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PRACTICE PAPER

Feedback on feedback! Encouraging students to read feedback: a University of Gloucestershire case study

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Abstract

This practice paper addresses the issue of encouraging students to read, assimilate and use feedback on assessed work. It is based on an experiment in two modules in the BA (Hons) Leisure Management degree at the University of Gloucestershire, examining students' expectations of the assessment of their work, and their responses to an initial withholding of the mark as written feedback is presented. The findings of the exercise revealed students to be largely positive about a transparent attempt to make them read comments before receiving the mark for an assignment.

Keywords: assessment; written feedback; formative feedback

Introduction

The purpose of this practice paper is to report on the findings of an exercise designed to encourage the reading of assessment feedback, undertaken with two groups of students studying leisure management at the University of Gloucestershire during 2002/03. The experiment was influenced by recent literature and the growing acceptance that 'assessment needs to provide feedback to support the learning process' (Open Learning Foundation, 1994:14), and that this is becoming increasingly problematic to systematise (Mutch, 2003).

Reading feedback can be helpful!

One of the 12 principles of assessment produced by a working group of the Open Learning Foundation in 1994 highlights an increasingly important issue in higher education. The feedback which we give to students on their assessed work (including examinations) can be a significant factor

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in the progress they make, as a number of studies have demonstrated (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002; Higgins et al., 2002; Knight, 2002).

However, this can only occur if the feedback is actually read and acted upon in the first place. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) and Knight (2002) suggest that it is important to encourage students to read feedback on their work for a number of reasons. First, assessment drives student learning, and knowledge of performance (and not simply results) is a key element of student learning. Reflection on the learning process and what can be improved can only occur with constructive and considered feedback, and the willingness of the student to act upon it. Second, full and specific written feedback is part of student-centred learning, to which most higher education institutions subscribe or aspire, particularly given the significance now attached to personal development planning. Third, the appropriate giving and receiving of feedback on assessment is part of the wider approach to ensure that students achieve the planned outcomes of the programme (Biggs, 2002). Finally, when we as tutors have put so much effort into marking and writing comments, it is so much more satisfying when students do actually read them!

Recent developments in higher education have also underlined the need for feedback which is received and read. Traditionally, in higher education in the UK, students received personalised feedback, often of a formative nature, which gave detailed guidance on performance and progress. With the large increase in student numbers over the last decade, the practice has become more variable, as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) found in the subject reviews (including hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism reviews) undertaken during 2000 and 2001 (see the QAA Subject Overview Report for Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation, Sport and Tourism, 2001). Perversely, the reduction in contact time, a concomitant consequence of large student numbers, together with the increased diversity in student intakes in many institutions, has meant that very full and specific feedback is more necessary than ever – and equally, it is necessary that students actually read it and act on it. A piece in the Times Higher Educational Supplement in 1998 (September 25th) had the heading ‘Feedback? No, just give us the answers’. Brown (2001) and Gibbs and Simpson (2002) report on the inclination of students, especially final year students, to look at the mark on work handed back and then throw it away without reading comments ‘even when it is lovingly crafted and provided promptly’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002:15).

Encouraging feedback to be read: an issue to be tackled

These comments had some resonance with members of a Teaching Development Group (TDG)¹ in the School of Sport and Leisure at the University of Gloucestershire. In response to the concern that too many students were not reading feedback on assessed work properly (if at all) it was agreed by this TDG, in setting its agenda for the academic year, that it would examine various approaches to encouraging students to read the feedback on their assessments. One approach involved an experiment with a level three group and a level one group, based on some ideas in recent studies, and obtaining some feedback from the students on the exercise.

The studies noted earlier offer a number of steps, which can be taken to encourage students to read feedback:

- Asking students to specify what they would like feedback on;
- Providing feedback but no marks;
- Requiring assignments to be self-assessed (without marks) so students compare with the tutor’s views;
- A two-stage approach with feedback on a first draft being used to submit an improved second version;

¹ Teaching Development Groups (now called Professional Development Groups) are small groups of tutors in cognate subjects who set their own agenda for the enhancement of learning and teaching within their programmes. For further explanation, see Brown, 2003.

- Providing a grade only after self-assessment and tutor feedback has been completed (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002).

Race (2001) sees feedback as central to the process of assessment which he also identifies as the key factor in student learning. He argues that feedback should be timely, intimate and individual, empowering, sensitive and manageable and he offers 12 'handy hints', including offering more than ticks and writing legible comments, but also suggests that 'feedback can be given before scores or grades' (Race, 2001:69).

