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Sharing practice on framing feedback around student development

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Abstract

In this article we share practical and evidence-based advice on framing assessment feedback around student development. The practices that we share are centred on two aspects of framing feedback. The first is in how feedback is generated and how the teacher can author effective feedback by making it personal, situated within the student's learning journey and by providing actionable points for the next assignment. The second aspect that we share is the framing of feedback in relation to student reflection and use of the feedback, scaffolding the development of a dialogue between student and teacher, and helping the student to situate their assignment and feedback within their own wider learning journey. Ultimately, we want students to find feedback useful and for feedback to represent a positive interaction between teacher and student, but both teachers and students need tools that help them to create usable feedback.

Keywords

pedagogy, assessment, feedback, reflection, higher education

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Introduction

A key aspect of learning is receiving actionable feedback that allows a student to develop their knowledge and skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). From the perspective of university-level degree programmes, given how highly students and lecturers both value feedback, it is surprising how regularly both parties comment with dissatisfaction about the process (Winstone et al., 2017a; Winstone et al., 2021b). In a recent qualitative analysis of lecturer and student experiences of feedback, Henderson et al. (2019) observed many challenges common to our own experience, such as students saying that some of the feedback they receive is unclear, unguided, and at times discouraging to the point that they are demotivated to seek further help. Lecturers on the other hand highlight increasing workloads and a feeling of not enough time to give appropriate feedback, along with a perception that the feedback is not acted on nor read by students. Whilst we do not propose that negative attributions regarding each other's attitude are always misperceived by the two groups, we do believe that most lecturers and students are highly invested in the feedback process and are keenly looking to improve this two-way conversation. To that end, in this paper we start by presenting three considerations, based on the literature and on our own experience, as to how lecturers might consider framing feedback to be more effective for student development, before looking at improving student engagement with feedback. The three considerations are:

1. Will the student resubmit the assignment?
2. At what stage is the student in the programme?
3. Are the feedback comments actionable?

Considerations

Will the student resubmit the assignment?

In our experience, for lecturers whose time is split between research and teaching, a common instance of providing feedback tends to be peer-to-peer review, where the aim, either as a colleague or as part of the peer-review publication process, is to help improve a written manuscript for publication through a series of incremental changes to the same piece of work. Since such peer-to-peer feedback for publication purposes is within their most recent experience of providing feedback, we have often seen that our colleagues and mentees recreate the practices for peer review that they have learned, when giving feedback to students. This cycle of feedback however depends on there being an opportunity to develop and hone the work further. In comparison, on a degree programme, it is not always the case that a student will have numerous opportunities to redraft and resubmit an improved version of the one piece of work, unless specifically built into the course as part of a formative task. In our own school, for example, more regularly a student submits one assignment, receives feedback on that assignment, and is then expected to use that feedback to improve their next submission, but that submission is a different piece of writing. Similarly, when formative feedback is offered, it is often only at a single opportunity. As such, for feedback to be beneficial to students, it is important that we as lecturers are mindful of how one assignment feeds into the next assignment, and whether a student will redraft the current piece or not.

Consider the following two hypothetical, but not uncommon, comments that may be given as feedback on a student's essay:

- It would have been good to have included further information about the theory of X.
- For next time, aim to give further details about the underlying theories to give more background to a reader.

The first statement assumes a chance to redraft the current assignment as the comment shows how to correct the writing that is specifically being fed back on. In contrast, the second statement is a more forward-looking comment that the student can apply to all future and similar assignments. Whilst the first statement is meant with good intention, showing students how to adapt the current assignment, it does not actually benefit the student for their next assignment unless the student can make the meta-cognitive step from what they should have done in the current assignment to what they should do in all future assignments (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The second statement, shown to help students more in the long-term (Derham et al., 2021), instead highlights the issue with the current work but also proposes an action plan for future work and, as such, the second comment focuses on future skill development rather than merely correcting the submitted piece.

