**Improving undergraduate written summative assessment feedback through powerful student engagement: a case study.**

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This research resulted from a Departmental short-life working group that focussed on written feedback on undergraduate summative assessment. The group developed an existing assessment feedback form and Departmental staff agreed to pilot the new form during an academic year.

Key to the evaluation of the developed form was the combined centrality of student and staff perspectives. A significant feature of this research was the ambition to promote authentic student-centred evaluative practice. The project was supported by the University’s [*Students as Researchers*](http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/add/add/learning-and-teaching/student-engagement/students-as-researchers-scheme.aspx) scheme, which meant that a student could be employed as a research assistant and be integral both to the design and operation of the study.

Weaver’s (2006) research into students’ perceptions of written feedback proved pivotal. From this and other relevant studies, including NUS research (2008[[1]](#endnote-1); see also: Maggs 2014; McCann & Saunders 2009; Carless 2007; Glover & Brown 2006), three broad objectives were identified for exploration with students after they received Semester One written summative feedback. Focus groups were identified as an appropriate context within which the student researcher could gather data on:

1. How students *engage* with summative feedback. That is, how students understand, approach and experience it.
2. How comprehensive is students’ understanding of the *strengths* and *areas for development* of their work as a result of the summative feedback?
3. What do students *do* as a result of receiving summative feedback?

Thirty (year one and two) students consented to participate in the research, representing four distinct programmes of study. Overwhelmingly, students reported locating their grade *before* reading the written comments. Most students reviewed the written comments as a secondary activity, although many reported *never* reading the written comments, and often students reported delaying reading the comments particularly if they perceived the grade as “bad”. Most students read the comments only once, sometimes because they felt it would have no relevance to subsequent assessments. Students described not understanding their feedback more often than understanding it, and themes of: inconsistencies, vagueness, desire for positive comments, and desire for personalisation emerged from the data. The findings from our research largely concur with the literature. Themes common within students’ reported dissatisfaction with feedback include that it: is too general, or vague; lacks guidance and includes no suggestions for improvement; focuses on the negative, is often not clear and is unrelated to assessment criteria (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Weaver, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001).

In terms of the (piloted) feedback form our students welcomed the separation of summary *feedback* on the assessed task, from the discrete identification of *feedforward* (priority aspects to concentrate on); although many commented on inconsistencies in the number and style of comments in this section. Students also appreciated that first markers had different preferences for the balance between in-text comments and detailed summaries on the feedback sheet, and, notably, did not class any such variance between markers as inconsistency. Students identified that the plagiarism statement was unnecessary on the feedback from, since students were asked to complete a relevant declaration when submitting work online. And, students welcomed the visual analysis that resulted from markers highlighting the University generic assessment criteria (page two of the form), because it helped them better understand grading judgements.

A, deliberately post-hoc, deeper exploration of the literature reveals that assessment feedback discourses are largely misunderstood, or at least not fully accessible to learners (Carless, 2006; Weaver, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). Students need advice on understanding and using feedback, including its tacit assumptions, in order to develop the capacity to engage with it and learn from it (Hounsell, 2008; Carless, 2006; Weaver, 2006).

Student interpretations and lecturers’ intentions, of feedback, are often mismatched (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Weaver, 2006), with both likely to conceptualise feedback in dramatically different ways (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). This results both in barriers that ‘distort the potential for learning’ (Carless, 2006: 220) and in ‘collective disillusionment’ (Hounsell, 2008: 2).

The literature also suggests that issues of identity and power are under-recognised in the research and practice of feedback (Carless, 2006; Weaver, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001); I would add to that list the, neo-liberalist, measures of ‘performativity and accountability’ (Zepke, 2014, 697). The performative and modularised ‘contours of higher education … reconfigured over the last quarter-century’ risk the quality of student learning (Hounsell, 2008:8), and massification of higher education (HE) has resulted in what is a narrow, and typically less-iterative, framework of student learning than historically (Nicol, 2010; Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Taras, 2006).

The challenge of change

Significant to this research was a commitment to maintain an environment in which the student-researcher was positioned equally within the core research team. From our review of the analysed data, two key recommendations were made, to:

* conduct a second-round of research, adopting a case study design, following a small number of students through the next (full) academic year. The case studies would be geared towards gaining rich data on students’ approaches to coursework with a particular focus on their use of written summative comments as feedforward for subsequent assessments;
* adopt the piloted form for the next academic year, with the following amendments:
	+ removal of the plagiarism declaration;
	+ re-location of the grade, from bottom to top;
	+ modification of the feedforward section to remove reference to *three* priority aspects.

Of course we (would) argue that researching our Departmental approach to providing written summative assessment feedback was strengthened by foregrounding student voices and taking action that responded to what we heard but the contextual complexity should also be considered, in terms both of the equality of the student researcher and also:

* our own positions as qualitative, typically interpretive, researchers cognisant of insider/outsider relationships when we research our practice (Herr & Anderson, 2014);
* our ethical responsibility for ‘systematic, critical and *self-critical* inquiry’ (Bassey, 1990: 35; emphasis added).

Much of the literature on assessment feedback highlights inequalities of power and influence (Carless, 2006; Weaver, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). In this study, the student researcher *improved* our self-critical inquiry; notably her equality within the research team meant that what we asked, what we heard, and our interpretation(s) of what was said should make for more authentic outcomes. Engaging students in, and within, the evaluation of feedback processes therefore resulted in a *powerful* (strong, or potent) improvement: to our research, our practice, and our research practice.

Key implications that I would like to foreground today are two-fold:

* From this small-scale study at least, it seems current HE feedback practice still creates barriers that ‘distort the potential for learning’ (Carless, 2006: 220). This is both ironic and worrying – HE has failed to learn from (research) feedback on our feedback, much of which has been available to us for at least a decade.
* In a mass HE system the challenge of change is massive, and growing.

To draw on a proverb: *a journey of a thousand miles begins with a small step*. At institutional level, genuine, authentic, self-critical inquiry into HE assessment and feedback practice that recognises the influences of power, the problematic nature of feedback discourse(s) and the risk of ‘collective disillusionment’ (Hounsell, 2008: 2) is possible. Engaging students in, and within, evaluation of our practice is a small step towards change, but one that can be powerfully improving.

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1. The most recent NUS Student Experience Survey with a discrete report on assessment and feedback. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)