Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education
Vol. 7, No. 1.
ISSN: 1473-8376
www.heacademy.ac.uk/johlste

RESEARCH NOTE

Enhancing Feedback: The Development of a Criterion-Based Marking Template for Students on a Sport Degree Programme

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DOI:10.3794/johlste.71.151
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to pilot and develop a marking strategy, enabling students to engage with assignment feedback beyond a superficial recognition of their assessment grade. Tutors and students developed a bespoke feedback sheet. Students used the template as a tool to help review work before submission, providing clear guidance regarding how their work would be marked and thus engaging students in reflective practice as part of their assignment preparation. Recommendations include extending the study to a wider sample and examining the effectiveness and impact of the marking template in relation to students' perceived improvement in academic study.

Keywords: Criterion-based marking; Assessment; Feedback; Student Perceptions

Introduction

Obtaining informative feedback is a crucial part of any learning experience (Lawrence, 2005). However, in practical terms, the format in which that feedback is provided usually varies across modules. In pedagogical terms, the way in which a student interprets the feedback is not necessarily the same as the message the marker wishes to disseminate. This does little to enhance students' understanding and progression in learning. Indeed, students reported

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that feedback, reflected in comments on scripts, was irrelevant and left some of them without an understanding of how their marks were awarded (Brown, 2004).

This raises several questions. What kind of feedback (given at what times) do students perceive to be most helpful in facilitating progression in their learning? How do students read and interpret the feedback they receive compared to how it is intended? Are students aware of why they have been awarded their grade, and what they need to do to develop their thinking and the quality of their submission relative to learning outcomes and assessment criteria in the future?

In addition to the needs of the learner being catered for here, one also has to consider the climate of accountability and calls for efficiency in which such assessments take place. One needs to consider the blend and marriage of efficiency and fitness in the process of assessment that is fostered by the tutor and to ask the question: is an academic's time spent wisely in providing exhaustive feedback if it is neither understood nor afforded adequate attention by students? If a by-product of providing clearer feedback on assessments to students is a reduction in the time spent completing such feedback, then the process of designing and refining criterion-referenced feedback forms should be welcomed.

Aims

- To raise student awareness of how marks are awarded within an assignment
- To improve accuracy and consistency in marking within and across degree modules
- To introduce a time-effective marking system for tutors
- To examine how the revised feedback mechanism impacts on students' ability/desire to engage actively in the assessment process and progression in their learning.

Method

Research design

Pre and post-intervention focus groups were used to review three sample marking templates. Four mandatory modules from second and third year undergraduate modules were used to pilot the template. Two of these modules involved the same third year undergraduate students moving from a semester 1 module to a semester 2 module.

Participants

A sample population comprised 46 third year undergraduate Physical Education students and 90 second year undergraduate PE students enrolled on mandatory modules.

Preliminary procedures

Staff received training from the project team as part of a strategy that hoped to ensure validity and reliability in procedural elements of the study. This involved a staff development workshop, during which aims, objectives and background literature was provided. Guidance was provided on the construction of module-specific marking templates, using clearly delineated marking criteria and based on comments from a student-focus group, from which data was categorised and coded and responses tagged. The information generated led to the initial design and then redesign of the criterion-based marking template.

The study was scrutinised in accordance with University of Worcester (UW) ethical guidelines. Confidentiality and anonymity of student responses were adhered to and no subsequent ethical issues arose.

Procedure

In accordance with satisfying our original Higher Education Academy HLST project proposal, focus groups acted as our primary source of data. The focus groups selected consisted of:

1) A team of five members of the PE teaching team
2) A group of eight third-year students studying on a joint Sports Studies and Physical Education degree course.

