Use of self-referential (ipsative) feedback to motivate and guide distance learners

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Abstract

Distance learners often rely on written feedback for learning and for motivation. But feedback that is 'given' to learners and that relies on praise to motivate does not engage learners in the process of self-development. We propose that an ipsative approach to assessment and feedback based on a comparison with a learner's previous performance motivates distance learners by developing a self-awareness of progress that encourages learners to interact with feedback and apply this to future work. A study of a distance learning Masters programme in Educational Leadership indicated that formal self-referential (ipsative) feedback was largely absent. An ipsative feedback scheme was therefore developed in consultation with the tutors in which students completed a reflection on their progress in implementing past feedback. Tutors provided both an ipsative and a developmental response. Student and tutor evaluations of the scheme indicated that feedback on progress has the potential to motivate distance learners and to encourage them to act on developmental feedback, but can also raise grade expectations. Sustainable methods of applying ipsative feedback to a wide range of distance learning programmes are worth further exploration.

Introduction

It is widely agreed that assessment for all learners should be formative - that is to inform learning - as well as summative – that is graded. Distance learners are especially dependent on usually written feedback from tutors for both motivation and learning and the links between motivation, retention and tutor support are well documented (Hyland, 2001; Kember, 2009; Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999; Simpson, 2003). But, higher education is dominated by summative assessment which prompts assessors to use feedback to explain assessment criteria and grading decisions rather than to encourage future action (Gibbs, 2006). In such a grade-orientated climate, motivating and engaging distance learners with useable feedback can be a

challenge (Walker, 2009). Assessment can be de-motivating (Falchikov & Boud, 2007) and the role of feedback in helping and motivating lower achieving students is particularly problematic in assessment systems which are highly competitive (Broadfoot,1996). Supportive tutors may use praise to counterbalance negative feedback and lower grades, but praise is not necessarily helpful to learners, and any motivational effects may be short-lived (Malloy *et al.*, 2013).

There is another approach to assessment and feedback which has yet to be fully explored: ipsative assessment. Hughes (2011) defines ipsative assessment as follows:

> Ipsative assessment compares existing performance with previous performance. Many informal and practical learning experiences are assessed in this way such as sports coaching, music teaching and in computer games. A personal best in athletics is an ipsative assessment. By contrast, in much academic learning, where assessment is made in relation to external attainment criteria or rubrics, credit is rarely given for how far the learner has advanced since the previous piece of work (p. 353).

In an ipsative academic assessment the reference point for judgements about student work is the student's previous work rather than externally set standards and criteria. This means the focus is on learner progress, or lack of progress, rather than meeting external standards, although the notion of progress will be inevitably be framed to some extent by the external context of the course of study.

Hughes (2011) has proposed that ipsative assessment may offer a solution to learner motivation because this focuses on their development over time rather than meeting competitive short-term outcomes. Success does not then need to be the preserve of the highest achievers, and provided that their course of study is appropriate, all learners at all levels can demonstrate progress.

We begin this paper with a critical review of formative assessment in distance learning and present the proposal that an ipsative approach might address some of the deficiencies. We then discuss a two year project to introduce formal ipsative feedback to a distance learning Masters programme delivered wholly online at a research intensive university. The first aim of the study was to review the written feedback provided for learners for evidence of ipsative feedback. Because this was absent, a second aim was to develop a process for ipsative feedback building on Hughes (2011) to develop a reflective feedback response form to involve learners in self assessment of their progress in relation to past feedback. Finally, the study explored student and staff views on ipsative feedback, its motivational effects and the feasibility of continuing and scaling up this approach. The results indicated that feedback on progress has the potential to motivate distance learners and to encourage them to act on developmental feedback, although there was a risk of raising student expectations that needed to be managed. The paper concludes that ipsative feedback is worth further application and investigation.

