

Good Practice in Assessment Feedback in Social Studies: Highlighting the Significance of Student-Teacher Relationships

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Abstract

Assessment feedback has consistently emerged as an area of concern to students completing the United Kingdom's National Student Satisfaction Surveys (NSS). It is recognised as being an important element of the student learning experience and as such it remains a significant focus of enhancement activity. Using mixed research methods, the research reported in this article sought to identify student and academic staff perspectives as to what constitutes effective assessment feedback practice. The research was informed by subject level data from three English universities, with a particular focus on subjects related to social policy and social work. Whilst supportive of previous research reports (for example, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006, McDowell 2008, McDowell & Sambell 1999, Crook, Gross & Dymott 2006), findings from this project particularly highlight the central significance to students of the quality of their relationships with staff. Indeed, other generic factors that are often argued to impact on assessment feedback, such as timeliness and consistency, appear to be contingent on the quality of staff-student relationships.

Keywords: assessment, feedback, student perspective, NSS, social studies

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Introduction

'Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education' (Boud 2006, p. 17); it has been an increasing focus of policy and practice since the early 1990s (Heywood 2000). More recently in the United Kingdom's 2009 National Student Survey (HEFCE, n.d.), only 65% of those who responded agreed that their experience of assessment and feedback was positive. In response, this paper offers an analysis of student and staff perceptions of assessment feedback within an institutional and subject context. What makes the research reported on herein distinctive is that it was conducted as a cross-university analysis of current practices in assessment feedback across cognate subject areas in three universities.

As a collaborative research project across three universities in England, the project set out to identify and disseminate knowledge about effective assessment feedback practice across higher education subjects related to social policy and social work. In particular the study sought to investigate the following questions in this context:

- i) What perspectives do students commonly hold regarding assessment feedback?
- ii) What perspectives do academic staff commonly hold regarding assessment feedback? (The terms 'academic staff', 'lecturer' and 'tutor' are used interchangeably for the study, referring generically to a person or people providing feedback).
- iii) What factors impact on the quality and provision of assessment feedback?
- iv) What is the impact of NSS data on academic departments?

Methodology

The three institutions who took part in this research project came together as the result of opportunity sampling, being those available and interested in participating at the time the study commenced. Although each participating institution is a 'new' university, former polytechnic or college as defined under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, they differed greatly in size and course provision. At the time of undertaking the

research, University A had over 19,000 students, including 3,000 from over 100 countries. University B supported nearly 24,000 students from over 156 different countries. By contrast, University C was the smallest of the sample institutions with nearly 10,000 full-time and part-time undergraduate students. Equally important to note are the differences in subject level teaching, learning and assessment. Each university in the study offered students different mixes and combinations of social work, social policy, criminology and other cognate social science teaching.

A similar convenience approach was taken to sampling within the specified subject areas in each institution. Although this resulted in data being gathered from varying numbers and types of respondents across the sites (e.g. more third year students at University A, more PhD tutors at University B, more participants overall at the University C), nevertheless several strong patterns of perspective across the sites emerged.

Despite these significant contextual differences project partners were keen to identify practices they could share and develop. Indeed they welcomed the opportunity to drill down and supplement existing data in an effort to find the local factors that were affecting the student experience of assessment feedback. Two of the three institutional leads for the project were based in central teaching and learning sections working closely with cognate subject areas in the social sciences (criminology, social work, social policy, psychology). The study benefited from its contextualisation within such support networks in two ways. Firstly researchers provided hands on experience and examples of supporting departments in their responses to policy driven agendas. Secondly they brought to the table a wealth of knowledge about earlier research and literature on the subject of assessment and feedback. Whilst it is not possible or desirable to devote a large segment of this paper to those sources, this preceding work is recognised as underpinning the current study. In particular, the work of two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) is acknowledged: the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) and the Assessment for Learning CETL (CETL AfL).

