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PRACTICE PAPER

Review of tutor feedback during undergraduate dissertations: A case study

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to establish and evaluate a method of recording tutor feedback given to students during the undergraduate dissertation tutorial process. The areas under review included both the tutorials themselves and written comments provided on draft work. Attention was paid to how effective these mechanisms were in supporting students through the dissertation process. Twelve sports education undergraduate students were asked to complete a dissertation feedback evaluation proforma after tutorials they attended between September 2006 and April 2007. The form covered key aspects of the student-tutor relationship, with specific reference being made to the strengths and weaknesses of tutorial feedback and support. The findings of the evaluation identified key issues for practice within the dissertation supervisory relationship. Furthermore, it was suggested by the students that this was an exercise with inherent merits for them: encouraging reflection on the learning process and helping them identify their responsibilities as independent learners. As a result, some students engaged more with the tutorial system and gained more from the experience.

Keywords: dissertations; feedback; student; tutorials; undergraduate

Introduction

Contemporary higher education is characterised by increasing student numbers and increasing diversity within that population. Consequently, academic staff face considerable demands on their time as workloads increase in response to the new climate (Ujma, 2007). The burdens placed on academic staff time have led to many feeling under more pressure when providing feedback and marking students' work. Yet providing informative, constructive and realistic feedback to students is a crucial part of any learning experience (Castle, Incedon, & Waring, 2008). Given these pressures, it is important to consider how to give good quality feedback in a clear and consistent manner within a time-constrained setting such as a face-to-face dissertation meeting.

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The shift in the professional environment would suggest there is a sound pedagogic argument for reflecting on the effectiveness of the feedback process (Mutch, 2003). Evidence of such discussions is now apparent, with feedback mechanisms being reviewed at the national level (Jawah et al., 2004) and at an institutional level (e.g. the authors' own institution requires module teams, as part of the end-of-module evaluation process, to include questions on how students perceived any feedback received). More important, however, feedback, in its various guises, has to enhance the learning experience and support efforts to improve a student's level of academic achievement. Engagement with the feedback process is therefore crucial.

Critiques of feedback have sought to identify the principles that underpin good practice. In 2004, the Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback (SENLEF) project set out seven principles of good feedback, arguing that when it feeds forward it can be instrumental in enhancing the learning experience and should be embedded in curricula. Students should be active recipients of feedback and the process of engaging with feedback should support the notion of students as empowered self-regulated learners (Jawah et al., 2004).

Whilst principles that define good practice are to be welcomed, the practical issues associated with providing feedback must be acknowledged. In light of the aforementioned pressures felt by colleagues, questions are raised about what constitutes feedback and what mechanisms can be used to ensure that students engage with it when offered (through formative or summative means). This aspect of the learning experience is drawn into sharp focus by the National Student Survey (NSS). What is apparent from the national overview of the NSS is that the analytical scale, "Assessment and Feedback", remains an area of practice delivered with varying degrees of success and resulting in varying levels of satisfaction amongst the student population (O'Brien & Sparshatt, 2007; Sturridge, 2007).

With responses to the NSS identifying issues with feedback, it is not unreasonable for staff to reflect on how best to address these concerns, on the different ways feedback can be provided and on whether students recognise the different forums for feedback that could inform their learning. Feedback for some staff and students means summative comments added to a front sheet of an assessment, such commentary providing a notional explanation of how the final grade was derived. This compares to others' perception that feedback is offered through discussions about draft work, assessment workshops, tutorials, peer-supported learning sets and online discussion groups. Castle et al. (2008, p. 90) ask: "What kind of feedback (given at what time) do students perceive to be most helpful in facilitating progression in their learning?" This paper wishes to respond to this question within the context of the formative feedback provided during the development of the undergraduate dissertation.