Formative assessment for distance learning

Formative assessment provides a bedrock for all learners. Formative assessments take place not only informally in classroom or online teaching when students' actions are evaluated by teachers or peers (Wiliam, 2011), but also intentionally when students receive formal feedback on, for example, a performance in a practice test (Sancho-Vinuesaa *et al,* 2013), or when they submit draft work for feedback. Formative feedback can also accompany a graded summative assessment (Price *et al.* 2011). For distance learners, the formal feedback mechanisms are particularly important because opportunities for informal feedback may be limited (Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999). But, although students value feedback, feel that they deserve it and sometimes claim to pay it close attention (Higgins *et al.,* 2002), there is also evidence of dissatisfaction (Crisp, 2007; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Rust & O'Donovan, 2008). Students may not understand feedback that is 'given' to them in a teacher-centric format using criteria and standards that are

opaque (Price *et al.,* 2010). Students do not always feel that they can approach their assessors to ask for clarification and advice depending on their relationships with their teachers and their own confidence (Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

To address dissatisfaction over feedback, guidelines and principles for effective practice have been proposed that can be subsumed into two key requirements for feedback. Firstly, formative feedback must reduce the discrepancy between performance and desired goals by informing learners where they are now and where they need to go next (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 2005). This is the requirement for developmental and motivational feedback. Secondly, students need to be active rather than passive recipients of feedback through engaging in feedback dialogues (Askew & Lodge, 2000; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, Gibbs, 2006). Furthermore, if students are to become self-regulating and less reliant on tutor guidance, then such dialogue must include students acting as assessors through supported peer or self-review (Molloy & Boud, 2013; Nicol, 2010). This is the requirement that students must be fully engaged in feedback processes. However, in practice neither of these requirements is easy to implement in externally-referenced often competitive assessment regimes where students are highly aware of their ranking and compare themselves to others even if the system uses criterion-led grades, where anyone could obtain the highest grade, rather than norm-referencing where the competition is inbuilt (Hughes, 2014).

Developmental and motivational feedback

Research suggests that the developmental and motivational aspects of feedback are lacking or problematic. Feedback is often retrospective and strongly linked to justification of a grade and thus is not future – altering (Carless 2006; Chetwyn & Dobbyn, 2011). In the UK Open University (OU) where learner satisfaction is high (Gibbs, 2010), provision of regular formative feedback might be more developed than this, but there is no room for complacency. Walker's

(2009) study from the OU suggests that much feedback is not useable, not only because learners do not understand it, but also because it is not clearly developmental. Developmental commentary – or feedforward - is only useful if accompanied by some explanation or detail, which is often lacking. Feedback about generic skills – such as for academic writing or other disciplinary skills - is most useable: it can be used for future assignments.

Feedback also needs to include critique, but the impact of assessment on a learner's sense of self-worth has a significant and often under-recognised influence on motivation. Comments and grades give individuals powerful messages about themselves as learners (Ivanic. et al., 2000; Stobart, 2008), and for many learners assessment produces negative emotions (Falchikov & Boud, 2007). Simpson (2008) challenges the widespread remediation approach to learner support where learners are given corrective feedback, because it emphasises learner weaknesses. Motivating learners requires a focus on strengths and building on these to improve learning skills. However, the idea of playing to strengths rather than weaknesses is not without its critics. For example, many tutors respond to a concern that learners will be overwhelmed by excessive critique with attempts to 'sweeten' negative or challenging feedback and results with positive comments. They use devices such as the 'feedback sandwich' in which critical feedback is 'sandwiched' between two sets of praise or positive feedback in an attempt to make the 'filling' easier to swallow. While it might be useful to begin feedback with some recognition of the learner's achievement and detailed praise can be used to indicate to learners when they have met the standards, excessive praise may be counterproductive. The recipients may know that praise is rhetorical device to make a bitter filling more palatable. (Molloy *et al.,* 2013). The sandwich filling is the important part for learners and it needs to be presented honestly and not disguised with bread otherwise learners are likely to ignore it. In other words it would be better to put effort into enabling students to interact with useful feedback – to digest the feedback to continue the metaphor - rather than trying to smother it with praise. Other rewards such as high

marks, qualifications or praise are not always effective motivators - especially in the longer term; Kohn (1993) argues that rewards that are planned in advance are set up as a means to control the actions of others – to persuade them to do something they may not be intrinsically motivated to do in the absence of a reward - in other words rewards easily detract from self-motivation.