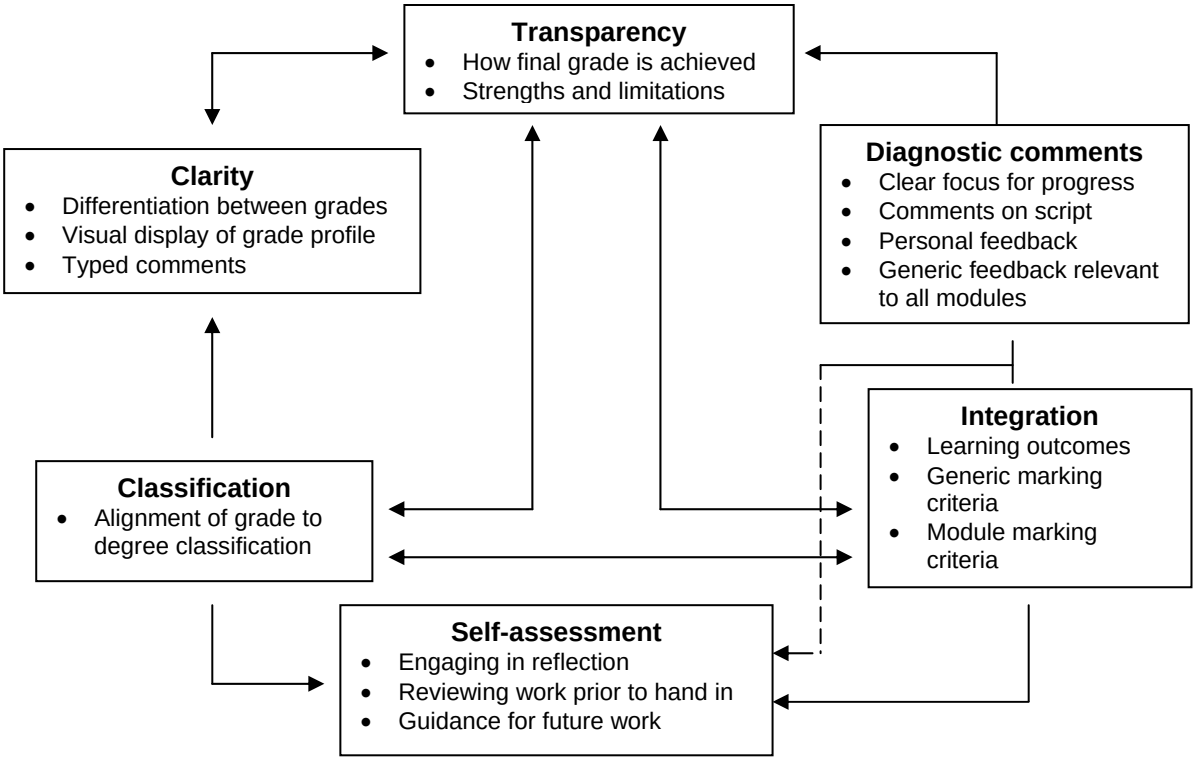

Figure 1: Summary: 'Best features' of template design (student focus group)