Undergraduate dissertation feedback

The dissertation can be the first major piece of research-driven assessment within the undergraduate curriculum (l'Anson & Smith, 2004). As a unit of independent study requiring critical engagement with relevant data, it is often identified as a key mechanism through which students are required to provide evidence of meeting subject-specific benchmark statements: synthesising a range of discipline-based knowledge and demonstrating the development of intellectual and key skills (QAA, 2008). Although the sector is increasingly embracing innovative practices that encourage students at all stages of their studies to engage in active learning and research-informed teaching (Jenkins, Healey, & Zetter, 2007), it is the dissertation and its requirement for the student to produce a substantive piece of independent work that brings into sharp focus the importance of the student-tutor relationship. It is this relationship that can enhance students' understanding of their subject specialism and facilitate an increased sense of self-efficacy. However, there are concerns over the resource implications of the dissertation, including supervisory time, and the negative impact the dissertation process may have on some students (Lafferty, 2007).

An interest in understanding further the supervisory relationship (the students' engagement with it and their perceptions of the value of the feedback obtained from it) is the focus of this paper. The authors felt it timely to evaluate faculty-level practices with regard to the

dissertation and thereby contribute to the broader discussion on feedback. With respect to the faculty's current practice there are two processes to note that contextualise the evaluation.

First, the faculty employs a dissertation tutorial record sheet system, which actively encourages students to note the content of their meetings with their tutor. These record sheets (which are duplicate carbon copy sheets) have two sections. Prior to each tutorial, students are requested to complete a section that identifies the key areas to be discussed with the tutor. This forms an agenda derived from the student's concerns. On completion of the tutorial, the tutor and student agree action points and both signatures are obtained. The original is kept by the student, and used to monitor progression and for reference purposes. The duplicate carbon copy is retained by the tutor. Furthermore, in the unlikely event of a suspected breach or a grade allocation dispute, the sheets are looked at by a second marker, or verifier, to clarify the content, relevance and details of tutorials undertaken.

Second, all students registered onto the dissertation module are asked to complete a module evaluation. However, this online evaluation receives a low response rate and, perhaps more importantly, the broad nature of this end-of-module evaluation does not allow tutors or students to reflect on and record ongoing details of the dissertation supervisory relationship. This detail is lost within a cohort evaluation. However, capturing such information could enhance our understanding of the dissertation process and allow tutors to evaluate elements of their practice.

As there was no method of monitoring the students' response to the feedback offered by a tutor and the merits and difficulties of the supervisory process itself, a proforma was designed to enable students to consider these points and feed their comments back directly to the tutor. The proforma designed for this evaluation of practice identified key aspects of the tutorials, with specific reference being made to the strengths and limitations of tutorial feedback. Students were further encouraged to make recommendations as to how changes to the dissertation support process might be made. Students were requested to answer specific questions after each tutorial, recording their responses on the proforma, thereby helping the tutor to undertake a critical review of the process (see Figure 1). The tutor did not, at any time, give the students any prompting or advice on how to answer these questions. They were, however, urged to take a couple of minutes at the end of each tutorial to reflect critically on the feedback given. On submission of the dissertation, students were asked to submit their proforma to the tutor and to discuss their thoughts in more depth. The intention was to improve the quality of tutor feedback (Nicholson, Cook, Cason, & Carter, 2005) and to find a way to monitor the feedback given (Adams, 2005). For the benefit of the dissertation tutor, the proforma was divided into four stages, enabling focused data collection:

Stage 1: Initial preparation for the meeting

Student to complete prior to the commencement of the tutorial

Stage 2: Personal reflective questions on the meeting

Student to complete at the end of the tutorial session without the presence of the tutor

Stage 3: Review of the feedback received to questions asked in tutorials

Student to complete at the end of the tutorial session without the presence of the tutor

Stage 4: Recommendations, strengths, weaknesses of the meeting

Student to complete at the end of the tutorial session without the presence of the tutor