Students engaging with feedback

The second requirement for feedback – that students must engage with it - is equally problematic and there are conceptual and practical reasons for this. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that student and tutor may have very different frames of reference about what constitutes good work and suggest that dialogue between tutor and students and between peers is the basis of a social constructivist rather than a transmissive approach to learning. Publishing criteria and standards is essential, but not sufficient for student engagement with tutor feedback; it is dialogue that enables students to better interpret these. Nicol (2010) further argues that students benefit when they also act as assessors themselves in peer or self review as this not only encourages discussion of criteria, but also helps students develop self-regulation skills and reduce dependency on teacher feedback. However, not all distance tutors and assessors may subscribe to this view. Furthermore, individual face-to-face dialogue is difficult to implement in pressurised mass higher education and is not readily available for distance learners, except by telephone or occasional meetings, and the students who need most help may be the hardest to contact. One solution is for tutors to be pro-active in identifying struggling students (Simpson, 2008: Hughes, 2007), but this is not routine and may be time-consuming. Peer dialogue and peer review can take place online although this may be a challenge to set up (Macdonald, 2001). Facilitating student-tutor dialogue in mainly written communication is another possibility for distance learning, for example through use of interactive cover sheets (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010).

Can ipsative feedback motivate and develop learners and encourage learner engagement?

Ipsative assessment offers resolutions to the above tensions in current practice both as a motivational device and in helping learners develop self-regulatory skills over time (Hughes, 2011; 2014). Ipsative assessment is self-referential assessment and the spotlight moves onto an individual learner's progress and away from attainment of external goals or standards, at least temporarily. Ipsative assessment is non-competitive because progress is possible for learners at all levels, whereas achieving high outcomes may be out of reach for many. Thus, it might be especially motivating and supportive for learners who do not receive encouragement through high grades. However, ipsative assessment cannot be completely divorced from measurement of performance in university education. Any measurement of progress must refer to an ultimate goal and there will come a point where a learner will have to enter for a criterion referenced assessment to gain an award (Hughes, 2014). Nevertheless, a judgment of progress implies something that is ongoing rather than final and so might be expected to be congruent with the developmental approach to feedback outlined above. Because ipsative feedback is explicitly about progress it can also draw detailed attention to where there is more work to do.

Ipsative assessment could be formative or summative or a combination of both. Ipsative summative assessment would mean giving grades and awards for progress rather than outcomes, in other words criteria would be self-referential rather than pre-set and conventionally lower achieving students may outperform the usual higher achievers because they have more possible ground to make up. But, such grading of progress requires a radical shift in assessment policy not only at the local programme level, but also by institutions and professional bodies. This seems unrealistic for the near future. However, when grades are accompanied by developmental feedback as in many forms of assessment apart from examinations, this formative aspect could be ipsative. This would mean that rather than

emphasising the gap between the student's performance and expected criteria and standards, which might be too large for the student to comprehend, feedback would refer to a student's previous work and previous developmental feedback and explore how far the student had progressed in relation to the criteria for the assignment and other more general disciplinary or academic writing requirements. Use of ipsative feedback therefore has the potential to ensure that developmental feedback is transparent and explicit.

Ipsative feedback is less controversial than ipsative grading because the formal requirements may not be as strict, and it seems that any study of ipsative assessment must start with the formative aspects whether or not this is accompanied by summative assessment. However, in an assessment regime where grades are used frequently to motivate learners there may be a mismatch between a conventional summative assessment and ipsative feedback. Students may see inconsistency between positive ipsative and developmental feedback and a low grade or mark and those with high grades may be complacent and less interested in progression goals. Ipsative feedback will require some point of reference and assessors will have in mind the standards and criteria to which students are working and these will need to be clarified. Thus, if ipsative feedback is part of a longer term developmental process, then ipsative feedback signals that progress has been made towards external standards, but there is always more to do. Students who are accustomed to a heavy diet of grades may of course need some persuading that making progress is as important as final attainment.

There may be instances of a student making little or no progress which can be made visible either through ipsative feedback or through tracking grades over time. A weak student who is making some progress has some chance of reaching the required standard in time with appropriate support. However, students who are not progressing are of greater concern. An ipsative approach to assessment might serve as a warning when a student is not benefiting

from the course and prompt a recommendation for transferring to a more appropriate course (Hughes, 2014).

