

The Problem with Written Feedback

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This paper evaluates the project: 'Showing; Not Telling: Modelling written feedback' to address issues of student satisfaction in feedback on the local, national, European and global dimensions. The focus is on improving written feedback to large cohorts for whom dialogic feedback is challenging due to workload constraints by reframing it within both tutor-peer feedback and formative assessment, i.e., as part of a process leading to a summative outcome commonly understood by both student and assessor.

Research Question

What are the issues in feedback and how can they be offset in written-only feedback? This will entail an analysis of what remedy peer review models offer to close the gap between feedback and student action on that feedback as well as an examination of the drawbacks of 'feedback as telling' models; and how our 'showing not telling' model can offset many of these drawbacks.

Recent discourse on feedback eschews the written-only as it lacks the affordances offered by the meta-dialogues available in constructivist feedback protocols. Sambell, Brown, Race (2019). The drawback to dialogic feedback, however, lies not in its efficacy, but in its practicality within the demands of ever-increasing workloads and large classes.

Our aim is to enhance the feedback literacy Carless and Boud (2018) of both staff and students by re-shaping the way we both construct and respond to written assignments to improve their effectiveness by blending formative and summative assessment within a peer-tutor review framework to: 1. develop a positive learning & teaching culture that goes beyond the issues identified in a range of NSS and PTES surveys to foster inquisitive minds and collaborative effort; 2. achieve high levels of satisfaction as well as timely and high-quality assessment & feedback. which will enable students to improve on a current assignment through feedback which addresses three areas of their formative work by identifying: 1) positive trends; 2) areas requiring immediate action; and 3) marker – modelling that is needed at the meso - level to demonstrate, explicitly, how improvements can be made to an assignment, thus bridging the gap between telling students what they should do to improve their work and showing them. This practice of modelling is based on the seminal work of Bandura, A. (1977) on social learning theory and specifically applies the concept of modelling high quality feedback for the use of both staff and students.

Feedback has been perennially problematic in student surveys - NSS (2017-19), PTES (2017-19) and we have grounded our work in extant theory and so, where Brookhart (2017) identifies a range of key elements to effective feedback including: timing, content specificity and personalisation, Brookfield (2017) focuses on an enhanced form of reflective triangulation, imagining the use of four lenses to ensure criticality: students, colleagues, personal, theory and research, while within the framework of Lan, L. Xiongyi, L. Steckelberg (2009), peer assessment becomes a strategy for formative assessment and a tool for reflection by students (Cheng & Warren, 1999 cited in Lan, L. Xiongyi, L. Steckelberg (2009). In policy terms, the European Programme Accreditation System (EPAS) cites feedback as a criterion to meet accreditation standards in Europe. This project tries to build on these works, national, European and global by inculcating the strategies identified within a malleable pattern. The project outcomes will benefit staff and students within Glasgow University and on the European and global stages where similar issues have been identified with the quality of student feedback. Additionally, in providing staff with research - based evidence from the project to enhance their practice, we will move towards more effective assessment architecture and written feedback for all forms of essay/assignment – based summative assessment.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

Six focus groups of 4 were established to capture the views of the model from volunteers from two courses from different Schools; the MEd/MSc in TESOL and the MEd in Education. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis was deployed by all researchers. This model starts with familiarisation and codification then shifts to the identification and extrapolation of themes, leading to eventual publication.

A protocol to apply this model was agreed in advance of the data analysis. One researcher identified the initial codes from one of the data sets to guide the other researchers in their own analyses, while still encouraging individual analyses to capture the richness of the data. The data sets were as follows:

Theme Frequency of references

Confidence 28

Emotion 6

Opportunity 19

Motivation 13

Usefulness 42

Objectivity 9

Unexpected Outcomes 9

Engagement with Criteria 11

Engagement with Feedback 8

The researchers analysed their allocated data set - one with which they were unfamiliar, which was characterised by a combination of inductive and deductive modes. The primary driver was to explore the effectiveness of an intervention to improve feedback practices, so the main approach was inductive - to generate new theory, although a deductive element remained - to test the effectiveness of existing approaches. The researchers met to thematise the findings from their analyses with the final product being collated by one researcher following the approval of the team. Findings are summarised below. Confidence is categorised into two forms: intra-personal and extra-personal with impact being greater in relation to the former rather than the latter. Emotion concerns the defensiveness with which participants received feedback - also influenced by the tone of the feedback. Opportunity was separated into two forms: personal and structural. In personal terms, participants viewed

formative feedback positively. In structural terms, many were keen to engage with the process of improving the model of feedback. Motivation was improved by the initiative, particularly in terms of focus in both criteria focus and deadline focus. Usefulness was defined in terms of specificity and the extent to which the feedback could be converted into improvement. Objectivity was a key finding; it offset the subjective experience of working on the formative stages of an assignment in isolation. A key Unexpected Outcome was improvements in critical thinking. Engagement with Criteria and Feedback both developed criticality while the main aim is that it was, 'short and to the point.'

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The support for developing feedback literacy was welcomed as the resources:

- Supported the forensic examination of assessment criteria and the mapping of these to exemplar scripts to provide access to the otherwise tacit knowledge of assessors;
- Aided the growth of a community of practice as participants were aware that they were collaborating on an equal footing with tutors with the aim of improving future practice;

Participants found the hybridisation of formative and summative elements helpful as this averted the need to translate feedback from one assignment into action on a separate one;

A strength of the protocol was the harmonised tutor-peer approach;

Feedback order was significant as motivation was increased by the initial focus on positives;

The fusion of peer followed by tutor feedback proved to be helpful for reviewees and reviewers as:

- Reviewers benefitted from the cognitive demands of prioritising feedback as well as the metacognitive engagement with the process of modelling for a peer;
- Reviewees benefitted from their work being scrutinised through two lenses.

Positive relationships within which assessors were positive were significant in motivating students to activate feedback and was supported by following the order of feedback in our model, beginning with the positives and reinforced by exemplification.

Finally, obvious issues were identified preventing their escalation which would impinge on the grade awarded. The key, however, was word choice and tone. Supportive word choices produced better results than unreconstructed comments provided by assessors who had not considered the potential impact on assesses.

The findings indicate the need for staff and student support to shift from an instructional to a descriptive model of feedback, which might be achieved through creation of a co-constructed protocol to exemplify good practice in relation to both the deployment and use of feedback.

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