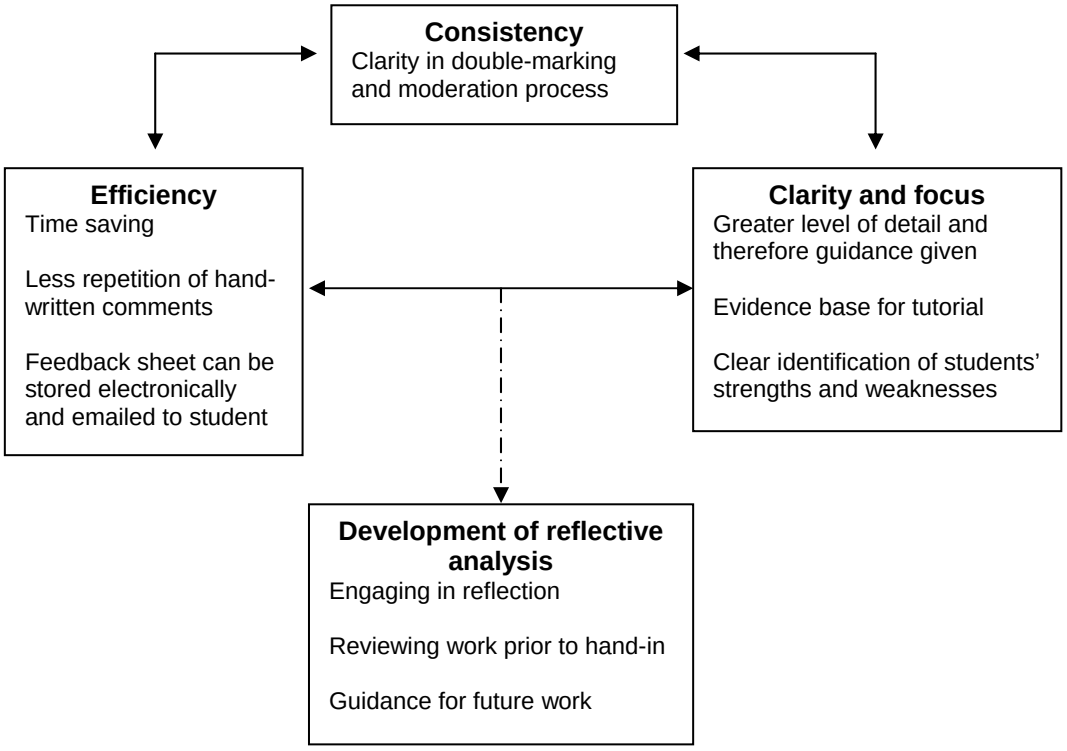

Figure 2: Summary: 'Best features of template design (staff focus group)

The students eligible to join the group were all studying on two specific modules in semester 1, 2005, and were therefore able to experience the two pilot marking templates designed for

the first phase of the study. It was decided to restrict the pilot run to two modules in the first phase to allow for a more focused approach. Two slightly different marking templates were designed for semester 1, reviewed at the end of semester 1, and the key aspects which were considered effective were used in the design of the second template (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students and field notes made from the unstructured open interviews conducted with the five members of the teaching team focus group.

Findings

Analysis of the focus group data initially revolved around what was valued most/least and why by the students in terms of identifying the 'best features', as operationalised in Figure 3. Staff perceptions of 'best features' are also provided for comparison (see Figure 4). Information from both figures should be considered in combination and viewed as complementary.

Student focus group

Initial consultation suggested that early versions of the template needed to be combined in order to provide desirable aspects from the various feedback forms. Students also reported a dislike of 'weightings', maintaining that such information would not be helpful in helping them to understand feedback and hinting at the first discrepancy between what academics perceive students desire and the students' perceptions of what constitutes important feedback. This must, however, be set in the context of something the students had not experienced at this point. Students identified a need to know 'what to do in order to improve'.

Students also reflected on:

> The way you can see what to do to get a higher grade …one of the best features.
>
> You could see the progressions between if you were getting a C you could see what you had to do to get a B. It was clear in the language. You could really see what you had to do to get a higher grade.
>
> Well, that's why this template would have been so good because you can see clearly what you did well or not so well. It is transparent.'

Students also found the transparency aspect of seeing exactly where they were gaining and losing marks helpful in terms of 'useful' feedback. The grades aligned to actual classification – for example, A = first class honours – was considered to be one of the best aspects of the marking template. Students' comments clearly reflect that they felt that this was a particularly strong aspect of the template: "I like the link between grade and classification being obvious …" and "…showed what classification you were working in".

As a result, it was agreed that a feedback grid, highlighting information for each grading category, should be incorporated into feedback forms. The revised integrated version of the feedback form has been designed from the student perception perspective and appears to have successfully addressed this point (see Figure 3).