With these caveats, ipsative feedback appears to fulfill the requirements for motivation and learner development, but it does not necessarily promote learner engagement with the feedback process. Ipsative feedback could be 'given' to students, but alternatively students could be actively involved in making ipsative self-judgments and engaging in dialogue.

Students make continual self-assessments of their work (Boud, 1995) but may be strongly guided by grades and they may not be aware of their learning over time. It is possible that an ipsative approach to assessment which clearly identifies where learners are progressing and where they are not might help learners make judgments about their learning that are more nuanced than judgments of success or failure based on grades and possibly unhelpful comparisons with others who are higher performers. However, encouraging learners to ask themselves 'what can I do to learn more (with possible future gains)?' rather than 'how can I improve my grade now?' is likely to be challenging for both assessors and learners.

A study of ipsative feedback

Background and study design

If ipsative feedback occurs in informal settings, such as individual tutorials where student progress is reviewed, but it is not systematically monitored, then the impact on learners will be difficult to ascertain. To explore the potential of ipsative feedback to motivate distance learners and to support their learning, a distance learning programme was selected for a systematic intervention or action research. The research was a co-operation between practitioners and independent researchers to give ownership of the project by the programme team whilst ensuring a good degree of reliability of the findings and a theoretical perspective (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Norton, 2008).

The programme was an MA in Applied Educational Leadership and Management delivered online at a research intensive UK university to mainly international students. The programme leader had identified problems with learner motivation and was particularly concerned about the lack of development of self-reliance for some students. Students on the programme were encouraged to submit draft assignments for formative assessment and this feedback was included in the study alongside the feedback provided on a final piece. Feedback on both draft and final assignments was provided electronically and was captured in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for each module. Students may also have received additional feedback via email, but this was not readily available and therefore not included. The research was conducted over two years. In year one the aim was to analyse current feedback practice to identify any ipsative feedback and the impact it had on motivation and learner responses to feedback. This scoping study indicated that ipsative feedback was not being provided, at least formally, but that both staff and students would welcome it. Therefore in year two, the aim was to set up a scheme to introduce ipsative feedback systematically into the programme and to evaluate the new approach.

The aim of the ipsative feedback scheme was to provide learners with feedback on their progress as well as the outcomes of their work. The idea was explained to the programme team along with a report from the scoping study and they held a meeting to explore how they might introduce ipsative feedback. Because judging progress requires that a comparison is made between former work and current work, the programme team raised two problems. Firstly, previous work was not readily accessible to tutors and to remedy this all assignments and marksheets were made available to staff on the programme VLE. This could provide tutors with a means of comparing current and previous assignments to enable the writing of ipsative feedback. Secondly, there was concern that the process of comparison would be time consuming and that it would be better for learners to do this for themselves – with some

guidance. Giving students such an opportunity for self-assessment also begins a move away from teacher-centric feedback.

A feedback response form was designed so that students could review the developmental aspects of past feedback and state how they had addressed each of the points raised in the current piece of work (see appendix). The feedback response form would then be submitted with summative assignments as part of an assignment cover sheet. Tutors would then provide further feedback on how successfully the students had acted on the feedback and whether or not there was further development work needed. The allocation of marks process was not affected. To sum up the following stages from Hughes (2011) were introduced into the feedback process:

1. Students review past feedback, either from draft work or from a previous module, and identify developmental points.
2. Students complete an ipsative self-assessment on how they have addressed previous feedback using the feedback response form
3. Students attach the form to the piece of work when submitted for summative assessment
4. Tutors review the student actions when assessing the current piece of work and provide ipsative feedback as well as developmental feedback for the next assignment
5. The process can then repeat as many times as is appropriate.

Such a cumulative ipsative scheme generates three possible impacts on the feedback process for students. Firstly, students have their attention drawn to previous developmental feedback. This could be feedback on a draft piece of work or feedback on assignments submitted for previous modules. In the second stage, learners have an opportunity to reflect on their actions in response to that feedback and this might address the student engagement requirement for

feedback to some extent. Thirdly, ipsative feedback closes the feedback loop in that learners can be clearly informed on how far they have responded to previous feedback and further guidance provided. Here the motivational and developmental requirements of feedback might be addressed.

