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'Feed-forward': improving students' use of tutors' comments

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[This report is part of a longer document. In particular the Appendix has been edited. For further details please contact the first named author]

Background and rationale

Anecdotal evidence, considerable practitioner experience, and research within this University (Winter and Dye, 2004) indicate that many students do not collect their work once it has been assessed. Many others show little interest in the written or oral advice offered to them by the markers (Wojtas, 1998). This means that tutors become used to repeating important advice to some students, with no evidence that they have read, understood, or learned from the points raised by them.

There are many reasons for students not using tutor feedback. For some students, only the numerical grade is of interest to them – simple, unambiguous and meaningful in terms of achievement and progression (Ecclestone, 1998). Some students will only read the qualitative comments if the quantitative mark is outside their expectations – perhaps to complain if it is surprisingly low, or to bask in the praise of an unexpected A grade. Some students may not read/heed the advice due to a combination of not fully understanding the comments (Chanock, 2000), and not realising their potential value; it is those students that this intervention hoped to target.

This study developed from the frustration of tutors who were reduced to pleading that students should engage with their assignment feedback in order to avoid having the same negative remarks appearing on their work in future. One of the student responses to these pleas was that the summative assignments for modules were conclusive and self-contained, and it was difficult to see how comments about raising the grade for a completed module on, say *Dyslexia*, could help improve grades on the next essay on, say *Autism*.

Indeed, this example uses cognate topic areas, whereas the modular system allows for much more disparate choices of topic, especially in a joint subject degree. Clearly, some students found it difficult to unpick the subject-specific, or topic-content advice from the generic advice to improve future achievement. Developing a solution to this problem required some means of using individual students' academic histories and applying them to current assessment tasks.

The research

The project team comprised 4 staff; one of whom was a tutor on the target module, two others who collaborated with him on additional tuition and advice on the module, and a fourth who was solely tasked with statistical analysis of the outcomes.

A single module was targeted for intervention. This module was a level 2 module with a credit rating of 15; in effect worth one-eighth of a full-time year. The module was a core requirement for all students taking the pathway for *Special Needs and Inclusion in Society (SNIS)*, but not exclusively for those students as additional students took it as an elective module. The target module ran in the second semester, enabling those students to gain some experience of level 2 work (and knowledge of their grades), before commencement of the target module.

Students who were pre-registered on the target module were contacted with an invitation to join the project. A strong “selling” talk was given, explaining that additional tutorial time on a one-to-one basis was available for all who would take part (a regular request made in student module evaluations). Students were told that a team of four tutors was being given additional resources to raise participants’ grades, and that the advice and training given should assist them in all subsequent modules. The only requirement was that students should bring at least eight (out of an available 12 or more) feedback sheets from previous modules for the team to base their advice on.

Originally, 52 students were registered for the module, and 16 of these volunteered for the project. The intervention was planned thus:

Each participant submitted her batch of 8 or more feedback sheets. The feedback batches were analysed by one of the project team for recurring themes or points. The sheets were then read independently by another team member and a consensus was formed around the key issues that appeared difficult for each participant.

Each module in the SNIS portfolio has subject-specific assessment criteria printed in the module guide against the grade bandings. This information was used in conjunction with the feedback histories to formulate ‘feed-forward’ for individual students. In other words, module tutors interpreted the criteria for the next assignment in the light of the students’ previous work. This is particularly important, as standardised criteria may be helpful, but they are liable to wide variations in interpretation and application (Webster *et al.*, 2000). In this case, the historical feedback was interpreted by the marker of the next work, thereby (hopefully) increasing accuracy. Rust *et al.* (2003), found in their feedback project that ‘students (...) also identified exemplars and further explanation as useful in making the assessment criteria more comprehensible’ (p.151).

This advice was then fine-tuned using feedback from a mid-module formative assignment. A support sheet was drawn up¹, and a one-to one session of up to an hour per student was arranged outside normal teaching time where each participant was supported in analysing their needs and developing an individual learning plan for the next, summative, assignment.

