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Research Article

Written Feedback for Students: too much, too detailed or too incomprehensible to be effective?

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Abstract

A three year research study entitled 'Improving the effectiveness of Formative Assessment in Science Teaching', involving Biosciences and Physical Sciences staff and students at two UK Universities, has been examining the potential for improving student learning by making changes to the way formative assessment and feedback are presented.

Whilst initial findings from the research outline similarities and differences in perceptions of the two institutions (see Gibbs 2002; Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald 2003), this paper focuses on the effectiveness of written feedback at both universities. The paper presents a more detailed analysis specifically of the perceptions of the levels and relative effectiveness of written feedback. Some key qualities of this feedback, and some examples of inappropriate use are identified, providing insights into possible changes in the nature of, and approach to written feedback to students.

The research described in this paper was carried out by the Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (FAST) project during the period 2003-2006 and has formed the basis for a workshop organised by the Centre for Bioscience in London (26th Jan 2006) and again at Wolverhampton (22nd Feb 2006). The workshop focused on the categories of feedback given to students, including: noting of omissions and use of English, investigated the effectiveness of different types of written feedback, and asked "if a comment is made, what do you expect the student to do about it?"

Introduction

> *When a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson in grammar seems an impertinence[1].*

As student numbers have increased within Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom, there have been economies of scale in teaching methods but not in assessment (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). This has placed extreme pressure on assessment practices in all subject areas and particularly in science, where students traditionally tackle assignments (such as laboratory reports and problem sheets) more frequently than in other subjects (Brown *et al*, 2004). Due to the increased volume of marking and teachers' workloads,

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[1] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Preface, Poems by Emily Dickinson

feedback is often being provided too slowly, and lacking in the necessary quality, to be effective. These factors, coupled with reductions in the frequency and quantity of feedback to students on their learning and progress, mean that feedback may be losing its formative function. This paper examines further one of the key issues to arise from Brown *et al*'s research - that of the quality of written feedback, and its effectiveness as a formative tool.

Feedback is effective if students act on it to improve their future work and learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest that this is most likely if feedback:

- Is frequent, timely, sufficient and detailed enough;

- Can be linked to the purpose of the assessment task and criteria;

- Is understandable, given the students' level of sophistication; and

- Focuses on learning rather than marks by relating explicitly to future work and tasks.

A three year research study entitled "Improving the effectiveness of Formative Assessment in Science Teaching", (FAST project, http://www.open.ac.uk/science/fdtl/) involving Biosciences and Physical Sciences staff and students at two UK Universities, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), and the Open University (OU), has been examining the potential for improving student learning by making changes to the way formative assessment and feedback are presented. At the OU modules were chosen to span HE levels 4-6 (i.e. undergraduate years 1 to 3), the level 4 & 5 modules being core to degree programmes - i.e. not optional or elective. Module leaders at SHU put forward modules in which certain weaknesses in assessment and feedback had already been identified, and for which they wanted to explore in more detail possible causes of, and solutions to, these weaknesses.

Whilst initial analysis and findings from the data outline similarities and differences in perceptions of the two institutions (see Gibbs, 2002; Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald 2003), this paper focuses on the effectiveness of written feedback at both Universities, but primarily that of SHU.

Supported by external examiners' reports and subject reviews, tutors at SHU argued that they were providing high quality feedback, but that much of this was neither engaged with, nor acted upon, by students. In order to examine further these perceptions, data were collected using a series of questionnaires, focus groups, and individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews were held with six module leaders who had been part of the project team within SHU for the duration of the research and whose modules had been identified as having scope to develop the pattern of formative assessment. Thirteen students were interviewed, chosen because of availability, from all students who had indicated on several questionnaires that they would be happy to be interviewed as part of the research. All interviews except two were conducted with individual students, the exceptions being one with two female students and another with two males and one female. The ten interviews were taped and transcribed, and initial analysis was carried out

using NVivo software, an application for identifying, managing and tracking patterns in qualitative data (www.scolari.co.uk). Two of the students (both female) were of Asian origin, but UK born, and with English as their first language. All others were white British.

