



Investigating students' responses to different styles of essay feedback

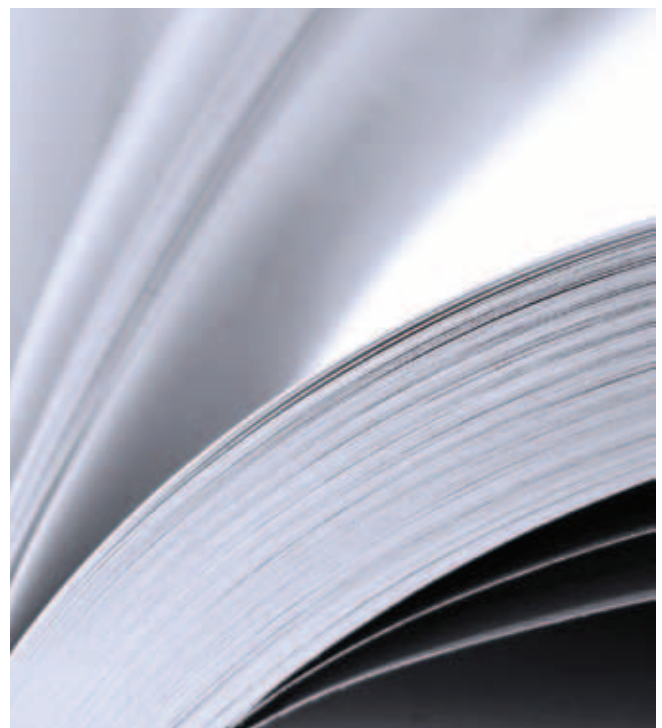
Abstract

This report describes some of the major outcomes of a GEES Subject Centre Small-Scale Project, run in the 2007-08 academic year, where first-year undergraduate students in Geography were provided with feedback on an assessed essay in one of eight different styles. These different feedback styles were evaluated by students through pre- and post-session anonymous questionnaires. This report makes a preliminary evaluation of students' responses to these different feedback styles and considers the implications of these styles for student learning.

Introduction and aims

'Feedback', within the context of assessment, refers to the 'information provided by an agent... regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p81). This broad definition is useful because it can refer to any internal or external stimulus that impacts on student learning, and which can contribute to reflection, deep learning, and attainment. The breadth of this definition of feedback, however, has also constrained exploration of feedback style and effectiveness. This is largely because it is difficult to find the correct methodology with which to investigate 'feedback', and because the role of feedback in shaping student learning is difficult to quantify. This latter characteristic is significant because, in reality, the learning undertaken by students in response to feedback is neither unidirectional nor linear: student learning and progression takes place in jumps and in response to a range of factors, which makes it difficult to link to specific instances of feedback (Carless, 2006). This more nuanced view of feedback contrasts with the somewhat optimistic view that argues that feedback

is associated with a permanent, sustained and directional change in learning. In this standpoint, feedback can be seen in a transformational sense as being the catalyst for change (a 'change-agent') in an individual's learning, learning style, achievement or understanding (Higgins *et al.*, 2002; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Feedback, especially one-off, interventionist feedback from a tutor, can act as the touchstone for this transformation. Feedback also forms part of a wider set of tools that can be used by students, individually or in groups, to set their work or their ideas within a wider context, or to reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, and to evaluate against marking criteria. Finally, feedback can be an initiator of academic dialogue between tutor and student that can close the quality assurance loop.



This report describes a project that examined in detail the role of one-off feedback given in response to a standard undergraduate essay. This project focused on essay feedback for a number of reasons. First, many studies identify feedback (in a range of forms) as a key component contributing to students' learning (e.g. Carless, 2006; Handley *et al.*, 2007). These studies do not agree, however, on the following: which feedback style (written, verbal etc) is most effective in contributing to students' learning; when it should be deployed for its greatest effect; or in what ways action taken by the student as a result of the feedback they received can be followed up or reinforced by the tutor (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Second, the essay is (still) a standard means of summative assessment for undergraduate students and is used routinely across a range of academic disciplines and at all levels of study. As such, the feedback that students receive from a tutor on their performance in essays is one of the most important formative experiences they undertake. In addition, essay assignments are often completed in a largely self-directed way with limited tutor supervision, which makes them ideal for large classes. Finally, 'assessment and feedback' forms one of the six groups of questions in the National Student Survey (NSS). This survey, undertaken annually since 2005, polls final year undergraduates on their learning experiences at UK Higher Education institutions (HEIs). Results from the NSS contribute to the position of HEIs in UK league tables. Questions on assessment and feedback in the NSS in almost all cases receive lower scores than in other categories. This means that

improved quality and usefulness of feedback has strategic, as well as practical, importance for student learning and progression.