In addition to this, a draft-reading service was provided. After the tutorials, students could send by email a draft essay that highlighted the areas of improvement identified during the project. An experienced member of the study skills support team read the work, and commented on the improvements so far.

By these methods, each participating student went into the summative assignment having had their advice from past tutors addressed individually by a tutor in relation to the current module.

For teaching staff, possibly the most interesting aspect of this project was the collation and analysis of the students’ previous advice, and its subsequent synthesis leading to the formulation of teaching points in preparation for the final assignment.

The feedback notes from other staff included subject areas unfamiliar to the project team, and there were a variety of feedback formats that helped or hindered our endeavours in this project. The tutors’ feedback was read through to ascertain what, if any, repeated

¹ For further details, please contact the author.

advice was given to any one student. Where an individual student had two or more comments from different assignments that stressed the same point, e.g. 'use the Harvard reference system', the point was listed against that student's name.

It was apparent that many of the tutors' feedback comments had no specific criticism, but vague praise was common. For our project to succeed, we needed clear statements of how the grade could be raised if the work was to be repeated. Statements like "use a more academic style" were clear enough for staff to interpret, but not so for all the students, as we found in the one-to-one tutorials.

A total of sixteen issues were synthesised from the tutors' feedback:

1. Read more relevant literature
2. Use more references
3. Proof read
4. Improve organisation and structure
5. Improve/correct punctuation
6. Check and improve spelling and grammar
7. Avoid over-clever language
8. Give more detail
9. Use more specific/practical examples
10. Support your points by reference or logical argument
11. Use academic style
12. Focus on the question and cover all key points
13. Deepen analysis of key issues
14. Sharpen critique
15. Identify and develop implications
16. Link theory and practice

This formed the basis of the main support document which offered advice through teaching points or links to other support resources, some via hyperlinks as the document was electronically formatted and placed in the module's web page on the University server.

The first 12 points were fairly straightforward to explain, and simple to illustrate in the context of the assignment. For example, "use more references" was clarified by specifying which authors and articles to use for which points in the assignment. The final 4 points were more complex and were combined for the purposes of teaching.

A recurring criticism that appears very hard for some students to respond to is the exhortation to analyse rather than simply describe. Certainly, for the team, our experience is that if students don't "get it" fairly spontaneously, then it is a very hard skill to teach them. Our attempt to explain and teach this skill via a support sheet² seemed to be a useful tool for this problem, but its impact is very hard to measure in this small project.

The evaluation of this project is incomplete at the time of writing. As the students had broken up for vacation by the time the exam boards had confirmed the grades, they were not available for interview or module evaluation questionnaire. Those procedures will be carried out in the first semester of their next academic year. A brief statistical report on the achievement in the module follows, set within the context of the cohort of students in the School of Education where the study took place.

² For further details, please contact the author.

The outcomes

The average grade achieved by students taking the target module was C10.4. The average grade for the students participating in the project was B12. However, those students showed a grade *history* of a higher average than the others taking the module: B11 compared to C 9.5.

Table 1 shows how the participating students' grades compared with their grade history over their first 2 years of study.

Grades attained by students in the Module sub-sample.					
Student Designation.	Average Grade	Module Grade	Student Designation.	Average Grade	Module Grade
L =	A14	A14	T =	A15	A15
M +	B11	B12	U +	C8	C9
N —	B12	C10	V + + +	B11	A14
O +	B13	A14	W + + +	B11	A14
P + +	B12	A14	X + +	B12	A14
Q =	D7	D7	Y + + +	C8	B11
R =	B11	B11	Z =	B13	B13
S -	B12	B11	Overall Average:	B11	B12

Table 1

The student names have been replaced by letters, and the accompanying notations indicate the direction and degree of change: ++ means an increase of two points, - indicates a decrease of one points, etc.