Contrary to tutors' beliefs and evidence from within associated literature (see Hounsell, 1987; Lea and Street, 1998; Ding, 1998; Wotjas, 1998), students argued strongly that they did attend to feedback, but often did not act on it (Brown and Glover, 2005). Where feedback was not acted upon this was because assignments were topic-focused, and had moved on, or the feedback lacked relevance to future assignments. There was feed*back,* but no feed*forward.*

Significantly, whilst tutors believed they were providing plenty of good quality feedback, students had a strong sense that much feedback was neither plentiful, nor particularly helpful (although they were not critical of all tutors). A clear disparity was revealed between the perceptions of the formative nature of feedback, and the use to which it was put.

This paper specifically addresses perceptions of the depth (quality) and relative effectiveness of written feedback to students concerning independent pieces of work submitted in the form of written assignments. Some key characteristics of this feedback, and some instances of inappropriate use are identified, providing insights into possible changes in the provision of, and approach to, written feedback to students.

OU and SHU

In order to establish any credence to the views articulated by students and staff, we carried out an analysis of tutor feedback on a number of randomly selected student assignments at both universities. Briefly, feedback was identified for type and purpose; all comments were collected and identified similarly; and how many marks allocated against feedback were also included. Analysis of type and purpose of feedback was carried out in 2003 using a coding system devised within the project. Examples of this coding can be seen in Appendix 1. For further details see Brown *et al* (2003); Brown & Glover (2005, 2006).

One assignment from each of 112 students at the OU, and each of 35 students (approximately 40% of the cohort) at SHU, studying on a variety of biological or physical science modules, was analysed using the coding system. Assignments at SHU consisted of short essays about a specific topic, research-based project reports, case study reports, question/answer based compilation reports, laboratory reports covering a semester's work, and longer essays. The OU assignments included a variety of essays, critiques, calculations and short answers to set questions. Although the number of assignments analysed here was minute in relation to the total student populations (range in the order of several thousand to several hundred per module) the comparability of outcomes across the modules and across the two universities suggests uniformity of approach by tutors to providing written feedback.

At both universities, tutor comments were analysed for:

- **type** e.g. science content, skills content, comments that feed forward to future work (i.e. skills and specific references to future work or tasks), comments that are motivational (praise & encouragement) and comments that may de-motivate (negative terms and critical judgements that focus on the student rather than the student's work, e.g. 'careless', 'take more time')

- **depth** of feedback explanation.

A total of 4428 feedback interventions were recorded on the OU assignments: 844 on the cover sheets and 3584 on the scripts (an average of 40 per assignment). 577 interventions were recorded on SHU assignments (an average of 16 per assignment). The smaller number of interventions on SHU assignments is to be expected as, unlike the OU students, SHU students are exposed to a wide variety of other forms of oral and electronic feedback. Depth of feedback was divided into three categories:

- **Category 1:** An issue acknowledged; (e.g. 'wrong number significant figures'; a spelling mistake; an omission mark signalled). It directs the student to the fact that a weakness has been identified but offers no corrective advice;

- **Category 2:** A correct response provided; (e.g. '2 significant figures, not 3'; 'you should have discussed x and y'; correct spelling offered). The weakness is acknowledged and corrective advice is provided. This sort of feedback can also direct a student to other sources where the 'answer'/corrective advice can be found; and

- **Category 3:** The reason why a student's answer was inappropriate or why the preferred answer was appropriate; (e.g. '2 significant figures, not 3 because…'; 'you should have discussed x and y because…'). Not only is the weakness acknowledged, and corrective advice given but an explanation of the weakness and/or the nature of the correction is provided. There can, and arguably should, also be an element of feedforward – "and you need to do this in future".

The same approach can be taken towards feedback that acknowledges strength. Praise alone ('good', 'well done') – Category 1; extent of explanation of the basis of the strength – Category 2 or 3.

For each assignment, each comment was coded according to the categories listed above, and the numbers of each category of comments written by the tutor on the individual scripts were counted.