The study adopted a largely qualitative approach, set alongside quantitative data from both the NSS and a student questionnaire, for demographic purposes and to establish patterns and trends in perspectives. Qualitative research is 'a situated activity ... that

describe(s) routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 3), where 'the emphasis ... is upon words rather than numbers' and 'textual analysis predominates' (Morrison 2002, p. 19-21). For this study, the qualitative data on student perspectives was collected from the NSS survey, a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews, and thematically analysed, using qualitative data analysis software to identify and explore in depth the meanings that individuals attached to their experience.

The sources of data were therefore:

- The 2008 National Student Survey for each institution; (NUS 2008)
- A student questionnaire conducted online at each institution;
- Focus groups with students;
- Interviews with academic staff at each site.

Across the three institutions there were 152 completed questionnaires, three student focus groups and 17 teaching staff interviews. Ethical approval for the study was received from each of the three universities and the research conducted in accordance with their requirements. All participants were assured that the data generated by the study would be held confidentially and anonymously. Participants in focus groups and interviews were asked for their consent to being recorded and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The research conducted across the three institutions also included a critical review of the National Student Survey and the ways in which its results can be usefully and meaningfully used at departmental level to inform changes in feedback practices. For a fuller account of this aspect of the work, see Crawford, Hagyard and Saunders (2010).

Findings and discussion

The range of data, qualitative and quantitative, from the three universities was drawn together in the analysis in order to ascertain common or unique perspectives and provide answers to the four research questions that the study sought to investigate. The

five emergent themes are discussed separately in this section of the paper; the format of feedback; concerns about quality and consistency; understanding the language of feedback; issues of timeliness; and the importance of relationships in the feedback process. The latter can be seen as a common thread through all of the preceding themes.

Format

Feedback is most often delivered in the form of written comment on written papers. Students do not like receiving simple tick-boxes or brief comments at the beginning or end of a paper. Instead they expect detailed written comment on their scripts, where comments are directly tied to particular parts of a paper. In addition, they appreciate the option of follow-up, one-to-one oral feedback sessions where comments can be further explained, but the availability of such an opportunity varied immensely between lecturers, programmes and universities. While over 70% of students reported that they liked to receive oral feedback, the proportion of students who reported discussing feedback with the tutor who provided it ranged from 30% to 12% across the three institutions. Some lecturers seemed to have an 'open door', others offered individual tutorials only to students who had failed, and others were said never to have offered such a tutorial.

The following staff comments represents generally acknowledged good practice, but also highlights the associated resource implications.

My students all get an annotated script and a separate marksheet. Any failing students are also offered a tutorial and I have seen them improve. Other students can have a tutorial if they ask.

In terms of my own practice, the introduction of personal feedback sessions has been appreciated enormously by students and you can deliver a lot more than in writing but it's very labour-intensive.

While lecturers talk positively about the benefits of group feedback sessions, students generally place less value on them. Over 65% of students reported liking group feedback sessions 'little' or 'not at all'. There is also some ambivalence around the use of alternative modes of feedback such as audio and video. Electronic feedback,

commonly provided through the use of 'track changes' facilities on Word documents, received a mixed reception, but it is possible, that these responses depended on the level of prior exposure to such feedback. Students expressing concern about electronic feedback were often worried that this would replace the individual oral feedback that is most highly valued.

We've been using Blackboard effectively...for feedback prior to assignment submission and electronic comments on scripts. It's good, but it's very time-consuming doing the comments this way.

Both parties appreciate the potential for improved legibility, while the practice of typing comments on scripts improves the usefulness of feedback as students see the direct relevance of the comment. Lecturers however feel that this is a very time-consuming process.

Quality and consistency of feedback

The quality of feedback was the issue of most concern to students. The opinion that feedback should indicate not only what was good and what was inadequate about a piece of work, but what might have been done to enhance it, was expressed strongly. While a few students said that any feedback at all was useful, the majority felt that it was only useful when the ideas could be used as 'feed-forward' to improve future work. Sixty-seven per cent of students agreed that feedback had helped them improve their performance in subsequent assessments.