Methodology

This project evaluates the use of different feedback styles on a single 1500-word undergraduate essay, by using a student-centred and longitudinal methodology. The essay assignment forms part of the assessment for a compulsory, year 1 Physical Geography module at the University of Exeter (Cornwall Campus). In the 2007-8 academic year, 81 students completed the module (34F, 47M) of which 20 were on BA (Human Geography) and 58 on BSc (Physical Geography) programmes. Three students were on Joint Honours programmes with departments other than Geography. Students completed an anonymous pre-session questionnaire (n=46) which evaluated their attitudes to assessment and feedback, including receiving feedback in different styles. Following submission of the essay, students were assigned randomly into ten groups. These groups received feedback on their essays in one of eight styles (with two control groups), which included disclosure of their percentage mark (Table 1). The control groups received standard written comments (with their mark) only. Students' evaluation of their experience of receiving feedback by these different styles was undertaken by anonymous post-session questionnaires. At the end of the process, all students received standard written feedback. All questionnaires are available by request from the author.

Feedback style (number of student respondents)
Face-to-face verbal and written feedback from peers (7)
Face-to-face verbal and written feedback from a tutor (6)
Face-to-face verbal feedback from a tutor (4)
Audio feedback from a tutor as a mp3 file (6)
Video feedback from a tutor as a movie file (8)
Feedback as a video showing their essay being marked in real time by a tutor (7)
Real time video feedback from a tutor using Skype (5)
Typed feedback from a tutor using a WebCT-hosted chatroom (4)
Control (2 groups) (7)

Table 1: Different feedback styles investigated in this project.

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Results

The pre-session questionnaire asked about students' attitudes to receiving feedback in different ways (Table 2). Traditional feedback styles, by verbal and written tutor feedback, receive the highest Lickert values. Other less-familiar feedback styles have lower values. Students were asked to name those things that, in their view, make for good feedback. Items mentioned (n=66) include ways to improve the essay (48%), good and bad points about the essay (21%), essay structure (10%), reference to marking criteria (10%), and reference to a model answer (9%).

Some students' responses to receiving feedback in certain ways are shown in Table 3, collated from the

free-text comments box on the post-session questionnaire. The responses, and qualitative evaluations from the students' perspective of their effectiveness in enhancing learning, are almost all strongly positive (n=40), with 50% of responses reporting their own feedback style to be 'much better' and 48% to be 'somewhat better' than standard written tutor feedback alone. The only exception was for peer feedback (n=7) where 42% reported it to be 'no different', 42% 'somewhat worse' and 12% 'somewhat better' than written tutor feedback.

The free-text comments shown in Table 3 highlight a number of themes, including the perceived quantity of feedback (expanding on certain points, depth of

Feedback style	Pre-session questionnaire: student rating of how useful different feedback styles may be for their learning. Average Lickert score (modal class), where 1 = 'Not useful at all', 5 = 'Very useful'	Pre-session questionnaire: do you think this feedback method would be useful to your learning? (%)		Post-session questionnaire: do you think this feedback method would be useful to your learning? (%)	
		No	Yes	No	Yes
Verbal feedback from your peers	3.39 (4)	32	68	53	47
Face to face verbal feedback from a tutor	4.76 (5)	1	99	10	90
Audio feedback from a tutor as a mp3 file	3.41 (4)	37	63	44	56
Video feedback from a tutor as a movie file	3.15 (4)	45	55	49	51
Seeing a real-time video of your essay being marked by a tutor	2.89 (2)	54	46	45	55
Receiving feedback on your essay from a tutor using online video (e.g. Skype)	3.04 (3)	51	49	63	37
Receiving feedback on your essay from a tutor in an online chatroom	2.91 (3)	53	47	67	33
Traditional written feedback from a tutor only	4.15 (4)	10	90	N/A	N/A

Table 2: Results from pre- and post-session questionnaire surveys (n=46).

engagement), and its perceived quality (suggestions for positive outcomes, improvements for the future). Free-text comments on the advantages of these different methods focus on the depth of explanation (20 of 45 comments), the personalised feedback (6 comments), the opportunity to ask questions with

face-to-face feedback (8 comments), and the ability to pause or make notes with audio/video feedback (6 comments). Free-text comments on disadvantages focus on the lack of opportunity to ask questions (10 of 23 comments) and the lack of hard-copy (6 comments) with audio/video feedback.