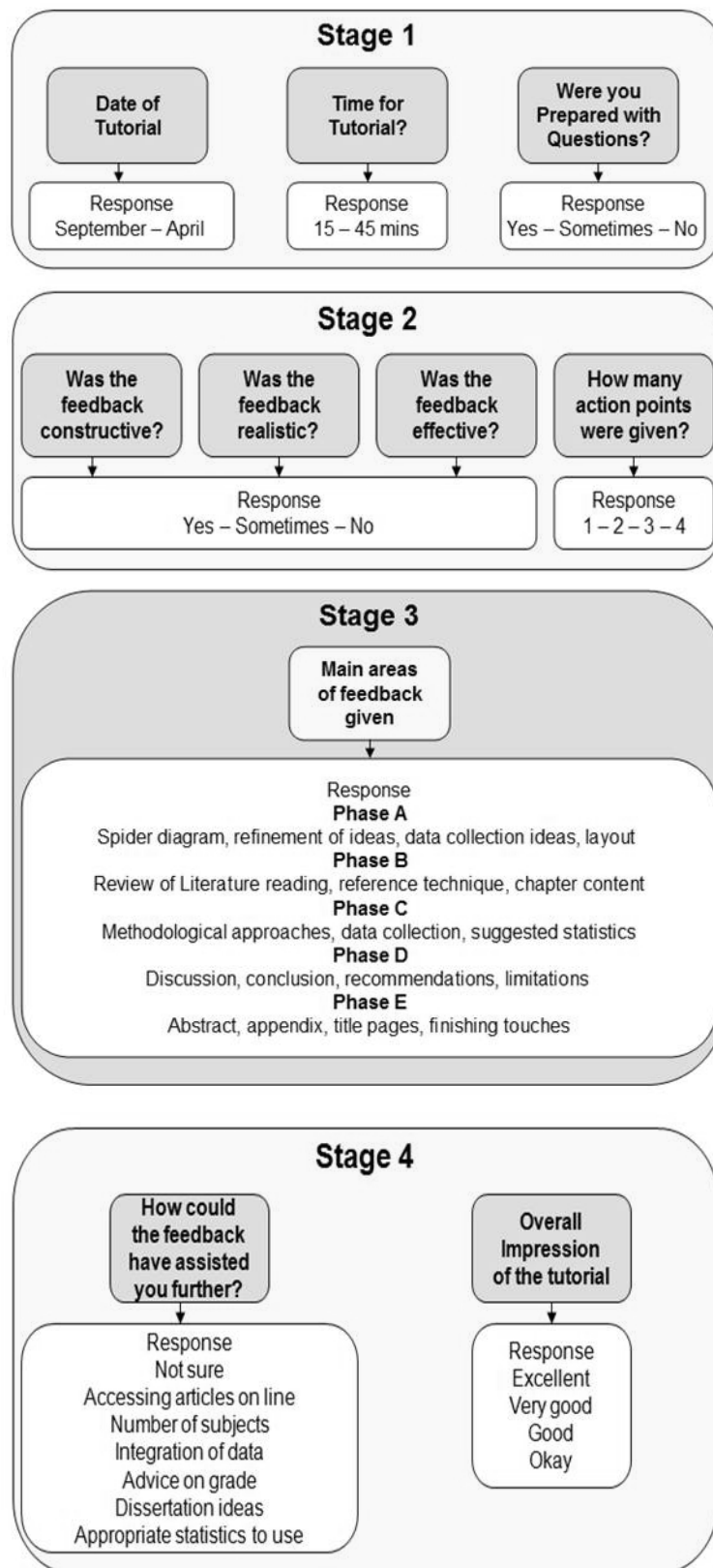


Figure 1: Four stages of the review process

Results

This section sets out the key observations from this review of practice. It will consider patterns of tutorial attendance, student perceptions of tutorial discussions, tutor feedback, and tutorial reflections from both the tutor's and the students' perspectives.

Tutorial patterns

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the students' expectations and responses to tutor feedback, contextual data were gathered and analysed in line with other studies (Hyland, 1998; Moore, Porayska-Pomsta, Vargas, & Zinn, 2004). Results indicated that students arranged between one and four tutorials per month and between 2 and 12 tutorials over the course of the academic year. It was interesting to observe how the number of tutorials attended fluctuated over the course of the academic year. Those in the latter half of September, October and February were the most heavily attended (see Table 1). Other module submissions and examinations, sporting commitments, holidays and external influences appear to have been responsible for the falling away of tutorial attendance. Identifying such pressure points requires students to reflect on their time management. The pattern observed is unlikely to surprise anyone but for tutors it does highlight times when students seek to access the support of the supervisor and this sensitises them to the needs of their tutees. Early engagement with the dissertation, setting out the demands of the coming academic session, getting the foundations of the study right and then addressing the data collection/analysis questions midway through Semester 2, seem to be the priorities for students.

