Improving the attention students pay to, and the extent to which they act upon feedback

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Background and rationale

That learning is a cyclical process and that assessment drives learning[1] are established facts. It is essential that an assessment regime considers not only what a student should know but also their approach to their learning. If students are required to evaluate, for instance, the ethical implications of IT, then it is not appropriate to use an assessment instrument that simply asks for regurgitation of information. In order to improve future performances, feedback on work presented by a knowledgeable other person, whether tutor, placement supervisor or peer, is essential.[2] Staff perceive that feedback prompts student discussion of their work, enables understanding and improves learning[3]

The aims of this project were to improve the efficacy of the feedback process and the quality of assessment feedback in the School of Computing and Information Technology (SCIT). This was through the implementation of a range of steps, based on those proposed by Gibbs during the University of Wolverhampton Campaign on Assessment (2002/03). The process of giving feedback to students has constituted a section in the SCIT Assessment Handbook since 2002. Also, for several years most academic staff in SCIT have used assessment criteria grids or sheets; firstly to render transparent to students the salient points staff are looking for in a piece of assessed work, and secondly, to facilitate giving feedback to individual students, without excessive time spent writing down standard comments. However, anecdotal evidence within SCIT suggested that students read their feedback, if at all, in order to ascertain that the grade they had been given was fair and that the marker had afforded their work reasonable attention. This impression concurred with the findings reported by Gibbs during his presentations. Indeed, a significant number of students do not bother to collect their marked work. Further, knowledge that the grade they had awarded an item of student assessment was likely to be scrutinised critically by the student, tended to lead SCIT staff into using feedback as justification for their judgment rather than as a means of improving student learning and hence future student performance.

Price[4] describes the feedback problem as one of communication; students do not understand academics' tacit knowledge of assessment standards. It is this that needs interpretation to students. The corollary is that academics have difficulty stating what they are looking for in a piece of work and hence resort to negative feedback comments. Price advocated the use of peer and self-marking exercises and workshops with students to discuss assessment standards.

1 Ramsden, P. (1997). The context of learning in academic departments. *in* Marton, F., Hounsell, D. and Entwistle, N. (eds.), *The experience of learning.* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, pp. 198 – 216.

2 Baume, D. and Baume, C. (1996). *Learning to teach: Assessing students' work.* Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development, p. 10.

3 Maclellan, E. Perceptions of assessment: an audit of practice.
ILTHE web-site, Members Resource Area
http://www.ilt.ac.uk/817.asp (accessed 18 July 2002).

4 Price, M. (2003). Misunderstood? Try a more positive approach. *Higher*, 19 Dec 2003.

The research

This project addressed these issues in the following way. First, in 2002/03, SCIT conducted a pilot examination of existing practice, using samples collected for external examiners, and using a revised version of the "assessment review checklist" provided by Gibbs, for both staff and students, which was re-labelled as Feedback Review Sheet (See Appendix 1) This examination reported on issues such as the timing of feedback and its level of specificity. It was recognised that such samples might have been biased and therefore additional examinations of marked work took place, of whole batches, during the examination period, just before assessments were returned to students. A staff development session was held in July 2003, on how to make feedback more meaningful to students, through the use of peer marking. The examination of existing practice, using complete batches not external examiner samples, was repeated in 2003/04. As the pilot had revealed that some students did not appear to understand the purpose of feedback, care was taken to make this, and the purpose of the questionnaire, clear to the students. This agrees with Gibbs' findings that students often appear to believe that "feedback" refers to the judgment on their overall performance and not to guidance on the merits and weaknesses of their work and the steps they should take to improve it. Another staff development session on feedback was held at the SCIT Away Day in July 2004, with the aim of deriving minimum standards for the content of staff feedback to students.

The outcomes

Table 1: Data summarising the students' observations about staff feedback from three significantly different SCIT modules

	Feedback characteristic	**Programming 2002/03Pilot**	**Programming 2003/04**	**Business 2003/04**	**Skills 2003/04**
	Number in sample	40	18	14	82
1	Provided often	26 65%	13 72%	8 57%	51 62%
2	Provided in sufficient time to be useful in the module	21 53%	14 78%	9 64%	47 57%
3	Sufficiently detailed	18 45%	10 56%	7 50%	37 45%
4	Encouraging rather than discouraging	16 40%	14 78%	9 64%	44 54%
5	Legible and understandable	19 48%	11 61%	4 29%	47 57%
6	Asks you to do something you know how to do, rather than issues directions such as "express yourself more clearly" and "don't be careless"	15 38%	9 50%	8 57%	40 49%
7	Gives specific advice, e.g. directs you to relevant reading/requirements you have missed	20 50%	12 67%	9 64%	39 48%