Feedback style	Student comments
Verbal feedback from your peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful insight into the approaches and views of other people in the peer group – also useful for ‘grading’ yourself against others. • It was very useful to read other people’s work as it showed other angles that could be taken to answer the same question, and it showed other writing styles. • Felt as though it was more of a fair discussion, and I could explain myself.
Face to face verbal feedback from a tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where you went wrong was explained well so you understand better. Face to face you can ask questions. • Essay was explained with how things could be expanded and changed. 3 minutes of verbal feedback wouldn’t fit on to marking sheet. Beginning to forget it already. • Found it very useful as feedback was explained more fully than written, going through step by step.
Audio feedback from a tutor as a mp3 file	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gained more information than written however accusations/assumptions were made but no defence could occur. • Positive – I learnt far more about my essay from the audio than I ever did from the feedback sheet. • Very positive, clear on what is good and what needs work and also provides advice on how to improve in future essays.
Video feedback from a tutor as a movie file	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely positive – focused, specific and non-pressured. • Overall useful. The video expanded on the points raised in the written feedback sheet. You could go through the essay along with the marker and see exactly where issues/problems with it were. You could pause the video to make notes of what the marker was saying. The marker provided improvements and sources of help in future. • Very good, more in depth and clear. Generally very constructive and helpful.
Seeing a real-time video of your essay being marked by a tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was slightly embarrassing, but that has aided me to do better in the future, and improve in many areas. • This was a good experience. Felt it was a lot clearer than just written feedback and helped to explain points made rather than just listing [them]. • Positive to an extent, having the video file enabled me to pause and take notes etc.
Receiving feedback on your essay from a tutor using online video (e.g. Skype)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good – being able to ask questions as you go through the text was very useful. • I thought it was useful and the feedback was a lot more detailed than feedback we have received in the past. It was the good that the points made on the feedback sheet could be expanded [on] to a greater degree. • I found Skype a good method of receiving feedback as it is interactive therefore you can respond to possible improvements.
Receiving feedback on your essay from a tutor in an online chatroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At first I thought it was pointless but then I found that it could be useful. Because it was easier for everyone to get involved and it doesn’t require everyone to meet up. • This method was useful as it allowed the written feedback to be discussed with the person who wrote it so a better understanding of the feedback could be achieved. • Good, it answered some questions I had and expanded well on the feedback sheet.
Traditional written feedback from a tutor only (control group)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly positive but difficult to read and there was no chance for discussion. However, key points were noted. • OK – not really informative and you cannot talk in depth about where I have gone drastically wrong. Not sure whether I am understanding comments correctly. • It was ok – you received brief comments about your work and certain issues [were] picked up.

Table 3: Results from post-session questionnaire survey on the students’ experiences of receiving essay feedback in a certain style.

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Students were also asked whether, in their opinion, these different feedback methods would be useful or not to their learning (Table 2). Results from the pre-session questionnaire show generally positive responses to all proposed feedback methods. The post-session questionnaire, however, shows a noticeable shift to more negative responses in all categories (Table 2). Superficially this suggests that no feedback style is useful, but the post-session questionnaires show a more nuanced view of these preferences (Table 4). For example, of those students who had received verbal tutor feedback (n=4), all also wanted audio and Skype feedback and none wanted video feedback (Table 4). All of those students who had received peer feedback (n=7) also wanted verbal tutor feedback, and no student wanted feedback from any other method. All of the students who had received real-time video feedback (n=7) also wanted video and audio feedback, and no one wanted Skype or chatroom feedback. The significance of these contrasting preferences is discussed below.

commented, unprompted, that they would like to speak to a tutor.