	1st class honours	Upper 2nd (2:1)	Lower 2nd (2:2)	3rd class	Tutor referral
Marking criteria					
Comprehension and interpretation of task; clarity and coherence of commentary 15%	A very well developed response, communicated in a very clear logical sequence. Very coherent and comprehensive discussion.	Clearly presented response, logical and structured. Good level of commentary, points clearly made.	Comprehension of task evident. A clear and coherent commentary presented +	Main points addressed but limited descriptive commentary. The response demonstrates basic relevance to the task.	Response confusing, poorly communicated. Only partial awareness and comprehension of task.
Ability to synthesise and critically analyse the learning process supported by appropriate research 35%	Ability to synthesise and critically analyse conflicting interpretations to reach a coherent and independent resolution concerning the learning process and its application in the PE context. Discussion supported with reference to a wide range of appropriate research.	Sound synthesis, ability to transform knowledge and critically analyse the learning process and its implication for PE. A clear resolution within an established is framework is formed. Good range of appropriate research is used effectively.	Ability to focus on central issues and report in a structured and relevant manner. Description rather than synthesis and analysis of the learning process is used to evaluate and present a coherent account. A range of relevant sources used but presented uncritically.	Very little synthesis or analysis. Knowledge and understanding of the learning process and its application in a PE context are reported rather than transformed. Dependent on received opinion and sources and presented at a descriptive level. Some but limited ranges of sources use.	Entirely descriptive and dependent upon a restricted range of sources. Some attempt to report the learning process and the implications for PE, but not always accurately.
Knowledge and understanding of principles underpinning chosen NC area of activity (knowledge, skills and understanding evidenced and enhanced by completed appendix) 20%	Extensive and comprehensive K&U of principles underpinning the chosen NC area of activity and set in a broad context.	Conveyed good and thorough K&U of principles underpinning chosen NC area of activity.	Satisfactory K&U. A straightforward conceptualisation of the principles underpinning the chosen NC area of activity +	Basic K&U only – very specific. Little acknowledgement of a wider context.	Little or patchy understanding of subject matter or issues relating to it.
Ability to evaluate the use of ICT as a learning tool 20%	A sophisticated level of reflection and evaluation of the use of ICT as a learning tool. Explanation and evaluation set in a broad context demonstrating independent and autonomous learning	A clear reflection and evaluation of the use of ICT as a learning tool. The work demonstrates the of the ability to synthesise, assess and critically interpret evidence -	An attempt to reflect and evaluate the use of ICT as a learning tool but at descriptive level. Descriptions appear sequential rather than related.	Some discussion relating to the evaluation of ICT as a learning tool but descriptive, basic and only a limited range of response.	Little and very descriptive level of evaluation of the use of ICT as a learning tool. Limited range of response and only partial relevance to the learning outcome.
Presentation 10%	Sources of ideas and information acknowledged with meticulous care using appropriate referencing system. A comprehensive reference list. Clarity of expression and standard of both oral and written presentation, excellent.	Careful referencing and acknowledgement using appropriate system. Good clarity of expression, both oral and written. Of a good standard +	Appropriate system used for referencing sources. Clear expression overall of both oral and written and written work.	Most sources referenced and acknowledged. Acceptable level of both oral and written work, sufficient to convey meaning.	Clear gaps in referencing and acknowledgement. Oral and written work lacks clarity and coherence.

You have achieved the learning outcomes for this assignment.

First Marker
Diagnostic Comments **Agreed Final Grade**…**B-**……

- **A greater level of synthesis and critical analysis in relation to what was actually shown on the video would have enhanced your grade.**
- **A good range of sources used well to support discussion. You demonstrate a good understanding of learning for pupils with specific learning difficulties**
- **A well presented DVD. The commentary was clear but needed to be better matched to content.**
- **Appendix clearly demonstrated your K U in relation to football in the NC and your ability to differentiate to suit pupils needs.**
- **Reference to ICT needed to be more comprehensive.**

Overall a pleasing piece of work.

Signed…….. **Name** **Grade**…**B-** ……..

Please see tutor if you require further feedback

Figure 3: Sample marking grid

Staff focus group

Staff reported improved efficiency in providing feedback to students, commenting that the marking templates, which are electronically generated and take advantage of 'cut' and 'highlight' options in Microsoft Word, have reduced the amount of handwritten repetition of comments on the cover scripts. Nevertheless, the system allows for individual comments to be written at specific points on scripts, and these can be cross-referenced to feedback sheets via numerical annotation. In subsequent focus groups, staff commented that the feedback forms had, in their opinion, successfully satisfied departmental requirements while retaining module-specific flexibility based on a generic feedback form. Perhaps equally important is the fact that protocols regarding external requirements were also satisfied. Our rationale for including an external examiner in the process enabled us to retain and satisfy institutional quality assurance while evaluating the new templates. By including the examiner at all stages of this study (his ethical consent was also given for the dissemination of his reflective input), we have triangulated experiences from each party in the marking process (student, staff and examiner).