There were some differences between the responses from students at the two universities, due mainly to the mode of assessment - OU assignments tended to be longer, with a variety of composite elements, whilst SHU assignments were more discrete, stand alone pieces of work. Overall, however, there was a core of generic characteristics evident in both. These characteristics involved feedback which concentrated on content, feeding forward into the next piece of work, feedback which encouraged further learning, feedback which motivated the student, and that which de-motivated. The frequency of these feedback characteristics at both Universities is illustrated in the graph (Figure 1).
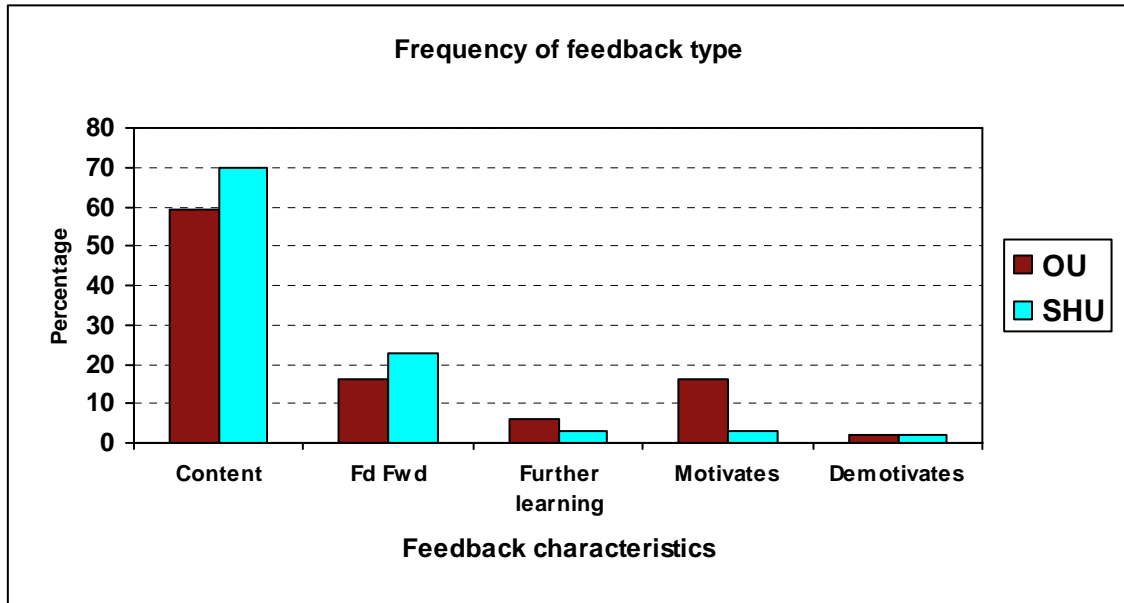
Figure 1 *Focus of types of feedback*

Over half of the script interventions from the tutors at both Universities were concerned with the science content, and much of this was omissions focused. Far smaller proportions were devoted to each of feed forward (skills and explicit links to future works or tasks) and praise or encouragement (motivational comment, predominantly praise). Skills weaknesses were signalled but not how they might be corrected, and interventions designed to encourage further learning were comparatively rare. Happily the use of negative words and phrases and negative criticisms or judgements, which may generate an authoritarian tone and de-motivate students, was also rare.

When further analysis was carried out, comments were sorted into four main categories. These are illustrated in Figure 2 below.
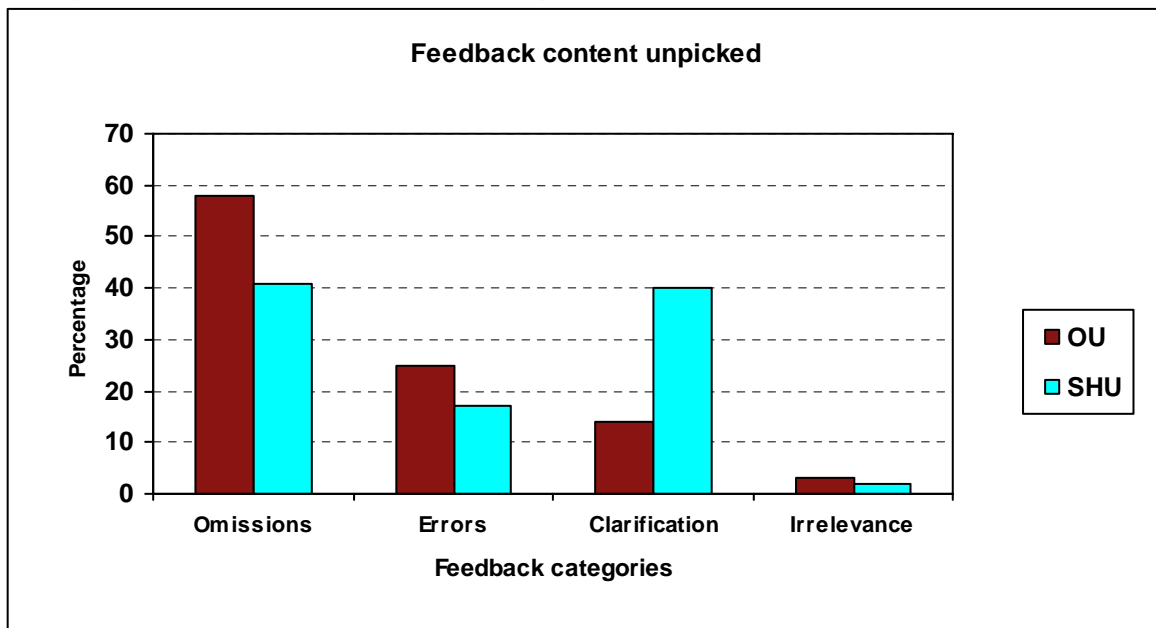
Figure 2 *The type of content of feedback given*