It's brilliant when it says what's good and why, then what's inadequate and why, and then what you might have done to make it better. That last bit is the gap that has to be filled. There's no point in getting feedback unless it really helps you in some way.

I hate it where you get those feedback forms where they've just checked boxes that say this was done, that wasn't done. That doesn't actually tell you anything...There needs to be a fair bit of content; just as they want to know what I'm getting at in the assignment, I want to know what they're getting at in the feedback.

Comments should be on the actual paper to show you where the bits are that they're talking about, not just on the front cover or at the end. They just say 'A good assignment; could be more analytical'; it doesn't actually tell you where it was good or what bits were bad.

Consistency was an issue in relation to both the equal treatment of students and the way in which their learning might progress or develop over time and across modules and courses. It was considered unfair that some students received useful feedback and others did not. Some students suggested that workload is often used by lecturers to explain the lack of feedback provided. However, they felt that as 'paying customers' they should have equal rights.

In our programme we're told that there are so many students they can't give us much feedback each, but we pay the same as students in other courses. They should manage us more effectively and plan on the basis that they will have a lot of scripts to mark.

Another form of inconsistency was the different formats used across different courses and by different staff. As alluded to above, some used tick-boxes, some open comments only or in addition to the boxes, while some provided just a couple of lines on the cover sheet and yet others wrote copious notes on the script. It was suggested that these variations made it difficult to track one's own progress across time. Furthermore, the varying practice in offering opportunities to submit assignment drafts for feedback or to have one-on-one tutorials left some students feeling disadvantaged.

Inconsistency in marker qualifications was also noted, with those receiving feedback from PhD students rather than experienced lecturers feeling a little disadvantaged. Interestingly, they felt that PhD students tended to be tougher in marking but also more narrow in their comments, giving more technical feedback about writing rather than about content.

The greatest concerns about inconsistency, however, arose when students compared their work and results.

Four of us worked closely together and presented papers similar in many aspects. There were three or four different markers and the marks and comments varied considerably, with an 18 point range numerically. Do lecturers actually communicate with one another?

A programme at one participating university scored noticeably lower on NSS question 9, relating to the usefulness of feedback. In this case, many comments referred to

inconsistencies in marking, so that they were unclear as to what they needed to do to improve.

Understanding the language of feedback

The language used by lecturers also attracted some attention, with students suggesting that it cannot always be understood. Only 22% of students reported that they always understood the feedback they received. The terms 'critical' and 'analytical' were singled out by students as causing considerable concern.

There are comments like 'be more critical' or 'be more analytical' and I think, 'I thought I had,' and I don't know what it means.

Some of my lecturers do sound like they've swallowed a dictionary. I had to write down the words and look them up. Everybody says a certain lecturer is a walking thesaurus...so it's a bit like they're talking over you sometimes.

Gibbon and Dearnley (2010) suggest that attention to the language used and the messages provided may increase student engagement with feedback. Yet, many of the lecturers responding to this research, felt that the meaning should be clear to students studying at undergraduate level and that such problems did not occur a few years ago because '*students then were taught better language skills and understandings while at school.*' Some lecturers also point out that whilst they know their own subject matter, they are not qualified to teach language concepts or skills. Student respondents from one university talked of the valuable assistance offered by their academic skills unit. They appreciated being able to go there for a chat, to have the feedback given by lecturers interpreted and explained and to discuss ideas for the development of their writing skills. As one reported,

They offer you coffee and make you feel very comfortable. I never come out of there feeling thick.

Students were also appreciative when feedback was aimed at them personally, in relation to their own work, rather than being generalised. Where anonymous marking was practised, this feeling was exacerbated, especially where students felt that they had particular needs that should be recognised.

I like it when the feedback is directed to me in a personal way. It feels as if someone cares about me and my progress.