	Dissertation timeline →							
	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Number of tutorials (total)	12	11	10	4	2	11	9	4
Tutorial time (minutes)	15-30	20-35	30-40	20-35	30-40	35-45	25-30	15-20

Table 1: Number of tutorials attended and average length of time of tutorials

Another discernable pattern was the duration of the appointments, which ranged from 15 to 45 minutes. The University of Gloucestershire allocates each student eight hours of tutorial contact time, and guidelines issued to students recommend that they consider breaking this up into series of 30-minute tutorials. However, it is generally at the students' discretion how much time is requested at any one time. The length of the meetings appears to be closely linked to the stage the student is at in developing their project (Table 1). For example, in the early stages, when the refinement of ideas and collection of initial literature was taking place, the time requested by students was minimal. Perhaps this explains the greater frequency of meetings where the student required a "short sharp" tutorial. This is surprising: one might have anticipated more face-to-face dialogue during the initial stages. However, as students began to understand the role of the dissertation tutor and what was expected of them, their expectations of themselves and the nature of the tutorials altered. There was a noticeable increase in tutorial time as students submitted literature reviews and discussed the empirical phase of the dissertation. It was only towards the latter part of the dissertation process that demand for supervisory time began to taper off.

It is difficult to determine whether this tail-off was a good thing and what the student intended or whether this was a consequence of other factors that might be expected to emerge at the end of a semester. One interpretation could be that the students were becoming independent learners, comfortable with their understanding of the requirements of the dissertation. On the other hand, it is possible that there were other thought processes and choices being made by students. It has been reported that students of lower academic ability tend to overestimate their performance (Prohaska, 1994). This is not an indication that these students lack skills of reflection or self-efficacy, but perhaps that they may be overly optimistic about their ability to meet the demands of some academic processes (Prohaska, 1994). Alternatively, it could be due to the dissertation tutor's overestimation of students' academic ability and understanding. According to Chi, Siler, and Jeong (2004), tutors need to be adaptive when monitoring students' understanding, thus knowing how and when to deliver explanations, feedback and questions in an accurate manner. If the dissertation tutor is disengaged or has poor diagnostic skills when checking students' understanding then the tutoring process will inevitably be less effective (Chi et al., 2004).

Tutorial discussion

The intention of the dissertation tutor was to avoid telling the student that they were incorrect in their sense of dissertation focus and direction, and to attempt to lead students to discover the error themselves. Consequently, it was hoped that students would be empowered to make choices about how to make the necessary changes to draft work (Moore et al., 2004). This type of guidance gave the students a feeling of control and, as a consequence, the dissertation tutor saw noticeable increases in students attending their tutorials with prepared pertinent questions (see Table 2). Encouragingly, students actively sought clarification of the tutor's suggestions and challenged the advice offered on a regular basis. Common discussion points included: what rationale is there for this type of statistic; why is this method more effective than another; I am finding it difficult to justify that concept, can you explain the epistemology in more depth; and, I need to argue qualitative versus quantitative research. The most commonly used phrase was simply: why? As previously alluded to, students felt more in control and confident in their abilities. This led to a tangible shift in the roles the dissertation tutor and student performed as the supervisory relationship developed and matured.

	Dissertation timeline →							
	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Yes	2	3	6	3	2	8	8	4
Sometimes	0	3	1	0	0	3	1	0
No	10	5	3	1	0	0	0	0

Table 2: Students who were prepared with questions prior to the tutorials

Tutor feedback

There needs to be a fine balance where students undertake as much of the work as independently as possible but are provided with sufficient feedback and guidance to prevent them from becoming frustrated or confused (Moore et al., 2004). The dissertation tutor was therefore conscious that the nature of the feedback had to vary according to individual differences in learning styles and the related needs of students (Hyland, 1998; Chi et al., 2004). In this regard, one-on-one tutor feedback, both written and verbal, was generally perceived as being constructive, realistic and effective (see Table 3). This conclusion was drawn out of the analysis of both the tutorial proformas and end of year feedback discussion.