As can be seen, errors and omissions featured highly in both universities, although the proportion was less so in SHU. Here the proportion of comments requesting clarification from the student was higher. Fundamentally both sets of tutors provided clarification of misunderstandings in student work, but SHU tutors asked for more clarification from the student about the answers given or points made. Sometimes these were brief interventions, e.g.: *which are? No of bases? Successful? Why*? Arguably these sorts of comments could be considered as omissions rather than asking for clarification, depending on the context.

Other comments were more detailed.

> *What do spots look like? How long do they last?*

> *Why did you not complete this?*

However, the purpose of these comments is often unclear to the students, and they consequently tend not to become engaged.

> Student 1: *Like 'what does this mean?' and they just circle it and they don't really mean 'what does that mean?'*

> Student 2: *Yes that's a lot of time, they just put a question mark next to it if you've left something or haven't included something.*

> Student 1: *Because then you don't know what they're talking about.*

Sheffield Hallam University

Although elements of the analysis were generic to both SHU and the OU, for example, the use of English (particularly spellings and grammar), the following section is devoted to more detailed description of feedback at SHU, where the evaluation of tutor feedback was developed further. The graph in Figure 3 indicates that almost 91% of tutor feedback comments related to only five different feedback types.
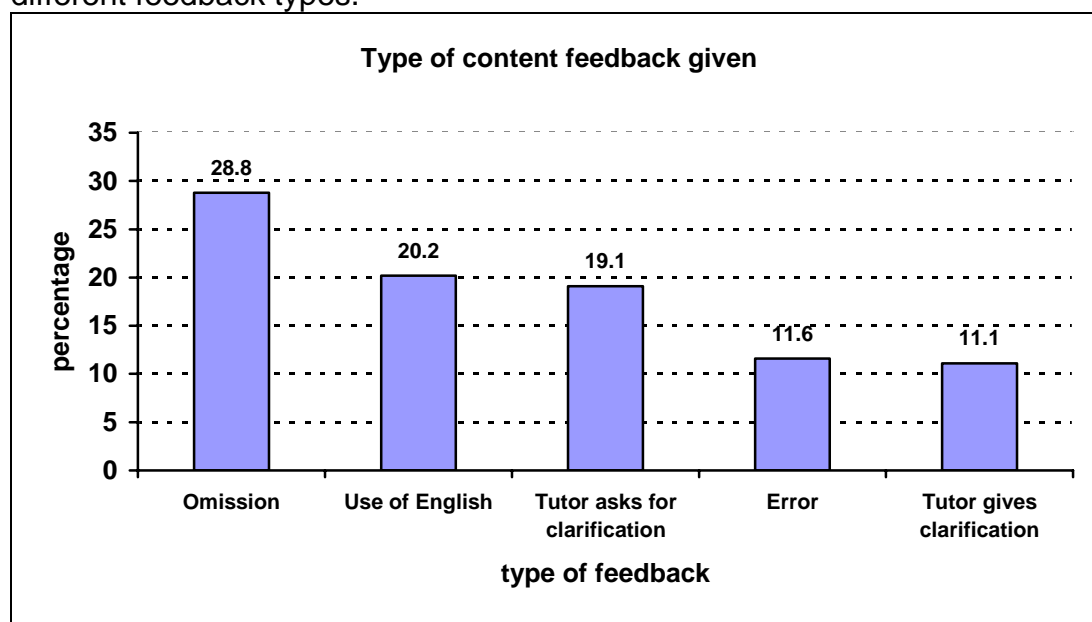

Figure 3 *Type of content feedback given*

Other elements of feedback were: -

Comments giving praise	3.1%
Comments about maths (e.g. only one significant figure, not two)	2.1%
Negative/judgemental remarks	2%
Comments about irrelevance	1.2%
Presentation of graphs/diagrams	1%
Reference to resources	0.7%

Where a student's attention was drawn to an omission, there was little or no supporting comment. Either the element missed out was given by the tutor, or some hieroglyphic used to indicate that a word, figure etc. was missing.

