Improving feedback to first year undergraduates

HEA Research Grant
Assessment of Student Learning: the relationships between staff and student perceptions of the quality of feedback on assignments in large first-year undergraduate courses

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Presentation Overview

- Research aims and design.

- Discuss preliminary findings:
  - Student and staff perceptions of quality feedback.
  - Student perceptions of their experiences of feedback quality at School/FE and HE.

- Relate interim findings to current theoretical models of quality feedback.

- Highlight key issues raised by research findings.

- Discussion of suggestions for improvements.
Feedback is central to student learning, feedback is the most powerful single influence on student achievement (Hattie, 1987).

Assessment Feedback is the least satisfactory aspect of student experience:
- ‘..low satisfaction scores for assessment and feedback for both the 2005 and 2006 National Student surveys.
- Most concern surrounds the **timeliness, quality and effectiveness of feedback**’ (National Student Survey 2006).
- QAA subject reviews identify assessment practices as one of weakest features of subject review (Rust, 2005).

Feedback is under-explored (Higgins et Al, 2002)

An opportunity for change?
- ‘The challenge caused by greater number of students and increased assessment workloads provides a new opportunity to make a radical review of the way we assess our students’ (Race, 1993).
Aims of the Research

- Impact of prior experiences of assessment on students’ expectations of feedback practices in higher education.

- Explore tutors’ and students’ perceptions of what is considered quality feedback and how this may vary within and across disciplines.

- Analyse any changes in students’ perceptions of quality feedback throughout their first year higher education experience and identify barriers to providing quality feedback.

- Enable interventions to promote quality feedback and evaluate these strategies, developed in response to dialogue between subject tutors and students, about feedback practice.

- Improve the quality of the student learning experience by developing and evaluating a process of change to embed good practice.
Large scale qualitative study:

‘the majority of the studies concerning students’ perceptions about assessment is quantitative in nature’ (Struyven, 2002)

- Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with opportunity sample of students and tutors from within and across disciplines; across education sectors and within differing higher education institutions. (over 120 students & 26 staff)

- Control Questionnaires delivered at assessment milestones (241 responses)

- Workshops to discuss a chosen intervention to promote quality feedback, developed by tutors, following dialogue with students.

- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Large scale qualitative study:

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- Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with opportunity sample of students and tutors from within and across disciplines; across education sectors and within differing higher education institutions. (115 students & 35 staff) + ASTON and MET
- Control Questionnaires delivered at assessment milestones (241 responses) + ASTON and MET
- Workshops to discuss a chosen intervention to promote quality feedback, developed by tutors, following dialogue with students.
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Identify perceptions of quality feedback in learning & teaching (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004); (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004).


Develop new interventions in assessment practice: adapted a model for the management of change (Black *et al.*, 2003).
Context & Data Collection

- TLCs: Teacher/Tutor Learning Communities
  
  (Wiliam, TES 2006)

- Liverpool Hope University:
  - 3 disciplines (Psychology, Performing Arts, Education Studies)
  - 9 student focus groups (3 per subject) across the year
  - Questionnaires
  - 15 staff interviews [check]

- 6 Schools/ FE Colleges in local WP area
  - 6 staff focus groups
  - 6 student focus groups

- Aston University:
  - 2 student focus groups (Psychology)

- London Metropolitan University:
  - 3 focus groups
  - Questionnaire (Psychology)
So, What is Quality Feedback?

‘Assessment involves identifying appropriate standards and criteria and making judgements about quality’

(Boud, 2000)

Activity:

- Write down 5 criteria for quality feedback – one per post-it.
- Swap your post-its with a neighbour.
- Be prepared to feedback.
Feedback Supports Learning

from *Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students’ Learning*
Gibbs and Simpson (2005)
Good Feedback Practice?