Discussion

The pre-session questionnaire highlights students' preconceptions on the style, purpose and significance of feedback. It is notable that the highest Lickert scores are associated with the feedback styles that incoming students are most likely to be familiar with from school or college. This is also shown in Table 4 where all students, irrespective of feedback style, would like face-to-face verbal tutor feedback. The lowest Lickert values are associated with less familiar and more innovative styles, which is consistent with results from other studies (e.g. Knight, 2007). The free-text responses on what makes for good feedback (e.g. Table 3) also clearly show that students are strongly concerned with *feedback for achievement* (driven by identifying how to improve, good/bad points, marking criteria, model answers) rather than *feedback for learning* (cf. Pain and Mowl, 1996). At no

		...also wanted to experience						
		Verbal peer	F2F verbal tutor	MP3	Video	Realtime video	Skype	Chatroom
Students who experienced...	(Control)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Written tutor	Y	Y	Y			N	
	Chatroom		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	-
	Skype	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y
	Real-time video	N	Y	Y	-	-	N	N
	Video	N	Y					N
	MP3		Y	-			N	N
	F2F verbal tutor		-	Y	N	N	Y	
	Verbal peer	-	Y	N	N	N	N	N

Table 4: Matrix of responses to future feedback styles. Students who had experienced one feedback style (rows) were asked which other feedback styles they would like to experience (columns). Y=yes please, N= no thanks, (blank)= no preference.

Irrespective of which feedback method they received, when asked whether the feedback would help them to achieve a better mark next time, 78% of all students answered yes and only 2% no (n=46). In all of these methods of receiving feedback no student

point did any student define feedback with respect to learning or understanding. This shows very clearly the dominance of surface/procedural over deep learning approaches (Knight, 2010).

The differences between pre- and post-session questionnaire results regarding the different feedback styles appears to link closely to this surface learning (Table 4). The results suggest that, having had a positive experience from one feedback style, students preferentially choose styles that are similar to the one they have experienced, to the exclusion of other styles. The stark difference between groups of students who had experienced different feedback styles shows this clearly (Table 4). For example, those students who had experienced verbal feedback appear to want to reinforce this behaviour through experiencing Skype and audio feedback. The experiences of using Skype and a chatroom appear to be linked, and these mutual preferences are not shared with other styles. It is also notable that all styles ask for face-to-face verbal tutor feedback, though, as noted below, the uptake of this is very low. Overall, these results suggest that no one style provides an overall better experience than any other, and that student preferences are more nuanced and dependent on the nature of the feedback itself (including its tone, timing and structure) (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). The free-text comments (Table 3) also suggest that the mark students received did not influence their perception of its usefulness.

The strong positive response to the experience of receiving feedback in these different styles (Table 3) highlights this point, and is useful for a number of reasons. First, it suggests that when students are required to actively engage with feedback (rather than to be the passive recipients of feedback) they are much more likely to reflect and act upon it. Second, it shows that there should not be a single or predefined way of receiving feedback, and that this can be achieved in different ways and at different times. One student commented: “[I] found it much more useful than expected, making me more willing to consider other types of feedback I previously didn’t think I would have found useful.”

Third, these components together converge on the notion of feedback as part of ongoing tutor-student dialogue focused on enhancing learning and developing deep rather than surface learning approaches.

Part of this student engagement with feedback, however, also depends on its perceived quality and quantity. It is likely that many students (incorrectly) have the view that more feedback is better feedback. It is also likely that some tutor comments are misinterpreted, which was identified in some free-text

comments (Table 3) (Orrell, 2006). Although student responses suggest that face-to-face contact (Table 4) and the opportunity to ask questions is important (Table 3), in practice the uptake of this opportunity (in the author’s view) is near zero, despite many promptings. This may therefore be an issue of students’ perception of tutor availability and approachability.

Conclusions

Feedback on assignments is a key component of student learning, but its effectiveness is contingent on a range of interrelated issues. Feedback style is one such issue, which has been explored in the project described here. The results show fundamentally that feedback that is perceived by students as useful, and which delivers in-depth information that is linked to higher future achievement, can be delivered effectively in any number of styles (Tables 3, 4). Although this emphasises the role of the tutor to provide this high-quality feedback, it also suggests that students have an important role to play through active engagement with feedback in order to effect change (Orrell, 2006).

Part of this engagement may involve disentangling ‘assessment and feedback’, so that feedback can be about learning rather than just achievement through assessment (Nicol, 2007). The results presented here suggest that feedback, and therefore learning, can take place in more informal settings or in different ways without the need for (summative) assessment, and can be achieved through a range of media that promote tutor-student interaction (Higgins *et al.*, 2002). The results also suggest that relatively small changes from current practice, to better embed this interaction and make feedback part of the active learning process, could have significant impacts on student satisfaction.

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GEES PHOTO COMPETITION 2009/10



RUNNER UP

Helen Wakefield
"Suburban Bush Fire",
Safety Bay, Perth, Western
Australia, 18th April 2009