> *Quite often it's just the thing's just been marked through where you've gone wrong there might be a sort of a question mark or a line. (Student 3)*

Whilst most of these types of 'feedback' were self-explanatory - it was clear *where* the mistake was, and it was clear *what* the mistake was - they were not perceived as particularly helpful to the student.

> *If the feedback is good and I can learn from it, that's brilliant. I can go away and read through all this and can learn from it. Whereas if I just get an assignment back that said you've done this wrong, you've done this wrong, but it hasn't said how I could have done it better, then you can't learn anything from it. (Student 4)*

However, others were even less clear and these are described in the following sections.

About spellings, grammar and conventions

At SHU, spellings were generally coded as errors, but could also be coded within 'use of English'. Generally the incorrect word was crossed out and the correct word provided, so most corrections here were comments of depth category 2.

Mis-spellings crossed out, with no correction provided, were coded depth-category 1. Where correction was provided (more commonly), coding was depth-category 2. Category 3, explanation given, e.g. a spelling rule, was not observed.

Variations of mistakes associated with spelling occurred frequently in students' work:

- the spelling of the word is correct, but it is the wrong word. There are obvious grammar implications – e.g. there, their – but it is not always clear whether the mistake is a spelling, or a more complicated misunderstanding:

- typographical errors – e.g. 'form' instead of 'from'.

It is possible to question whether these errors need to be highlighted to any degree within the context of clear communication. In certain cases the need

for accuracy is paramount, and here typing errors would need to be corrected, (e.g. organism names in Microbiology). However, in many cases the meaning intended is clear, and it is apparent that the student can spell the word, as the correct version is present elsewhere in the work. Here consideration could be given to whether all such errors are/need to be corrected, although generic comments relating to lack of proof reading or too much/little dependency on the spell checker could clearly be indicated.

Where it is clear that a student is particularly poor at spelling, there are obvious support and teaching implications. However, these need to be dealt with sensitively and by separate face-to-face/oral negotiation with the student, which is not always in evidence.

There were other instances where students had used the wrong word, which were treated as spelling errors. The spelling 'errors' may have arisen because students:

- either understood the concept but just had the wrong word for it;

- or did not understand the concept, and were using the right word for the wrong 'answer'.

There was less tendency to correct spellings on handwritten work, as opposed to word processed, where it is assumed there would be an expectation of automated spellchecking. However, there was inconsistency in tutor correction of spellings for handwritten work; some hardly any, others more. There was variation between different tutors, and in an individual tutor's approaches to different students. Some work was heavily corrected, others much less so. These remarks apply equally for grammar, including syntax.

Our research suggests that much feedback comment focuses on incorrect use of English and grammar, and often assignments are covered with such detailed, often pedantic interventions - what Willingham (1990) describes as 'hyper specific corrections'. He explains:

> *"If the feedback given is to emphasise improvement in future assignments, will students benefit from reading hyper specific corrections written by their instructors? Most college students have been reading such corrections for years; if they were helpful, they would have helped by now."*
>
> *(Willingham, 1990 p12).*

One student at Sheffield Hallam University summarised this problem as follows:

> Interviewer: *If you have something like 'flawed grammar', would you know what was flawed?*
>
> Student 6: *No.*
>
> Interviewer: *And would you know what to do about it?*
>
> Student 6: *No, to be honest. I think sometimes you can read through and realise what you've done when you get it back, but there tends not to be that specific feedback - it's more generalised. Sometimes it is - it all depends on the tutor. Some people go through and they pick up every little thing - you're doing this wrong, you're doing that wrong.*

It is clear from the FAST research that, in spite of specified assessment criteria, there is much inconsistency in feedback given by different tutors, often as a result of individual perceptions of the importance of grammar, etc. (see Truss, 2003). An excessive quantity, approximately 20%, of feedback to the SHU students was concerned with such minutiae of grammar and spelling. This differed at the OU, where the proportion was, at most, 5% on the Year 1 module, and quite a bit less on the higher-level modules.