It's very important that we feel that the feedback is aimed at us and not just a general piece that's been written and given to everyone regardless.

Further to this, the issue of the tone used was important, since, as Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001, p. 273) point out, 'the tutors' expert position confers their 'judgements' with an elevated status, which enhances the power of these judgements to invoke feelings such as pride and shame within students.' Thus tutors sometimes use a tone which to their own mind is quite bland, but which to students can be upsetting or even 'degrading.' Conversely however, lecturers also felt that students sometimes exhibited a lack of respect towards them as well, especially in individual emails relating to feedback.

Timeliness

At perhaps the most basic level, the issue on which provider and recipient most agree is that of timeliness; both students and staff know that the timing of feedback is important. The sooner the feedback is received, the more likely it is to be used, particularly in the formative mode. As evidenced by several writers (e.g. Orsmond, Merry & Reiling 2005, Black & William 1998), if a student receives feedback early in a given course and is able not only to assess his or her relative progress but see how to improve, then there may be opportunity for development. Students participating in this research, however, describe very varied experiences with regard to tutor responsiveness. Two students from the same course and university offered the following:

My tutor this year has been amazing, following things up and asking if I need help.

Some lecturers just never get back to you and if they do they can't answer the questions anyway.

However, as Black and William (1998) concluded, while good formative assessment is increasingly valued, certain problems in providing it are obvious in today's universities. Timeliness, like other aspects of feedback, has become very difficult given both the trend to modularisation, which 'compresses units, with assessment at the end and little/no feedback in between' (Hounsell. D, Hounsell. J, Litjens & McCune, 2005), and

'the increasing economies of scale in teaching but not in assessment (Glover & Brown 2006)'. Such issues, however, invoke little sympathy on the part of students, who feel that effective and timely feedback is a 'right' for the paying consumer and a matter of fairness across courses and consumers (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002). Students question why they can be penalised for late submission, yet lecturers 'get away with' late feedback.

Relationships

The staff-student relationship is an issue raised by students much more than by lecturers. The data gathered for this research demonstrates that students are far more likely to take note of feedback from those whom they respect and who appeared to show them respect as well. While there seems no doubt that many lecturers adopt a very supportive approach, which is greatly appreciated, the following comments indicated negative emotional responses that might go unnoticed.

I was scared out of my wits of my tutor and even when I went to see him I used to shake so much and when I left I'd remember things and have to go and ask somebody else.

A senior lecturer told me I was a borderline student in terms that I felt were quite degrading and I nearly left.

...it was only necessary to circle the rubbish once, you don't need to go round and round with big exclamation marks...

The following staff comment demonstrates the acknowledged importance of developing a good relationship.

The key to successful feedback is having a rapport in place. When we sit there and we go through the essay and we look at strengths, weaknesses, things that can be improved upon and things that don't need to be changed, that develops a rapport.

However, the issue of 'rapport' needed to be carefully managed.

There need to be established expectations, such as it's not appropriate for you to be emailing me every day.

Students can be quite rude and inappropriate in tone of emails.

One programme incorporated in this study, which scored particularly well in the NSS, put a focus on individual feedback sessions, and these were clearly appreciated by students, even if they do not always take advantage of the opportunity. Conversely, at a site where scores were lower, students commented on the lack of opportunities to discuss their feedback with tutors.

At one participating institution there were significant differences in NSS feedback scores between the same programme delivered at different campuses. This seemed to relate primarily to the difference between a well-established, mature provision and a new programme where administrative processes and support may not have been in place. Another factor was the different atmosphere at the smaller, satellite campus where relationships between staff and students appeared closer. Again, this highlights the importance of students feeling comfortable in their relationship with staff. It also shows how the ability to breakdown the data to programme level allows for more sophisticated analysis of underpinning issues.