Research suggests that many of the comments lecturers make within their feedback for students tend to be more like the above first approach – correcting the submitted piece – but with the expectation that students will comprehend the comments akin to the second approach – skill development through feedforward for the next assignment (Arts et al., 2016; Dirkx et al., 2021). As such, we suggest that feedback becomes more effective if lecturers, when giving feedback on a student assignment, are first mindful as to the whether a student has the opportunity to resubmit the same piece again or are instead expected to use the feedback as a means of improving a future assignment. In short, lecturers should adopt the second approach for when assignments cannot be resubmitted and the first approach for formative pieces that go on to become a revised version of the same work.

At what stage is the student in the programme?

In the same way that we can skim read a journal article to get the overall gist, or we can peruse every sentence for a deeper understanding – a distinction that ties into depth of processing theories in cognitive psychology (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) – feedback can focus on either the fine details down to spelling and grammar, or the more global aspects such as structure and building arguments (Derham et al., 2021). However, in our experience of feedback and mentoring others on giving feedback, we often see a mix of these two styles of feedback together in the one document, with lecturers expecting students to comprehend and improve both elements for future work. In order to comprehend both kinds of comments, students need to be able to switch tasks between fine-detailed considerations and global considerations. Cognitive psychologists have found that task switching is cognitively demanding and cost-heavy (Grange & Houghton, 2014; Ophir et al., 2009) while Vermeylen et al. (2019) further found that there is also an emotional cost so that task switching is experienced negatively and hence a person would not be motivated to task switch under normal circumstances. In the case of using feedback, it has been proposed that in the instance where there is a mix of fine-grained and global feedback, students fixate on comments related to the fine details specific to that task, as these are the ones that can be quickly comprehended, but at the expense of developing the global

skills of writing such as structuring arguments and discussion (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009; Orsmond & Merry, 2013).

The above evidence suggests that when a lecturer focusses their feedback on the task-specific fine details, such as grammar and spelling, students interpret these aspects as being most important, and miss the point that it is really understanding the process of developing knowledge and skills in writing, such as evaluation and communication, that leads to writing a top-end assignment. Furthermore, focussing feedback on the global aspects of writing, e.g., building arguments and discussion, helps students engage in the meta-cognitive processes of transferring their skills to new types of assessment and new domain knowledge (Dawson et al., 2019; Tai et al., 2018). Therefore, a lecturer, when giving feedback, should be mindful of what they want the student to focus on more; the fine details or the knowledge of how to structure writing, and target their feedback accordingly.

That said, it is important for teachers to help students improve the finer details, such as grammar, spelling, and subject-specific formatting including citations and references, but perhaps more so in the early stages of development with the goal of building a solid foundation. Therefore, when providing feedback, we propose that consideration should be given as to what level the student is at in their studies. As a student progresses throughout their degree, they may expect to see a shift in balance from comments on task-specific finer details to comments more on the global process of writing (for discussion see, Parboteeah & Anwar, 2009; Sadler, 2010; Winstone et al., 2017b). The transition point will of course be dependent on programme and fields, and may vary across assignments within a year group, but we would recommend that feedback on assignments in first year are more towards the finer details, and feedback from second year onwards are more towards the global process. One consideration might be that later years have smaller formative assignments specifically designed to reiterate the finer details, but if larger summative pieces are still correcting finer details, at a point when students should be focussed more on the global process, then it would be worth considering how the assignments in earlier years are being designed to develop those foundational skills. Ultimately, it falls on us as lecturers, and as teachers, to recognise the benefit of helping students focus on the most important aspects, at different points in their learning, that will help sculpt their future work (Winstone et al., 2017b).

Are the feedback comments actionable?