Moreover, if we draw students' attention to incorrect use of English, can we expect them to know what we are talking about? If they don't, whose responsibility is it to teach them? Perhaps Kreibich (1996) articulates here what many tutors are experiencing:

> "If [tutors] stopped to shift or delete every misplaced comma they would never get around to their specialisms at all."

Evidence suggests that tutors are attempting to teach their specialisms, as well as correcting errors in academic conventions. This proves to be often excessively time consuming, yet tutors continue to devote many hours to providing feedback that is often ignored or misunderstood. The evidence also suggests that tutors have differing interpretations of what those academic conventions are.

> Interviewer: *So there is a lack of consistency between different subjects, telling you about the same thing but telling you to do it differently?*
>
> Student 11: *It's like we get told off sometimes. For example, we're not referencing right and like you know you should do this, this and this, have the book title on one line, author, date of publish etc. But sometimes they said 'just put a comma and pull it up'. So sometimes I get confused, it's like it's that subject oh, that's how you reference it for him or her. But I thought there was a universal way of doing it.*

About grades

Based on conversations and interviews with staff and students, mainly at SHU, and debated within workshops and seminars run by the FAST project team, a hypothesis emerged that there is a positive correlation between a student's grade and the amount of feedback given, i.e. lower achievers should merit more feedback than higher achievers. There was also a sense that high achievers would receive more in-depth feedback than low achievers (see Mutch (2003) who describes the relationship between level of work and type of comment). This assumption is not necessarily valid. As one tutor remarked:

> If I've got an 80% student, I still find something to write on (the assignment). But I just give them a big pat on the back and say 'keep up the good work' probably. If I got a 30%, I'd write a lot more because that's where I think there's more to do. I would write more on a weaker script. (Tutor A)

This is supported by students, whose views are summarised below:

> But when you get that sort of mark you generally don't get that much feedback because it's usually the little tiny thing that you've missed. And usually you might have missed out thing that's important and that's let you down. But the higher mark you get the less feedback you get. (Student 6)

To ascertain the extent to which a positive correlation between assignment scores and quantity of feedback was evident in practice, the number of comments written by the tutor on the individual scripts was counted, regardless of the nature of the assignment. The total number of comments given per individual assignment was then compared with the grade given to that individual assignment. However, irrespective of the grade given, there was little difference, if any, between the amounts of feedback provided on low and high-scoring assignments. It was clear that the basic hypothesis was unfounded. Overall there were only marginally less comments as grade increased, and inconsistencies between similar grades were evident. For example, one assignment awarded a mark of 40% had a total of 22 tutor interventions; another with 41% only had 2. One with 78% had 5 interventions, whilst one with 80% had 31 (a figure only surpassed on one piece of work, which was awarded 50%).

It was clear, therefore, that tutors at SHU are giving similar amounts of feedback comment, irrespective of the quality of the students' work. What was not indicated, however, was the quality of these comments. A further analysis was carried out using the criteria described in section 2.

This analysis of tutor feedback tended to indicate that little or no relation between the grade awarded and the depth of feedback comment (categories 1, 2 or 3). Taking level 2 feedback as an example, the comparisons revealed that the assignment awarded a mark of 40% had a total of 5 level 2 tutor interventions; the one with 78% had 3 level 2 interventions, whilst one with 80% had 22, more than most of the lower-scoring assignments. Although academic participants in the research anticipated that there would be some noticeable differences in the type of feedback given to lower and higher graded work, our findings are that tutors at SHU provide similar levels of feedback to their students, irrespective of the quality of the work submitted. Interviews revealed that students have also found difficulty equating the type of comment given to the grade received. As one student commented:

> I've seen two pieces of work that were 80, one was 81 per cent, one 80 per cent was 'good', one 81 per cent was 'excellent' – so I'm thinking 'right if I want to get from good to excellent I want another mark'. (Student 5)

In a further interview, another student confirmed the uncertainty:

> Well I thought eighty per cent was alright, I was quite happy with eighty per cent but when it said 'good' I thought 'eighty per cent's better than good.' (Student 6)

A number of authors have highlighted problems with the nature of feedback comments provided by tutors. In particular, it has been argued that tutors' comments can be inconsistent in terms of both quantity and quality (Ding, 1998; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Bligh, 1990; Hounsell, 1987; Hextall, 1976; MacKenzie, 1974.) Furthermore, as Hounsell (1997) and McCune (1999) have suggested, students may struggle to access the particular discourse underpinning tutors' comments. In other words, they may not understand the feedback they have been given.