**Seven Principles of Good Feedback Practice,**

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004)

1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
3. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards).
4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Different Tutor/Student Perceptions of Quality Feedback

3 months

3 Years

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Students’ FE/School Experience: Focus Group Findings

[% statistics refer to a selection of questionnaire responses]

- Support
  - accessibility to tutors: personal, often not online
  - explicit pre-assessment guidance

- Feedback linked to motivation: confidence/reassurance

- Frequent feedback
  - formative: (65.2%) drafts for coursework/exam practice
  - timely: 1 week turnaround (73.6%)
  - detailed: exemplars
  - understandable: written and oral feedback

- Awareness of criteria/markings scheme
  - some peer assessment

- Read and acted on (79.9%): culture of target grades
The Guidance and Feedback Loop

1. Students' prior experiences

2. Preliminary Guidance

3. Ongoing Clarification of expectations

4. Feedback on Performance

5. Supplementary support

6. Feed forward skills / understanding

Feed forward into next assignment / assessment

Start assignment

Review Feedback

Submit assignment

(Hounsell, 2006)
‘It’s .. taken from your GCSEs and its like the lowest grade you are expected to get….you often have to do it again until its either above the target grade or on your target grade..’ [FE Student]

‘I always remember her saying to me, “at school we handed our coursework in and it would come back more or less done for you and its such a reality check when you come here”. unfortunately we are getting kids from that culture…” [FE Tutor]
‘..when I did my A levels we knew exactly what they wanted from us.’ [HE Student]

‘…… they do it more when you are planning an essay. examples of what you have to put in … but you have to do it though.’

[School Student]

‘..they are getting marked according to the exam scheme all the way through and eventually it sinks if I don’t do this, what it says on this level, I will not get that..its the thing we absolutely hammer, the main thing.’

[School Tutor]
‘we’ve learned to rely on drafts ...
..so if you’re not getting that at
University, it’s going to be a big
shock.’

‘..we could hand coursework in as
many times as we wanted.’

‘..we get our coursework given to
us in like tasks..’

[FE Students]

‘ we do drafts in coursework..that’s actually part
of what they are supposed to do..’

‘...there is ongoing
communication of feedback..’

[FE Tutors]
‘...written down and then the teacher would sit and talk it through with you.’ [HE Student]
‘...they give you suggestions and try and guide you...’
‘...usually within a week.’ [FE Students]

‘that’s the policy of my team...we say, we’ll return it in one week.’

‘its not...enough to put on ‘good essay’ because for us assessment objectives are absolutely crucial...so our comments are geared towards specific assessment objectives and how to improve on them.’ [FE Tutors]
‘even if we have not got a lesson, we can always go and find them for help or we have support lessons’ [FE Student]

‘…I felt really supported… I could go to anyone and ask for help …’ [FE Student]

‘.its the pressure of you really want the students to do well.’ ‘the philosophy ..to develop personal relationships .. because we see that as being the key.’ ‘.there are issues of accountability as well.’ [FE Tutors]
‘..for every piece of work you have got a cover sheet and a student action plan. you are supposed to make your own action plan from these comments….’
    ‘they say “next time you do an essay you can do it like this..’
    ‘you know that it is going to improve your work.’
    ‘Definitely, well try to anyway’
    [FE Students]
‘..many students do take notice.’ they know their minimum target grade and that may drive more emphasis on feedback.’
    [FE Tutors]
Feedback as a Guidance Process

Students’ and Tutors’ Perceptions of Feedback in Schools/FE

Guidance Process
Driver: Results

Delivers Improvements in Performance

‘...we’re under so much pressure to get exam results and for the student to achieve and we tend to spoon feed them as much as we can.’ [Tutor]

Not Deliver Independent Learning Skills
Academic Writing
Reading
Research

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Students’ prior experience

‘nobody really understood that we didn’t know the difference between A level work and university work’

‘Learnwise… we don’t know what we are doing… at college.. it was handed in, in folders or on paper.. It was just such a change.’