Students commonly state that whilst they understand what is being said in the feedback, they do not know how to action those comments (Winstone et al., 2017a). To remedy this, one well-intended approach often seen in novice markers is to add more and more specific comments about what the student has done wrong within the current assignment with a view to giving the students something to focus on improving (Wiliam, 2011). As stated above, this style of feedback would really only be effective in developing the task-specific details of writing or in a formative assignment that may be resubmitted. In addition, the hidden downside of this approach is that students can find receiving a lot of comments highlighting issues to be demeaning and demoralising (Boud, 1995; Ryan & Henderson, 2018), leading to cognitive dissonance where the student can disengage and even take the viewpoint that the teacher did not understand what the student had written (Fong et al., 2019).

An alternative approach to feedback would be to keep the comments about the current work more general and instead make the comments for future work more specific, highlighting what was good and demonstrating how it could be improved in the next assignment (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). Again, this might be dependent on year of study, but by doing so the feedback would then highlight issues within the current work, but in a manageable way for students, and focus the students specifically on what they could do in the next assignment to help improve or maintain their standard. Often, in our experience, this does not require a large change to the comments lecturers already give, and the inclusion of "For next time, …" as a stem to the sentence can help frame the comment. Key however is making sure that the comments are actionable and specific so that students can make best use of them. Compare the two hypothetical, but not uncommon, comments below and ask yourself which would benefit you most in terms of going forward:

a. Whilst you covered an array of relevant topics, it would help to have a better structure.

b. Whilst you covered an array of relevant topics, for next time, start your essay with a clear introductory paragraph that highlights the key concepts and lays out how the essay will address the question, before moving into individual paragraphs structured around Point, Explain, Evaluate, Link.

Likewise, compare these two hypothetical comments below and consider which would encourage you to disengage more:

c. In this one sentence there were four spelling mistakes, an incorrect use of a comma, and you started the sentence with the word AND. It would also help the reader if you used paragraphs.

d. Whilst I can see you trying to use what we have discussed, there are a number of spelling and grammatical issues that detract from the reading. For next time, aim to build more space in the calendar before submission to review and proofread your work a few more times to help reduce these issues.

In the above examples, statements a) and c) pinpoint issues of the submitted writing but give no tangible goal for a student to work towards. In contrast statements b) and d), whilst pointing out issues, frame the comment as an actionable goal – whether it is a resubmission of the current piece or a future assignment.

In reality, the goal with feedback is not to give endless comments; lecturers do not have the time and students do not have the brain space to process them all. Instead, as proposed by Forsythe and Johnson (2017) the goal should be fewer but more effective and actionable comments. As such, we propose that lecturers be more specific in their comments and frame feedback as actionable points around student development, as this would be more beneficial to the student and a more effective use of time for staff.

Improving student engagement with feedback

Whilst the above approaches should help improve the quality and potential useability of the feedback that we as lecturers give, there is further work that we can do to help

students to improve engagement with feedback by helping them to develop a feedback dialogue.

Firstly, lecturers can highlight to students that feedback is a two-way street. As such, it is imperative to help them to make use of the feedback through reflecting on what the lecturer has written in response to their submitted work, and in obtaining further feedback through discussion with lecturers when possible (Carless & Boud, 2018; de Kleijn & Renske, 2021). Along with notifying students of the available opportunities, one example may simply be lecturers demonstrating how we personally reflect and respond to feedback. Receiving feedback is an emotional process and we can all make knee-jerk reactions but stepping back and making a plan helps us move forward (Derham et al., 2021; Fong et al., 2019; Winstone et al., 2017a). To paraphrase Kirschner and Hendrick (2020, p. 4), students are not "novice experts" who already have the knowledge and skills for dealing with feedback. Instead, we must model reflective practices for them, and help students develop an appropriate approach for making best use of the feedback they receive (Price et al., 2010).