The formative nature of feedback

Randall and Mirador (2003) suggest that summative feedback can be characterised by single statements about the quality of the work or part of it. Formative feedback is distinguished from summative feedback in that "the term was being used to provide a comment which was developmental in nature, i.e. expected to provide the student with feedback on how progress can be made on the work or any aspect of the work evaluated" (Randall and Mirador, 2003, p 523). Interviews with 112 students at the OU revealed that they did not use written feedback to improve their future work, despite a relatively quick 3-week return for assignments, because the topics studied had moved on and were thought unlikely to be re-visited. The feedback was, therefore, not timely (Brown and Glover, 2006).

What is clear from the analysis of tutor feedback above is that the tendency within both Universities, and particularly Sheffield Hallam University, is to provide summative feedback, irrespective of the nature of the assessment.

Students interviewed at SHU attest to this:

> But usually you can see how they've marked it as they've gone through – like a tick here and a cross here whatever but there's no – often they'll just put a single word a 'why' or 'explain more' sort of thing. (Student 7)

> It's more just little short sentences in the borders and there'll be slight sort of grammar corrections and stuff but nothing more than that really. (Student 8)

The above quote, however, is certainly not true of OU tutors; feedback from them tends to be depth category 2, i.e. weakness acknowledged and corrective advice given, but still lacking overt linkage to future work or assessment tasks.

FAST research has revealed that students attribute importance to grades as a measure of achievement, but look for formative comments to help with their understanding. This is also reflected in other research. For example, most of the students in Ding Lan's (1998) study, while attributing much importance to grades, desired formative comments to supplement grades. 90% of students in Hyland's (2000) study believed that feedback could help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, engender a sense of achievement, and raise their marks on future work.

The need for a shared understanding

At both Sheffield Hallam University and the Open University, the lack of shared understanding of assessment criteria and feedback between students and the assignment author(s) was found to be particularly pertinent when the discursive content of an assignment was high or when the main tasks involved information selection. In these cases, the feedback was strongly omissions-focused and the lack of errors-feedback suggests that the assessment was a poor measure of students' knowledge and understanding. Instead it was a measure of how well students were able to map their own answers onto the mind-set of the tutors (See Brown and Glover, 2005).   Two OU students observed:

> 'Not sure what was expected by the questions.' (Student A)

> *'Including the points the tutor wanted was a lottery.' (Student B)*

It became clear during the course of the research that students increasingly appear not to understand the taken-for-granted academic discourse that underpins assessment criteria and the language of feedback (Creme and Lea, 1997; Brown and Knight, 1994; Hounsell, 1987). This has led to students failing to understand both feedback comments and the assessment criteria on which these comments are based (Hounsell, 1987). Such failure inhibits the possibility of any feedback being used in a formative manner.

Findings from the FAST project resonate with those discovered elsewhere. For example, Maclellan (2001) reported that most students in her research did not view feedback on their learning as either routinely helpful in itself or as a catalyst for discussion (p316).   Interestingly, however, tutors interviewed within the FAST research offered different perspectives. These are discussed below.

Differing perceptions

Tutors argue that they spend an inordinate amount of time marking assessments and providing feedback, which they believe is wasted time because students are only interested in their marks, and take little or no notice of the feedback given. As one tutor observes:

> *Oh, it's not that the feedback isn't there, I think it's very high quality feedback, it's just that they don't want to know. (Tutor B)*

This perception is not supported by the students themselves.

> *If I have got a section that I've got completely wrong and I don't have a clue why, then from what feedback they give me I do try and go and have a look through but then usually I either find it and I think 'good that's where I've gone wrong, I should have being doing that'. (Student 9)*

> *So you have to go over it because if you've got it wrong you're learning the wrong things. (Student 2)*

They claim that too much time and effort is spent giving feedback that is unhelpful, and consequently unnecessary.

