the tutor – as we all know, the ‘ten minute slot’ allotted to each student so that so many students can be seen per hour, inevitably overruns. Secondly, students may not need the tutorial, as much as they need support in knowing when and why to contact the tutor.

Thus, we need to get a balance between the times when personal discussions are necessary (e.g. personal issues, plagiarism, failing) and the issues which could be more usefully discussed in group tutorials. In other words, we need to encourage students to develop ownership of their learning.

Feedback sessions:

One way we could be said to be moving towards this ideal of students possibly working together to foster self reflective learning, is in the processes of seminar feedback:

It’s good when they hand back essays in a seminar and then say some general things because then you are getting feedback but it’s more anonymous, like if they say ‘don’t use Wikipedia’ and you know you did, but it’s not like they are just telling you directly which could be a bit embarrassing.

I like the general talk after work’s been handed back because I like to know about the process of doing work.

If we were told the range of marks you’d know where you stood in relation to everyone else so general feedback is very helpful.

However it must be noted that there were critics of the tutor giving ‘group feedback’:

When tutors say well most of you did this that isn’t any help to me.

I sit there thinking, this doesn't apply to me when tutors give general feedback, because you haven't had a chance to look at your essay properly.

Why these responses are highlighted here is that interestingly, the Art, Media and Design students we interviewed were much more positive about group feedback, although their experiences of it were different to Culture and Media Studies students, as their 'group feedback' involved peer feedback as well as that from the tutor. This was seen as very useful:

You get constructive criticism from similar minds.

Whilst this type of feedback lends itself more readily to visual art work assessments, the idea of peer reviews could translate to essays and exams, enabling students to share ideas and mutual support, and to learn from each other.

Perhaps other faculties can look to the Art, Media and Design model of constructive, shared advice as an example of possible good practice in enhancing students' feeling of belonging, of enabling them to share experiences and allow them mutually supportive space to reflect on their learning. This appears to support Ballinger's argument that seminars generate confidence and a feeling of belonging, which in turn fosters co-operation between students, generating 'a sense of we're in it together' (Ballinger 2002, p.105). In addition, we could reconsider the role of the tutor in these sessions. Currently, there is a tendency to provide an overall summary of 'how you've all done' in seminars. We would argue that this is not always useful in encouraging self reflective learning, emphasising as it does that the tutor plays a somewhat limiting role of 'gatekeeper' in the conventional post-assignment session in which the tutor reveals his/her opinion of the cohort's general performance. Looking to Blair's study, we can see that the tutor's role was similarly limited in the studio crit situation where students' anxiety potentially blocked 'any learning experience'. Is there something to be gained here from supplementing, or even reconsidering, such sessions as primarily sessions of constructive peer support? In such sessions the emphasis could more usefully be on developing independent learning skills, and learning when and what questions are appropriate to ask, thus generating a sense of responsibility in/ownership of one's learning? Ideally these sessions would be mutually supportive learning experiences, in which both information and experiences could be communicated and shared.

Implications and concluding thoughts...

In general, these findings seem to be drawing towards a conclusion that meetings, assessment discussions, study skills and learning support are best offered as an integral part of the module as a whole, and that Humanities could look to Art and Design methods of peer reviewing. Also, it must be noted here that whilst written assignments do not involve the same kind of public performance as studio crits, the feedback exchange is nevertheless a potentially emotional experience. Likewise, rushing marked assignments back in an (unrelated) seminar does not encourage the student to take the time to reflect on and discuss the marks and comments. Instead, it could exacerbate the student tendency to see work as a series of unrelated pieces of work and not an on-going learning process

However, one should be cautious of adding more 'ideals' to the current literature on feedback. One-to-one tutorials for example are an ideal, but an impractical one: surely we would all enjoy being able to engage with the students as they reflect on their learning. What needs to happen is that students are supported and feel confident in their own learning, so that they don't hang around the corridors waiting to see already overloaded tutors with a vague sense that somehow, the tutor holds the 'right answer'.

We also need to consider here how the current system may implicitly encourage the very kinds of student behaviours and assumptions that we are critiquing.

This means that tutors may need to address the purposes of the feedback forms, and how to make the process more consistent and transparent, discussing with each other the 'discursive modes' and assumptions of the feedback exchange. So, to go back to the plaintive cry of the confused student, what *do* we want? What are we as tutors doing when we write comments on feedback sheets? Is it clear to the student why this is relevant to their next piece of work?

Are we giving general advice on how to improve, to support their general progress? Or are we justifying the mark?

In current literature there seems to be a tendency to assume the 'mismatch' of expectations and discursive modes is between the tutors and the students, and as soon as 'they', the students, come to understand what 'we', the tutors, want from them, the feedback exchange will be effective and meaningful. But clearly the different modes of feedback and the issues raised by both Blair and ourselves suggest that it is not only students who would benefit from constructive reflection and supportive peer reviews...

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Biography:

Kate Brooks is a lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Having published widely on her media and cultural studies research, she is currently involved in pedagogical research at UWE, focusing on students' transition to university and on students' expectations and uses of assessment feedback. Whilst this research has tended to look at assessment of written work, this paper argues that there are ways assessors of both Art and Humanities students can learn from each other.

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