Completing the feedback review and ipsative self-assessment was a new process for students which was introduced after the first module in their first year of the two year programme. Students were directed to the form by a message from the tutor in the discussion forum and the new form was made available in the VLE.

Evaluation methodology

There were three questions for the evaluation:

1. Is there evidence for ipsative formative assessment taking place?
2. If so, how does ipsative feedback impact on learners and their learning?
3. What are the challenges for sustaining and scaling up such an ipsative scheme?

Three datasets were collected, interviews with students, analysis of written feedback and interviews with tutors. A methodological challenge for this project was gaining quality data when all the students and four of the five tutors on the programme were only available online. Different time zones also impeded telephone interviews so interviews were conducted via email. The emails consisted of a list of questions for the recipient to answer and could be likened to a free-response section of a questionnaire. Emails could also be used for follow up questions and requests for clarification so that the in-depth probing of a face-to-face interview was possible, although not as extensive. Another advantage of the email interviews was that participants were sent short quotations from their feedback to reflect upon. Student interviews were voluntary and

24 students out of a total of 62 students on the programme were interviewed during the two years including both strong and weaker students. All students were asked for views on ipsative feedback in the interviews.

For data analysis, a written feedback tool was developed based on the Hattie & Timperley (2007) model for effective feedback. It distinguished between feedback or critique on current performance and feed forward that could be used either for the next assignment or for a further submission of the same piece of work. The tool also identified ipsative feedback: comments on progress made since a previous assessment. A total of 70 feedback samples from 38 students were analysed and included both feedback on formative and on graded assignments.

In year two the feedback response forms from 27 students were also analysed. Only 11 students completed the new self-assessment sections of the assignment cover form, but a low response is not surprising when students are asked to do something new and they had only completed one ipsative feedback cycle by comparing two modules by this stage. In subsequent years the numbers completing the form have improved to 93%.

The programme leader was closely involved in the research, but the interviews and feedback analyses were conducted by two independent researchers who were not associated with the programme. The exceptions were three tutor interviews in year two which were conducted by the programme leader. The programme leader was then interviewed by an independent researcher so the whole team took part. The three datasets were systematically organised for interpretation through thematising, cross referencing themes and summarising.

The prevalence of ipsative and developmental feedback

Feedback given to learners before the intervention

In year one, there was little evidence of ipsative feedback and tutors were not proactive in informing learners of progress. Tutors tended to provide generic developmental feedback that was criteria and/or grade focused, but further actions were implicit, for example:

> What then might have taken the assignment to the next grade level? … you might have engaged rather more in a critical analysis of material in this field. (Tutor A)

Some examples did inform learners of what to improve – but in retrospect:

> The assignment would improve further if you had: 1) made your paragraphs more distinguishable by allowing an extra space; 2) formatted your assignment differently to allow for different subsections; 3) followed the guidelines on referencing, outlined in your Handbook. (Tutor C)

Learners found much of this feedback vague, and suggested that specific examples of what to improve would be useful for their learning and motivating.

> [the feedback] was subject to my interpretation, it did confuse me on the direction to take to improve the assignment paper. In this state of confusion, the levels of encouragement and motivation were found to be low. (Student 2)

> I found [one of the tutors'] feedback most useful, [the tutor] explained through examples and encouraged me to do better. (Student 8)

In the interviews, learners indicated that they would find ipsative feedback helpful and motivational, for example:

If someone would read my first and second assignment and examine my progress as a paper writer and give me general comments about how I did or didn't improve and what I needed to focus on that will be very helpful. (Student 9)

Ipsative feedback after the intervention

In year two, the feedback response form invited students to identify previous feedback and reflect on how they addressed it in the current assignment and this time there was evidence of ipsative feedback from tutors. Three tutors (A, B and C) taught the core modules which used the new form. They all commented on how students had improved from previous work- usually the draft assignment:

It is clear that you took careful note of the advice you received on the draft and the previous assignment. You have worked hard to improve the narrative flow and have taken steps to develop your critical engagement with the sources. (Tutor A).