‘..I didn’t feel qualified to do it, that’s why we’re students, we’re here ok to become independent learners..’
‘It’s alright saying no force fed but you have to be told in the beginning how to do it confidently on your own so it’s just causing unnecessary stress.’

‘..I suppose that could be seen as a checklist .. but it doesn’t tell you what the marks are or anything.. Its too late when you are handing it in.’

‘..there’s a difference between being spoon fed and guided..’

‘..at least leave us the spoon,’
‘...sometimes I just need a bit of reassurance that I’m on the right track. Just to keep me confident, to keep me motivated, to keep me going you know..’

‘I have seen people actually give up now...we were only told after about four weeks what a portfolio actually is..’

‘...no drafts.. I would have been much more comfortable with a draft..’

‘all I got was “you’re on the right lines” – what’s that supposed to mean? It’s not helpful’
‘I didn’t get many comments but the ones I did get weren’t explaining things.’

‘I think it’s a bit sort of like standardised….its not personal’

‘..even the emails we’ve got were just a number…”

‘..we had written feedback ..which was quite good but I’d prefer one on one’

‘I don’t think its so much feedback as feedfront we need to be set on the right path.’
‘..there are so many tutors…’ ‘I don’t know who my first point of call is for like essays, different assignments.’

‘There’s like four bits of information coming at us, so there’s Learnwise, there’s the CD, there’s the tutors and then there’s the seminars and they’re all different.

‘..The mentor feedback we had wasn’t really useful because she was telling me to do one thing….and we went to the tutors….and he told us completely different things
Summary of Preliminary Findings

- Quality Feedback (Norms-what should be.)
  - Students and Tutors across both education sectors and the three chosen disciplines, have a shared awareness of core characteristics.

- Perceptions of quality feedback are influenced by:
  - Prior experience of feedback as a guidance service
    - High level of interaction between teachers and students
    - Focus on delivering improvement in performance (grades)

- Feedback experience in first year of HE:
  - Feedback in HE does not meet students’ expectations
    - Pre-guidance: ‘what they are looking for’; Discussion of Formative Feedback, Consistency and Timeliness.
  - Culture shock: Independent Learning
  - Students’ perceptions of feedback quality do not improve across the year.
  - Tutors’ perceptions of the quality of feedback practice differ from students’ perceptions.

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Barriers to Improvement

- FE Tutors and Independent Learning
  - Pressure of examinations and league table [quote]
  - Expectations of students [quote]

- HE Tutors and Formative Feedback
  - Time and Nos [quote]
  - Perceptions of student engagement with assessment [quote]
  - Training [quote] – plug for MSc?!

- HE Students and Engagement
  - no scaffolding [quote]
  - Lack of consistency [quote]
Barriers to Improvement

- **FE Tutors and Independent Learning**
  - **Pressure of system**: ‘that teachers are under to produce results.. we’re trying to get them through exams’
  - **Expectations of students/ parents**: ‘..we cannot allow them to do it ..because of the league tables..’

- **HE Tutors and Formative Feedback**
  - **Time and Nos**: ‘its becoming unrealistic... by the time you ..even made a few formative comments you’re still taking 10-15 minutes, it just isn’t possible’
  - **Perceptions of students**: ‘that’s an issue of addressing the expectations of students at the start and actually changing those expectations.’

- **HE Students and Guidance**
  - ‘I’m sorry, if I’m paying £3,000 I expect feedback..’
  - ‘..we’re not children, just a bit more guidance ..and then we can be left, once we’ve got the hang of it’
  - ‘..fair enough we shouldn’t be spoon fed at uni but at least we should have the spoon given to us..’
Refocus Effort

1. Improve induction into a culture of Independent Learning by taking much greater account of prior experiences of assessment.

2. Integrate students more effectively into an agreed academic community of practice through ‘front loading’ (Rust, 2000) feedback as pre-assessment guidance.

3. Encourage staff/ student engagement with formative feedback to maximise ‘feedforward’: viewing feedback as an event does not enhance the student experience.

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References


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