Conclusions

In many ways this study has confirmed the conclusions of other reports, such as the seven principles of effective feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) identified as a result of a project funded through the UK Higher Education Academy, or the Manifesto for Change developed by ASKe (Weston Manor Group 2007), while the National Union of Students (NUS) also identifies 10 principles of good feedback practice (NUS 2009).

Thus there is general consensus emerging around a number of key aspects of feedback, for example:

- feedback should be timely;
- students should receive clear indications of what they need to do to improve (feed-forward);
- students like feedback that is personal to them;

- students need opportunities to discuss their feedback individually;
- feedback should be written legibly (preferably electronically) and expressed in a language that the students understand.

A recurring, underlying theme is that of respect, namely the feeling that staff have respect for students, their work and their emotional response to feedback. Respect also underpins issues around the timing of feedback. Most importantly, students want clear information about when feedback will be received and consistency of practice so that they do not feel disadvantaged in relation to fellow students. Failure by staff to meet feedback targets is seen as disrespectful, especially when students themselves are penalised for late submission.

But while the NUS recommendations focus on what academic staff need to do in providing feedback, other reports stress the dialogic nature of feedback and the responsibility of students to make effective use of it for their own learning development.

*One way of increasing the effectiveness of external feedback, and the likelihood that the information provided is understood by students, is to conceptualise feedback more **as dialogue** rather than as information transmission.*

(Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 210 – emphasis in original)

This sentiment is echoed in the ASKe manifesto

It is when learners share an understanding of academic and professional standards in an atmosphere of mutual trust that learning works best

(Weston Manor Group 2007, p.1),

However, perhaps the most striking conclusion of the current study is the importance of the relationship between staff and student in underpinning these other successful practices. For example, individual discussion of feedback is not seen as helpful if there is not a good rapport between the student and tutor. The personal aspect of feedback is a key feature, which possibly explains why students are less supportive than staff of group feedback sessions. Students want to know that comments relate directly to them, and do not always see the relevance of general comments.

These findings however could be seen to suggest a rather simplistic view of the student-teacher relationship, which is in reality influenced by a range of complex variables. Thus whilst the potential practical implications of this work would indicate that more timely, personal feedback, in individual face-to-face sessions would meet student needs, and that such sessions should be based on staff-teacher relationships of mutual respect, other processes may mitigate against this. One such process is anonymous marking in which student's work is not identified by name, but by some form of coded identifier. In many institutions this process has been put in place 'to try to mitigate against ... certain kinds of bias that can occur when markers know things relating to the identity of the students whose work they are marking' (Murphy 2006, p.41). Yet, whilst research has shown that despite work being submitted anonymously, the marking is often not truly anonymous (Maclellan 2001), the intentions of the process, by definition preclude personalised feedback that might take account of specific, individual learning needs and development.

It is also important to acknowledge, when considering the implications of this aspect of the research findings for teaching and learning practice, that limited resources, increased bureaucracy and large class sizes may reduce the amount of academic time invested in assessment (Gibbs 2006), mitigating against aspirations to implement more personalised approaches to assessment feedback. It is apparent; however, from this study that there are several areas in which there is an evident disconnect between the providers and the receivers of assessment feedback. Such a divide calls for better communication between the two parties in order to develop better understandings of expectations and perhaps, as an outcome, more mutually satisfactory approaches to provision. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001, p.271) observe that much of the problem results from an 'over-simplified model of communication' in which there is a 'linear transfer of information from tutor to student.' They suggest that the feedback process is a unique form of communication in which issues of power, control and emotion come into play and need to be understood and acted upon if the process is to be successful. Perhaps even alternative, more emancipatory conceptualisations of the higher education process should be considered, as in the vision, offered by some academics, of a continuing research partnership between students and their teachers rather than short-term assignments (Neary & Winn, 2009). In this way, the essence of the relationship between students and teachers is the foundation on which to build learning,

teaching and assessment cultures that empower students as partners in the production of knowledge and a community of scholars.

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