The data in table 1 summarises the student questionnaire responses about their feedback. The staff responses were far fewer and are discussed below, together with the students' views. The programming module ran the pilot in 2002/03 and then took part in a broader survey in 2003/04. The staff responses in 2002/03 indicated that they felt that the quality of feedback could have been improved, in particular in focussing on what students could

do to improve their work, rather than on their deficiencies. This was mirrored by the students giving lower scores to comments being encouraging rather than discouraging, and being advised to do something that they know how to do rather than general instructions without explanation. The 2003/04 student sample was more positive about the feedback they had received. However, the staff still felt that feedback could be improved in particular: it could be more detailed, could be better linked to the purpose of the assignment, could address future tasks students would meet and could offer more generic advice. The students in the second sample, like the staff, were happy with the frequency and timeliness of feedback and that it was encouraging. However, the attributes of being sufficiently detailed and being advised to do something they know how to do scored least well. It appeared that the feedback given on the programming module had improved from the previous year and in that, at least, it was more encouraging. However, it lacked a level of detail, possibly encompassing explaining to students precisely what they needed to do to improve their performance.

On the "business" module, the staff were happy with the feedback that had been provided on the module. The students observed that it was not always legible and/or understandable. Possibly the students would also prefer the feedback to be more detailed.

On the skills module, the staff were concerned about the frequency of feedback in tutorials, aggravated by staff absence. However, the students did not note frequency and timeliness as issues. They were concerned in particular about the level of detail and would have preferred more precise instructions to improve their performance. On this module, students are required to reflect upon and evaluate their assessment performance and then reflect upon where their evaluation differs from the tutor's assessment. Students were more critical of their feedback apart from the issue of legibility and understandability. Perhaps this approach had led to the students being more discerning.

In conclusion, in two significantly different modules out of three it was found that feedback to students could be improved by being more detailed and focussing better on what students need to do precisely to improve their work. The issue was how to address this, whilst being consistent with the time staff need to spend to meet increased institutional expectations.

Benefits

There is greater awareness amongst SCIT academic staff of deficiencies in feedback to students. Overcoming these deficiencies will make our feedback more useful to students and hence will encourage them to pay more attention to it. This will result in improvements in student learning and improved student retention.

Evaluation

In 2003/04 two SCIT external examiners commented that, in the case of some assessors, they would like to see sufficient and more constructive feedback to students, although the observation was made that the quality of feedback in SCIT had improved. It is intended that those external examiners will respond favourably in their reports for 2004/05.

It should be noted that more recently Gibbs has reported that student responses to assessment questionnaires did not tally with the subsequent use to which students put feedback, as recorded by telephone interview[5]. Feedback was seen as of use in identifying and correcting errors, but rarely impacting on the method adopted by students in producing another piece of work. This implies that these problems may prove resistant to change.

5 Reuben, C. (2004). Evaluating the effectiveness of feedback on formative assessment. *LTSN Physical Sciences News,* **5**, 1, pp. 11-12.

Future Developments

Staff guidelines on minimum standards for feedback content are to be sent to all academic staff and incorporated in the SCIT Assessment Handbook. These are to include:

- Evidence that student work has been read
- Comments consistent with grade
- A positive remark on each piece of work
- Suggestions showing how the item of work could be better, or referring to general class feedback
- If general class feedback is provided, each student to have a copy or web address where it can be found
- If English is poor, sample corrections
- If an assessment criteria grid is used, then evidence that all the criteria have been considered

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Appendix 1

Feedback Review Sheet – Staff **Module**

	Feedback characteristic	Yes	In between	No	Comment
1	Provided often				
2	Sufficiently detailed				
3	Focuses on the actions the students should take to improve, not on their deficiencies				
4	Linked to the purpose of the assignment and the criteria				
5	Addresses future tasks the students will be engaged in rather than what has gone by				
6	Concerns generic issues such as study skills as well as assignment-specific matters				

After sample provided by G. Gibbs, How assessment influences student learning, University of Wolverhampton Assessment Campaign, 2002.

Feedback Review Sheet – Students **Module**

	Feedback characteristic	Yes	In between	No	Comment
1	Provided often				
2	Provided in sufficient time to be useful in the module				
3	Sufficiently detailed				
4	Encouraging rather than discouraging				
5	Legible and understandable				Say which
6	Asks you to do something you know how to do, rather than issues directions such as "express yourself more clearly" and "don't be careless"				
7	Gives specific advice, e.g. directs you to relevant reading/requirements you have missed				