> *Some of my lecturers - it's just like, 'this is wrong' and just squish the whole thing with red pen, it's like 'where did I go wrong' and it doesn't help me really. (Student 10)*

> *But usually you can see how they've marked it as they've gone through like a tick here and a cross here whatever … - often they'll just put a single word a 'why' or 'explain more' sort of thing …(Student 1)*

Even worse, much of this feedback is not always understood, as illustrated by the following discourse.

> Student 2: *Sometimes some of the [assignments] have come back with just a mark and then just a one line comment on the end of 'good' or 'not so good'.*

> Interviewer: *And what does 'good' mean in your eyes?*

> Student 3: *I don't know, I've got no idea!*

Tutors contend that feedback is aligned to assessment criteria, and that these criteria are available to students. However, students claim that often these

criteria are too vague. For example, "shows good command of English" is open to too much interpretation, as there is no clear or consistent policy about what constitutes 'good' English. When comments like 'Take care with apostrophes' are written on assignments, do the students have any idea at all what is meant? One student remarked:

> *If I'd have known that when I was doing the work I'd have put it. What am I supposed to do with this? (Student 5)*

Reflection

Is there any way we can reduce the amount of time spent on feedback that is not acted upon by our students? We could, for example:

not give any feedback at all

This would reduce marking time substantially, and if students don't read the feedback, anyway, then......!

give less feedback

Serious consideration could be given to ignoring certain mistakes where these are not specifically related to any learning outcomes, or where the meaning is clear, even though this may fly in the face of the government's drive towards defining 'graduateness' and competency in employability skills.

give feedback that is acted upon

As tutors we need to consider the following issues, based on the outcomes of the research discussed in this paper:

- How much of the feedback that we give really matters?
- Do we need to give all the feedback all the time?
- If we give too much, will the more important things be lost?
- Will students act on any of it?; and
- Do we really expect them to?

Summary

It is clear from FAST research that the four conditions under which feedback is likely to be effective (formative function) are not met as frequently as originally believed. In some instances there may be plenty of it, but it is not received in time to be of use to students and may be misunderstood in relation to assessment criteria.

At both SHU and the OU, marks or grades are the primary vehicle for informing students of their progress. Where feedback is given, its prime function is to inform the students about their past achievement rather than looking forward to future work. Most feedback is mark-loss focused, not learning-focused, serving primarily to justify grade. There is a lack of explanation of what students have done wrong. At the OU, the norm is to provide corrective feedback, rather than simply acknowledging weakness or

explaining the basis of the correction. At SHU marginally more corrective than simple 'acknowledgement of weakness' comments are made, although a high percentage of these are the correction of spellings or errors in grammar.

Few, if any, explanatory comments are given in all types of assignment, i.e. most feedback shows answers expected, but rarely explains why. For feedback to be formative it should involve not only identification by the learner of the gap between the desired goal and present state, but also provide the information needed to close the gap with sufficient explanation to enable students to use this information. The lack of sufficient explanation means that most feedback at both universities is only summative, and does not help the learner to take action to close that gap.

FAST research suggests that we need to:

- Place far less emphasis on marks, far more on achievement;
- Ensure that teaching, learning outcomes and assessment are constructively aligned, placing far more emphasis on criterion-referencing in relation to learning outcomes, and far less on scoring points;
- Focus on main weaknesses, and explain these in depth; and
- Worry less about jots and tittles.

There are clear implications for major staff development to encourage changes in feedback culture. From our research, we feel strongly that the whole nature of assessment needs to be restructured in order to achieve real change and improvement. Ad hoc and piecemeal initiatives will not be enough on their own.

Unless tutors address the issue of giving formative feedback, as opposed to feedback which is purely summative, then it is likely that there will be little change in the ways that students understand and use the feedback, and indeed how they make sense of the assessment and the learning context in general.

> *I would prefer feedback - unless they're really being nit picking which can happen. Yeah the feedback's good but the problem is we don't get any chance to change it anyway and the likelihood is that we only do one piece of work like that anyway. So it doesn't actually serve any practical purpose at the time because you've done the work, you've got the mark, that's it. (Student 6)*

If feedback does not aid understanding, i.e. enable the student to close the performance gap, and does not feed forward, it doesn't matter when it is returned. Such 'feedback' serves only to justify the grade, and may as well not be given at all.

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