An important step in effectively using feedback for future work, and to progress from being a novice to being an expert, is to develop a metacognitive understanding of how different pieces of coursework fit within the learning journey by engaging in feedback processes (Winstone et al., 2021a). Feedback processes are where the student seeks out feedback and actively engages with that information to understand and use the feedback provided to improve skills. However, in our experience, students need guidance as to how best to engage with feedback for the purpose of skill development. Lecturers can support this process by incorporating activities and reflection exercises that help students to pro-actively engage with feedback before an assignment is submitted (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Winstone, 2020). Activities suggested by Carless and Winstone (2020) include helping students to generate or identify feedback; supporting students to evaluate peer work and exemplars in the context of the current assignment; and engaging students with the assessment criteria so that these become part of how they address the assignment. All of these activities can be planned into day-to-day teaching so that students engage with feedback for the purpose of skill development even before they have submitted the assessment, and the feedback dialogue between lecturer and student is then part of the preparation for assessment.

Strategies

We continue this paper by providing three activities that lecturers can use to aid student engagement with feedback and to help establish a positive and pro-active dialogue around skill development:

1. Ask students to identify sources of feedback
2. Help to identify exemplars
3. Scaffold reflection on feedback

Identifying sources of feedback

In order to help students to situate their feedback within their learning journey, lecturers should consider demonstrating reflective approaches such as self-appraisal, goal setting, self-regulation, engagement, and motivation; processes defined by Winstone et al. (2017b) as proactive feedback recipience processes. To do this, lecturers should encourage students to identify feedback from different sources and for different purposes, then use

those sources to identify a skill that they need to develop, and make a plan for how to develop that skill. For example, we would ask the student to identify a skill that they want to develop. Then the lecturer might help a student identify one piece of feedback directly related to the current assessment (e.g., formative feedforward in the course), one piece of feedback from an unrelated assessment that might not at first glance appear to be related to the current assessment, but that used the skills that they want to develop, and identify a future assignment that will also use those skills. An example of apparently unrelated assessments are exam essays and research reports. However, there are commonalities between the two in terms of developing arguments, structuring paragraphs and sentences, use of evidence and making inferences from evidence. The same skills will be used in many written assignments and hence any one assignment is part of a wider journey in skills development.

Once the student has identified sources of feedback, and situated the current assignment in their learning journey, we would ask them to identify how the current assessment will allow them to develop, practice, or extend their skills. Next, we would ask them to use the previous feedback to identify strengths and areas for improvement in those skills by answering questions such as: What did you do well? Can you identify how it was done well? How can you do this well again in the next assignment? What aspects need to be improved? In what way does each aspect need to be improved? How would you use the skill in future assignments? If students struggle to answer the questions, they can seek a lecturer's help during any available student office hours or drop-in sessions. In this way the lecturer can help students to develop their feedback literacy in appreciating feedback, making judgments about the utility of feedback, and managing affect (Carless & Boud, 2018) at a time when it will be of most use to students and when they are motivated to engage in activities focussed on their skill development. This then can make the link between skill development and feedback explicit.

Identifying exemplars

While there is still uncertainty about the use of exemplars, they have been shown to increase proactive recipience processes such as student self-efficacy and self-monitoring (Hawe et al., 2019). For exemplars to be of use to students, working with them needs to be integrated into teaching in a way that helps students to evaluate the exemplars and link them to the current assessment criteria (Carless & Chan, 2017). In addition, the choice of exemplars is also important; previous student work as exemplars can be valuable in setting expectations about structure and language, developing understanding of academic writing formats, seeing different ways to answer a question, and a range of other benefits (see Hawe et al. (2019) for a summary). That said, being mindful of plagiarism issues, it may be more appropriate for a lecturer to build an exemplar based on previous student submissions.

With exemplars, it is best practice to design activities that foster a dialogue between students themselves and between students and the lecturer. For instance, one task may be to ask students to evaluate the exemplar in terms of the assessment criteria, with time made available where students discuss their 'assessment' of the exemplar with each other and with the teacher. For further options, Carless et al. (2017) offers a series of activities for a small group teaching whereas Hawe et al. (2019) offer activities that can be scaled up to larger classes, such as tutorial or lab-based classes.