Feedback from the external examiner following the use of the semester 1 template included suggestions to specify the comments as 'diagnostic' to help give even more precise feedback to students on 'how to improve'. He also favoured a weighting system to facilitate 'transparency' and 'clarification' regarding grades awarded. However, this contradicts comments from some students and staff, the majority of whom initially expressed a preference for using a modal, as opposed to a mean, system. Two modules for semester 2 were used to explore the potential/compare both systems.

The staff focus group was asked to reflect on a redesigned version of the template on the basis of student feedback. Members of the group were asked to comment on: template design; integration of learning outcomes, module marking criteria and generic marking criteria; weighting; module-specific situations where it would be difficult to use; general comments and observations. Tutors found the template design easy to read. Language was felt to be appropriate and aligned clearly to the comment banks for UW grading criteria. It was agreed that differentiating between levels could pose some problems when aligning to UW grading criteria but that these could be addressed through the integration of the learning outcomes.

Integration of learning outcomes, generic grading criteria and module assignment title and marking criteria provided a comprehensive framework to assess student work. The framework was logical and coherent but would need to be explained clearly to students

during the module. This would also help guide students in terms of content, while highlighting transparency in how each grade would be awarded.

No clear consensus of opinion on module marking criteria and generic marking criteria emerged. Some staff felt that it could be useful in focusing on important aspects and provide transparency in relation to how an overall grade was achieved; others felt it would unnecessarily complicate the marking process. It was decided to pilot two modules with weightings assigned to each of the grading criteria.

Oral presentations and practical assessments were thought to be more difficult assessments for the criterion-based template but possible. General issues raised included the importance of sharing the template with students at the beginning of the module so that they could use it as a basis for planning and reviewing their assignments.

An issue of transparency in the double-marking process was raised. It was agreed that comments could be completed in a 'diagnostic comments' box, assigned for purpose. This would provide clear guidance for improvement at A grade as much as at C grade (see Figure 4).

Oral Exam
Learning outcomes:
1. Critically evaluate their progress in a chosen NC activity in PE
2. Critically analyse how individual performance is improved in a selected activity within the community
3. Independently initiate and evaluate action research and judge its effectiveness as a tool for change
4. Identify and critically evaluate how scientific principles underpin progress

Grade	**A+/A/A- 1st class honours**	**B+/B/B- Upper 2nd 2:1**	**C+/C/C- Lower 2nd 2:2**	**D+/D/D- 3rd class**	**E+/E/E- Fail**
Marking criteria					
Clarity of answer in response to question and ability to articulate ideas.	Very well developed response, communication in a logical sequence. Ability to synthesise evidence, critically evaluate and interpret effectively.	Good response, logical and structured. Sound synthesis. Ability to critically evaluate and form clear interpretation.	Clear comprehension. Ability to focus on central issues but relied on description rather than synthesis of evidence to evaluate and form own interpretation/ opinion.	Main point addressed but limited, descriptive and dependent on received opinion.	Short answers. No sequence. Response confusing, poorly communicated.
Knowledge and understanding of subject matter supported by appropriate research	Excellent comprehensive K&U evident in all aspects relating LOs – ability to support discussion with reference to appropriate research.	Conveyed good K&U. Ability to apply it in appropriate situations. Draws on research.	Satisfactory K&U. A straight-forward conceptualisation of the topic. Provides a range of response. Some attempt to refer to research.	Basic K&U only – very little acknowledgement of a wider context some but limited ranges of response to topic.	Little or patchy understanding of subject matter or issues relating to it.
Ability to critically reflect upon and evaluate key aspects of progress	A sophisticated reflection and evaluation of personal and professional practice.	A clear critical reflection and evaluation.	An attempt to critically reflect and evaluate but a tendency towards description.	Some discussion relating to issues surrounding the context but descriptive rather than critical reflection.	Little and very descriptive level of reflection.