Therefore, this practice paper is not concerned so much with the nature of feedback to students as simply encouraging students to actually read it. The experiment took Race's suggestion, and the substance of the second and fifth of Gibbs and Simpson's steps for encouraging students to read feedback, and applied them to two groups in the School of Sport and Leisure at the University of Gloucestershire.

It has been noted that a constraint to students reading feedback is their preoccupation with the actual mark which is often ultimately what students are most interested in. Higgins et al. (2002:61) note that 'it may be difficult, in the light of increasing competitiveness for graduate jobs, for students not to have one eye on the grade'. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) suggest that there is a problem with both marks and feedback being provided. Students often perceive a grade in relation to their worth as a person and a poor grade can damage the student's self-efficacy.

A practical way of encouraging the reading of feedback

It was decided to adopt the following sequence of actions with an assignment in each of two modules - a first year module, The Leisure Business, and a third year module, Policy and Planning in Leisure and Culture. Prior to receiving their returned graded assessments, students were asked to indicate on a pro-forma, their estimated grade with their reasons, at the following stages:

- Stage 1 Before receiving the assignment back;
- Stage 2 Based on the tutor's comments on the text of the assignment;
- Stage 3 Based on the comments on the text and the overall comment related to the assessment criteria and grade descriptors;
- Stage 4 Finally, students were asked to comment on the exercise itself and the tally between the tutor's grades and comments.

Tables 1 and 2 respectively indicate the survey results for the first and third year modules. For each of the four stages, the mean of the various estimated marks by the students is shown, and finally, the actual mean mark for the assignment. The second column highlights students' comments which show how they arrived at their estimations, and what they thought of the relationship between the actual grade and the feedback they received. The final section offers their reflections on the experiment itself.

Grade	Reasons/observations
<p>Stage 1 Anticipated: Mean mark 44%</p>	<p><i>Given the work put in to the assignment and your understanding of the subject area, what grade would you anticipate and why?</i></p> <p>There were three main categories of responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those 7 who left it late either to start or write up the assignment – (“did quite a bit of research but was aware that a lot more could have been done. The essay was written quite late and was rushed”). • Those 5 who felt that they had prepared adequately for the assignment (2 had looked at other students’ work for general guidance) and had appropriate subject knowledge and understanding (“I feel that this piece of work was completed with a good understanding and base of knowledge”; “did a good piece of work, worked hard”). • Those 5 who were unsure about their approach and the knowledge and understanding demonstrated.
<p>Stage 2 Based on feedback in text: Mean mark 39%</p>	<p><i>Comment on how or why the feedback in the text led to a revised grade/endorsed your anticipated grade. General comment on the nature of the feedback.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 students lowered their expectations as a result of reading the comments on the text of their assignments. • A number were concerned about their grammar, spelling and syntax (“there is lots of underlining, does not look so good”; “English does not look good, worried about it”). • Several picked up comments relating to content and progression. • Many were aware of many comments/indicators of problems with referencing.
<p>Stage 3 Feedback in text and on grading pro-forma: Mean mark 45%</p>	<p><i>Comment on how or why the feedback in the text and on the grading pro-forma led to a revised grade/endorsed your anticipated grade. General comment on the nature of the feedback.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students seemed to understand (and be able to read!) the substance of the comments and their links with assessment criteria and grade descriptors. • 2 students were unhappy about the nature of the comments (“it doesn’t give any examples of how I could have done it right” and “everything seems to be bad”), • others found the overall feedback to be helpful and constructive.
<p>Stage 4 Actual mean mark: 47%</p>	<p><i>Comment on the relationship between the grade and the feedback, do they tally?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 students agreed that the actual mark tallied with the comments. • Several found the overall comment to give a more accurate indicator than the comments on the text, but this may be to do with the amount of red ink (or other colours) on pages. • “Yes – I had hoped with the feedback in the text, this would lead to an A grade but was reluctant to allow myself to get too excited” (her anticipated grade went from 55% to 65% and then 70 % after the final comment and an actual mark of 78%). • Most students felt that the comments and the grade were fair and matched.
<p><i>Feedback on the exercise:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 1 student did not think the exercise was useful (“didn’t like doing the feedback sheet as it made me feel worried about my work”). • Of the others, 3 saw it as a good exercise but also painful (“horrible but makes you think”) and the rest were very positive about the process (“Good exercise. It has made me properly read the comments made. This will help when writing future essays”; “The exercise was successful because it allows students to realise consistent mistakes and alter their approach for the next assignment”; “Yeah very good. Makes you highlight your mistakes. Didn’t like it at first but very pleased with grade” (it was 50% -anticipated 45%). 	