It can be seen from Table 1 that of the 15 students within the sub-sample, 8 had achieved a grade above their average on the module assessment, 2 students had achieved a grade below their overall average, while 5 had been awarded a grade equal to their overall average. It should also be noted for the purposes of this analysis that 5 students had achieved a grade that was significantly (i.e. 2 points or more), above their overall average, while only 1 student had achieved a grade significantly below their overall average.

The statistical data generated by this research study is inconclusive and provides only tentative evidence to suggest that students within the target module sub-sample have achieved improved grades as a result of the additional interventions. The situation is further clouded by that fact that all written support for this project was made available to *all* the students on the module, this in respect of equity. Furthermore, *everyone* was subject to regular appeals to use these resources and to apply their past feedback comments to their forthcoming assignment, even if they were not taking part in the project. If such additional input had been restricted to the project participants it would have been unethical, but might have accentuated the difference in achievement between the groups.

Plans to carry out probability tests to establish whether the difference in average grade between the module students and the participant sub-sample have happened by chance, or whether there is another reason for the disparity are no longer appropriate and will not be advanced. There are a number of reasons for this. Leonard (1971, p 149) recommends a minimum of 50 pieces of data to progress this test; these are not available in this study, and the disparity between the average grades for each set is too narrow to be attributed clearly to a single known variable.

It would seem that, in this case, a more qualitative approach is required to gain insight into the issues under review but the statistical work reported here could augment those findings in a cautious way. The interviews will probe students who were and were not participants, and discuss their criteria for non-participation.

The benefits

One immediate issue that concerned the project team was the low student response to this offer of additional help. Despite a “hard sell” approach, plenty of notice, and a careful attempt to minimise additional student time/workload, only 16 of a possible 52 students (31%) volunteered for this project. There is little that researchers can do in this situation: self-selecting volunteers are bound to skew the results and, in this case, motivation seems at least as big a factor in raising achievement as does additional tutor input.

The low take up of this offer was surprising as many students had expressed through previous module evaluation forms their desire for more one-to-one tutorial opportunities (but see Johnson, 2000 for a closer examination of this problem). Also, the provision of a draft reading service was thought by staff to be a tempting one for students, as there are frequent requests for such a service in many modules.

A second issue related to the quality and style of written feedback to the students. The variation within one year, of one Award, in one University, was quite remarkable. How such variety helps student learning must be the subject of another project, but it certainly had an impact on the present study. There was a preponderance of positive and encouraging comments on feedback sheets at the expense of clear practical advice on how to improve the quality in subsequent work, or at least clarify issues in the students’ minds. This absence of identified areas for improvement meant that analysing the feedback comments in order to construct feed-forward was very difficult.

In early discussion of this point with one class of students, they generally agreed that such critical but practical feedback was preferable to faint praise. This will be a central point in the follow-up interviews for this project.

In the one-to-one tutorials, students were extremely receptive to the advice, and appeared to benefit from the personal contact that the additional resources in the project afforded. It was noted that many of the participating students had read the historical advice, but for one reason or another had not discussed it with the marker. This point links back to the one above: many markers may use the front-sheet to simply summarise what they have described as notes on the script, others may use them in conjunction with an expected oral session that might or might not actually take place. This means that our criticism of vague written comments taken out of context might well be unfair.

Future developments

Conducting this project has highlighted a number of strengths and weaknesses in our practice, as well as testing out some innovations in the area of feedback and feed-forward. The results are not conclusive, as to date they include only a small amount of data on one dimension (Kember, 2003). However, they do hold some promise that how and why we write feedback can be improved to raise students’ learning, and that another project with a larger sample and slight changes in the methodology could provide clearer understanding of this relationship.

The forthcoming interviews will provide qualitative insight into the students’ experience and understanding of the processes of the project, and these will form a more comprehensive evaluation of the project to be published at a later date.

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