You have satisfied/not satisfied the learning outcomes for this assignment.

First Marker Comments **Final Grade…C-** ……. • **You were able to discuss the issues raised quite well demonstrating a reasonably good understanding of aspects of your research but you did need to be led on occasions.** • **Your answers, although fairly accurate were a little basic. The ability to analyse and synthesise information was a little underdeveloped.** • **You did speak well and answered clearly.** **Signed**…….. **Name**……. **Grade C-** ……
Second Marker Comments
Grade **Please see tutor if you require further feedback**

Figure 4: Sample marking grid

Discussion and conclusion

It was surprising how little attention, reflected in the literature, has been paid to assessing the way in which students apply feedback to improve their work. In order to redress this imbalance, one must first, perhaps, explore student perceptions of the efficacy of such feedback. It was anticipated that our proposed research could help make explicit to students where the emphasis has been placed, i.e. learning outcomes addressed and the importance of aspects such as referencing, structure, grammar, etc. Nevertheless, despite the relatively small group of students sampled in this study, greater clarity in where students need to make improvements in order to gain higher grades has been elucidated.

Many students continue to lose marks for making the same type of mistakes, for example, lack of critical analysis; poor or inappropriate referencing, etc. Despite the perception that students receive detailed and pertinent feedback, it becomes lost in prose, which they may find hard to untangle. The template may help to overcome this, and it may also aid lecturers by providing appropriate feedback in the context of increasing demands on lecturers' time-management skills as a result of ever increasing cohort sizes (Lindsay, 2002) within higher education (HE) institutions. Comments from the student focus group interviews clearly indicate that students do want to engage in a process that helps them improve their grade. A number of students in the focus group used the template as a tool to help them review their work before submission. Staff found it helpful to use the template early in a module so that students were aware of how their work would be marked, thus engaging students in reflective practice as part of their assignment preparation.

> I think I have used it more in my preparation for my recent assignment on my PGCE course even though it is a different course. The strength for me about this template is that it relevant to all your work. I wish we could have had this in the first year. I think it would have really made me reflect on my work and I think I would perhaps have got better grades as a result.
>
> It depends on the learner really, doesn't it? If you want to improve your next assignment and want to get a better grade, you can look at something like this and it clearly states how you can improve your grade.

These comments are important insofar as they forge the relationship between interpreting feedback and reflective practice. Reflective practice is an integral element in many assessment strategies within sports students' modules. The degree to which students engage in reflective thinking is therefore arguably rather important given the number of undergraduate courses that aim to produce reflective practitioners (Kember *et al.*, 2000). We

hold the view that interpreting and applying feedback from assessments is a valuable skill that students should learn in order to achieve this.

Adaptations of the marking template have now been used across a variety of pathways and modules. Consultation took place throughout the design phase with both focus groups, the School of Sport and Exercise Science (SSES) learning and teaching advisory group, and the current external examiner for physical education. The revised second marking template was used for four semester 2 modules. Project leaders have assisted other module leaders in the preparation of the marking template to help tailor it to the different assessment levels and learning outcomes. Versions of the template have since been adapted for practical and oral exams as well, illustrating the flexible nature of the design.

The sample marking template chosen by the student focus groups was presented to the SSES learning and teaching advisory group, which approved our recommendation that the findings were disseminated through a staff development session in October 2006. As one might expect with a large department, the template received both support and constructive criticism. The objective is to refine further criterion-referenced marking templates by reflecting on departmental comments and continued student feedback.

The extent to which these findings generalise to students on sports-related courses elsewhere remains to be seen. The literature to date implies that the focus groups participating in the current study are not unique in their perceptions (O' Donovan *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, this issue has wider implications. Given the findings emerging from the present study, perhaps it would be prudent for institutions to investigate the efficacy of existing feedback protocols in all disciplines. The key lies not in staff-driven but rather in student-focused perceptions of the feedback required to participate actively in the journey to becoming a reflective practitioner.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Higher Education Academy Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network's Pedagogic Research and Development Fund, 2005/6.

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