Questions	Dissertation timeline →							
	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
<i>Was the feedback constructive?</i>								
Yes	12	10	7	4	1	9	8	4
Sometimes	0	1	3	0	1	2	1	0
<i>Was the feedback realistic?</i>								
Yes	12	10	8	3	2	9	9	4
Sometimes	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0
Not sure	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
No	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
<i>Was the feedback effective?</i>								
Yes	11	11	10	4	2	11	9	3
Sometimes	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Table 3: Students' opinions of dissertation support tutorial (tutor feedback)

Interestingly, one example involved a student commenting that they had received negative feedback from the dissertation tutor. This surprised the tutor: had they anticipated that their feedback would be considered negative, a different approach could have been adopted. The

incident raised awareness of the need to be sensitive to students and that one style of feedback does not fit all. This helped to reinforce the need to have mechanisms in place that check understanding and also ensure that students feel the tutorials provide them with key points that support amendments to draft work. Mechanisms might include more question and answer style dialogue within tutorials in order to minimise misunderstandings and being conscious of limiting overly complicated verbal feedback in order to maximise the utility of the advice offered. Castle et al. (2008, p. 89) reinforced this point by suggesting that “the way in which a student interprets the feedback is not necessarily the same as the message the tutor wishes to disseminate”.

Tutorial reflections

Stage 4 of the evaluation required the students to reflect on how the feedback could have assisted them further. Data collected found that 7 of the 12 students were undecided or not sure how to respond to the question. It was apparent that many of the tutees found articulating a reflective response difficult. This emphasised to the tutor that there should not be an assumption that students know how to engage in reflective work, even at Level III. Other data collection found that 4 students wanted clarification about the choice of statistics to use and 3 requested an indication of the grade that could be awarded for each chapter submitted. It is important to stress that under no circumstances were grades or potential grades ever discussed, as this was deemed unprofessional. The practice would also have taken the students' focus away from the process of developing the work. While students naturally have an interest in the final mark, the learning environment should encourage academic development. It is engagement with the feedback that can bring its rewards, not a focus on the grade (Buswell & Matthews, 2004). Exemplar dissertations were also wanted from 2 tutees; additional advice on accessing articles was requested by another; and another wished for greater clarity on the number of subjects needed to increase the validity of their study.

Overall, students recorded positive comments about the tutorials offered during the dissertation support process. Although this was welcomed, it is important to recognise that the delivery of feedback and management of the supervisory relationship can always be improved. Endeavouring to monitor tutorials and other forms of feedback will help the tutor to develop strengths and reflect on where improvements can be made.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main benefit of this exercise was that the dissertation tutor established how effective and realistic their feedback to 12 undergraduate students was during the academic year. This was achieved by the students completing a proforma and engaging in a reflective discussion at the end of the dissertation process.

Despite the relatively small sample in this study, the collated results and the supplementary anecdotal evidence suggested that the students made a positive attempt to reflect on whether the tutor feedback supported their developmental needs. Even though many students found the reflective process a relatively new and thought-provoking exercise, some were able to demand greater clarity in the feedback obtained from the tutor as a result. This greater detail encouraged students to make more specific improvements to their work. Furthermore, by actively connecting with the tutor, they had an improved working relationship over the 8 months that further promoted a sense of self-efficacy in their learning and encouragingly these students achieved higher grades. Overall, the students' feedback suggested that the tutor was delivering high quality and relevant feedback. However, it is important to reflect on where enhancements can be made, especially when planning for ongoing improvements to the dissertation supervisory relationship. Thus the authors suggested three enhancements:

1. To consider various feedback strategies to assist different academic abilities (e.g., podcasting, student strategy task sheets, different tutorial environment, role reversal).

2. To engage in various forms of tutorial dialogues to assist with different students (e.g., question and answer sessions, group tutorials, staged tutorials at certain points in the academic calendar).
3. To develop student feedback on the tutor's feedback (e.g., workshop on reflection and reflective activities, student reflective task sheets, integration of reflection activity within tutorials).

As a result of this study, the dissertation feedback review will continue to be implemented in future academic years. An area that merits further examination is the question, how could the feedback have helped you further? Students found this question particularly difficult to answer, which perhaps illustrates a lack of in-depth reflection (Mills, 2007). The proforma will therefore be slightly amended to encourage an improved articulation of the students' experiences. Finally, it is important to maintain the effectiveness of the feedback by continuing to monitor and enhance the quality of the feedback provided (Nicholson et al., 2005).

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