Table 1: LM 103 The Leisure Business - Assessment One Feedback

Grade	Reasons/observations
Stage 1 Anticipated: Mean mark 47%	<i>Given the work put in to the assignment and your understanding of the subject area, what grade would you anticipate and why?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several students felt that they had rushed the assignment and others either lacked understanding of some aspects or had not done enough background reading. • Several were unconvinced about their use of illustrative examples (either appropriateness or sufficiency). • Only 1 student referred to the assessment criteria in making the initial judgement
Stage 2 Based on feedback in text: Mean mark 42%	<i>Comment on how or why the feedback in the text led to a revised grade/endorsed your anticipated grade. General comment on the nature of the feedback.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students were philosophical about the comments in that they acknowledged comments about referencing, structure and lack of clarity and depth. • 1 student was really surprised by the comments and another had critical comments on sections that she had been very happy with at the writing stage, although 2 students felt that comments were too critical or <i>negative</i>.
Stage 3 Feedback in text and on grading pro-forma: Mean mark 48%	<i>Comment on how or why the feedback in the text and on the grading pro-forma led to a revised grade/endorsed your anticipated grade. General comment on the nature of the feedback.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students generally found the overall comments constructive and illuminating. • Not a single student complained about the nature of the comments although 1 student felt that her work had been “put under a microscope”. • Another student had been embarrassed by the work (“it was the worst essay I had ever written”) although she would still have passed it!
Stage 4 Actual mean mark: 48%	<i>Comment on the relationship between the grade and the feedback, do they tally?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students were unanimous in their view that the feedback tallied with the grade given (“yes, very consistent” and “After reading the comments and the essay again this is a fair mark although I was hopeful of 40”), although 1 student couldn’t read the tutor’s handwriting! • The correlation between the estimated mark and the final mark is also a good test of the tutors and the expectations set and the clarity of the assessment briefing.

Feedback on the exercise:

- Comments ranged from: “It’s a good idea. I never read my feedback in the past” to “not at all enjoyable”, but the majority of responses were overwhelmingly positive with 60% indicating that it assisted their understanding of the topic and why they achieved the mark they did.
- 1 student thought it was “good but cruel” and another thought it was interesting but “please do it with other groups not this one!”
- 20% were negative about the experience (mean mark 38%).
- 20% were mixed with 1 student suggesting that the experience should be optional.

Table 2: LM311 Policy and Planning in Leisure and Culture - Assessment One Feedback

Conclusions

There are several points we can draw from this experiment as to how feedback was delivered and perceived.

First, across the two groups there was overwhelming acknowledgement of the value of the process, though in some cases, a little grudgingly. Most students appeared to welcome the attempt to encourage them to read feedback. The level one group was more enthusiastic about the process than

the level three group; the formative nature of the process has more to offer them and they are not as set in their ways at this stage in the programme.

Second, a number of responses made direct reference to the formative nature of feedback. The students felt that it would help them with future assessments.

Third, the use of explicit assessment criteria and grade descriptors, with comments drawing on them and their language, probably help to ensure consistency and a match between the mark and the feedback - which was the case in both modules (see Biggs, 2002).

Fourth, it is important to offer critical comments as constructively as possible. This again appeared to be the case with most students even though the two mean marks were relatively low ones. Responses from students indicated that they were happy to have sharp and candid comments, as long as they were helpful and constructive, and most students saw the feedback in this light.

Finally, comments on the text and handwritten final comments need to be legible. This point was also noted by Higgins et al. (2002:56) and highlights, perhaps, a growing constraint as student numbers, and pressure on tutors' time, increase.

The way forward

We are reviewing the findings of this exercise within the School of Sport and Leisure and may undertake a similar approach on a wider scale in the future, i.e. students would receive their work back initially without the mark. However, the logistics are a constraint and the time gap also needs consideration (would it be a few minutes within a session or, perhaps a week, which students might regard as unacceptable, especially when another assessment within the same module is imminent?) Furthermore, how would students react to what might become common practice?

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