This was definitely an improved version, compared to the draft you previously submitted for formative assessment. You have managed to shift the focus from a description of an intervention on enhancing school/family links (which was not the focus of this study) to a small scale study addressing one particular research question. (Tutor C)

It was common for a tutor to provide a positive ipsative comment followed by detailed developmental feedback:

Although this assignment was an improvement compared to the previous version you submitted for formative feedback and you have moved from discussing the establishment of a research centre to proposing a small scale research exploring staff and students' views, there are issues that could be further addressed to improve your work further … establishing a strong narrative

thread that will allow you to capitalise on your command of the field of study and second, ensuring that your referencing is appropriate (Tutor C).

Ipsative feedback was not necessarily positive:

It is a pity you did not have the chance to revise your assignment on the basis of the feedback provided earlier, as this would probably result in a better grade. (Tutor C)

This could be a consequence of students not understanding the developmental feedback or finding it 'vague' as was identified in the first cohort study. But, another tutor commented on both progress and lack of progress and provided some explanation:

Occasionally I detect examples of overly long indented quotation which was also an issue in your first assignment. However, overall your writing has moved on in range and detail, both from the early outline draft and from your earlier assessed work. (Tutor B).

It appears that the sense of impetus provided by ipsative feedback helped tutors to be more explicit in their feed forward and be clear when students had addressed some developmental areas but not others. Tutors did not report any increase in workload, but they agreed that the process changed the way that they gave feedback, 'up to a point' (Tutor B). Another tutor commented that:

I was already on the journey to that approach. When providing feedback I tended to approach it in my normal way and then made sure that I adapted things to meet the requirements of the new front sheet. (Tutor A).

There was evidence that the tutors wrote ipsative feedback for the non-completers as well, so the form was a trigger, but not essential.

Ipsative feedback as motivational and developmental

Students who completed the feedback response form found the ipsative self-assessment helpful. For example, one commented:

> It [the form] allowed me to show how I had attempted to improve on my last assignment and also encouraged me to reflect more deeply on my submission. (Student 22).

The other benefit was that the new form facilitated a systematic approach to making changes in response to feedback:

> The two step process was like a self assessment. The first step was how I had approached and understood the assignment. After incorporating my tutors' inputs the second step allowed me to explain the changes I had incorporated. The difference between the two steps helped 'focus' the areas of change (Student 19).

Some students referred to a clearly motivating effect of ipsative feedback from tutors:

> [the ipsative comment] gave me confidence and made me feel proud of my work – this was very important as it was the first assignment I had handed in and I was very unsure about it! It also made me aware of the changes that I made that improved my work so I will know what to do next time (Student 16).

Raising expectations

A few students expressed disappointment that they did not gain extra marks by acting on feedback on draft work. One high achieving student wrote:

> I do find that the generous positive comments, motivating as they are, don't always translate into higher marks. Perhaps the marking is very strict but after all the hard work, the positive feedback

encourages hopes for higher marks and I wasn't quite sure why I eventually only grazed into an A grade. (Student 13).

Tutors were concerned about students' expectations that motivational ipsative feedback would guarantee a higher grade in the short term.

I could see from the comments that some students expected their revised draft to lead to an A [top grade], and it was subsequently disappointing for these students to gain a sense of progress without an A. (Tutor C)

Such views are not surprising in a grade-orientated assessment regime, but the coherence of the programme may also need to be addressed. Tutor A commented:

The two [core module] assignments are very different in nature, draw on overlapping but not identical skill sets and each poses its own challenges. It is perfectly feasible to have picked up (in the student's view) on earlier guidance only to fall down on something which is specific to the second of the assignments. Perhaps we need to make this clearer. (Tutor A)

Use of ipsative feedback to engage distance learners in the feedback process

Before the intervention there was no ipsative feedback on this programme and developmental feedback was strongly linked to criteria and standards which were not always transparent to students. Developmental comments were vague and students appeared to have little idea about the progress they were making, or not making, in the more generic skills. The intervention above indicates that a system for providing ipsative feedback can address the motivational-developmental requirements for feedback for distance learners. The new process encouraged tutors to write ipsative and more detailed developmental feedback and this was helpful for learners because students could see how their actions on past feedback had influenced

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subsequent work as well as what else they needed to work on. The ipsative self-assessments and tutor replies also helped some students to appreciate the progress they were making which was motivating. There is an alternative here to using the distracting 'feedback sandwich' to motivate students.