One issue with using past student work as a basis for exemplars, however, outwith concerns of plagiarism, is that they can start to be limiting as students' progress with their studies or as assignments become more individualised and complex. This is because exemplars are carefully chosen by teachers to represent a generic answer to one specific assignment or one specific aspect of an assignment. In our experience, while exemplars based on student work can be useful in the initial study years and stages of identifying how to work with exemplars, as students' expertise grows, the sophistication of the exemplars need to grow as well. However more sophisticated exemplars become more and more difficult to identify in addition to being increasingly abstract from what students will produce in their assignment.

An alternative to exemplars based on student work, and an approach we have used in our own practice, is to use published articles as exemplars. This both helps students to build expertise in critically evaluating published literature and in using the literature as examples for what to strive for in their own work. With each article we identify how it is relevant to the current assignment. To highlight, for a critical review or literature review, short review articles from a field-specific review-based journal (such as *Current Issues in Psychological Science* in our own field) would typically have a similar word count as the student assignment and would have similar expected structure, focus, and use of evidence. However, there are ways in which such papers may not be completely relevant (e.g., lacking methodological detail where we might require students to include that) and so we identify for students which aspects of the assignment are not met by the exemplar. From there, we build student skills, through personal advice, on searching for their own exemplars. Ultimately, through engaging in a feedback dialogue with the lecturer around exemplars in comparison to their own writing, students identify a handful of exemplars that they can refer to throughout their studies and in this way develop their personal writing voice.

Scaffold reflection on feedback

The final approach we take to improving student engagement with feedback is much like our own feedback practice, which is to give actionable steps to help scaffold reflection and set goals. We ask students to do five tasks with their feedback, whether it is to reflect before visiting their marker, or when we work with them in class or a tutorial:

1. Identify what you want to use the feedback for (e.g., a future assignment, general skills development).
2. Identify from the feedback, areas that went well and how you will do that again or extend those skills.
3. Identify areas in the feedback that you want to improve on.
4. Identify resources for improvement and make an action plan of how you will go about working towards this improvement.
5. Seek advice for anything that you cannot do yourself or ask for examples from your marker.

By structuring and scaffolding an approach to working with feedback, and by giving students a clear series of steps of 'what to do now', we are taking what can at first appear to be a daunting and unyielding task and making it more manageable and achievable. We further signpost students to identifying three things that went well and three things that can be improved. Scaffolded processes allow students to set goals and hence they can learn to self-regulate learning by being strategic about addressing gaps in their skills and

knowledge (for a short review on action planning, see Winstone et al., 2017b). This stepped approach encourages students to be more engaged with the process of using feedback as they know where to start, and as Winstone et al (2017b) found, the action planning associated with reflective approaches such as this has been shown to be beneficial in achieving deeper approaches learning. In short, we give students a to-do list to work with their feedback.

One stumbling block to the above, however, is that it requires time and effort on the student's part and student uptake of goal-setting reflective activities can be low outside of tutorial-type situations. A way to encourage getting students over that hurdle that we have tried, is to be completely transparent about the process we go through when marking and moderating assignments. Prior to the release of feedback and grades, we have found it good practice for the module lead to post a message to students on the Virtual Learning Environment that explains the school's procedures for marking and the diligence that goes into making sure that grades and feedback are of the highest standard. This transparency is not intended to show how hard lecturers are working, nor to self-validate our role, but to show to students how invested we are in the process and to emphasise that improving work does take time and effort. We cannot expect students to fully engage in the process if we do not show them that we, the lecturers, highly value generating feedback for student development.

Conclusion

In the end it is of course down to students to use the feedback we give them to develop their work. That does not however excuse us as lecturers and as teachers from looking to improve our practice in giving feedback, to make it as effective as possible for student development, but also to give students tools that they can use to get the most out of feedback. We believe that the above practices would make the action of giving and receiving feedback a more fruitful experience for both lecturers and students. Whilst giving more feedback might seem the most obvious answer, it is rarely the most beneficial. Instead, fewer more targeted and actionable comments, along with helping students to reflect on that feedback, will allow them to develop the knowledge and skills that they require as they progress through their learning journey.

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