There is also some evidence that the structured ipsative self-assessments using the form prompted the start of a dialogue with tutors which could continue throughout the programme and address the engagement requirement for feedback. Such a dialogue could very valuable for distance learners who have limited contact with tutors and peers. For example, student 22 who stated above that the form prompted self-reflection, wrote on the form in response to feedback on draft work:

> In the methodology section I have added more detail and have given further thought to sampling and validity of data

This is indicative of this student's growing self-reliance, however, more research is needed to follow how self-reliance might develop with further iterations of this feedback process. In addition, a detailed self-assessment was not completed by all students and although this could be because of lack of familiarity with the process, there is the likelihood that further interventions will be needed to encourage all students to engage fully.

Scaling up the ipsative feedback process

Comparison with previous assessment is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, access to previous feedback and assessments is not always easy and therefore an ipsative process may be difficult to scale up (Hughes, 2011). Numbers on this programme were relatively small, but

using a feedback response form such as this means that a different assessor could continue the process in future modules, and students from much larger cohorts could be tracked. Using technology may also provide some solutions to managing large volumes of student assessment data (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). For example, making previous feedback and assignments readily accessible via a VLE or other technology might help students and tutors identify progress and there was some evidence of this from the study. Asking the students to provide the summary of previous assessments is another option for enabling comparisons, but it may not always be accurate.

Secondly, there is the problem of consecutive modules emphasising different skills. This means that comparison is not straightforward. It can also lead to students' disaffection because they believe that they have acted on previous feedback, but the response they get from the assessor is that there is more work to do. In a context where there is emphasis on grading and achievement, motivational ipsative feedback might raise student expectations. Further work will be needed to manage student expectations through broadening their understanding of assessment to view it as a longitudinal journey throughout a programme where a learner is expected to make continual improvements rather than jump over a series of assessment hurdles.

Conclusions and recommendations

An initial review of a distance learning programme indicated that ipsative feedback was not a part of the formal assessment process. However, learners expressed a desire for information about their progress and the tutors agreed that ipsative feedback was potentially motivational. A direct intervention has begun to explore ways for using ipsative feedback to motivate distance learners. A new formative assessment process was designed that enabled learners to reflect on

addressing previous feedback and encouraged tutors to provide ipsative feedback and consequently more explicit and fine-grained developmental feedback. The ipsative feedback was well received by students and ipsative self-assessment initiated a dialogue between tutor and students which could continue not only during a module but also across a programme.

Although this study applies to Masters students in Education, the approach might be useful for students at undergraduate level and in other disciplines. Undergraduates are less likely to be self-reliant than postgraduates and many take a similarly grade orientated view (Higgins *et al.*, 2002). They may be less motivated to complete a self assessment, or less able to complete it accurately, and tutors may need to be more proactive, but over the longer-time span of degree programmes the benefits of increased motivation and enhanced learning might outweigh this. Ipsative assessment may be new and largely untested, but the potential benefits suggested here provide a useful starting point for further work in this area.

Appendix

MA Applied Educational Leadership and Management

Assignment submission form

Please copy and paste this form into the first page of your assignment file

Name	
Student ID	
Module title	
Title of assignment	
Assignment word count (excluding references and appendices)	

Is this a draft?		Is this a resubmission?	
Yes / No (delete as appropriate)		Yes / No (delete as appropriate)	
Date of submission		If this is later than deadline, please give submission date agreed with course director	

Please indicate what feedback you were given, for your last assignment, in terms of how you could improve:

Please indicate what feedback you were given, for your draft of this assignment, in terms of how you could improve (if applicable):

Please comment on the extent to which you feel you have responded to feedback:

If you would like feedback on any particular aspects of your current assignment please make

a note of them here:

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