Written Comments on Student Writing - How Can We Ensure That Our Feedback is Effective?

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Introduction

This paper presents the main findings of primary research into international students' perceptions of written tutor feedback on student writing, in order to draw conclusions about ways of making feedback more effective. The interest in this topic is based on the belief that assessment and feedback are part of the learning process and that it is possible for feedback on summative assessment to also be used formatively. Various authorities (cited in Rust, 2002) assert that assessment will govern both what students learn and how they approach their learning. Ramsden (1992, p.186) also stresses the need for teachers to perceive assessment as 'a way of learning and of demonstrating understanding'. Precept 12 in the QAA's Code of Practice states "Institutions should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement" (p.10). It goes on to suggest that when giving feedback, institutions should consider timeliness, effective use of comments, and supplementing written comments with oral feedback. Ramsden (1992) cites Entwhistle's research in 1989 which claimed that 'an important contributory cause of student failure was an almost complete absence of feedback on progress...' (p.193). All of this points to the importance of the formative purpose of assessment, which '... provides (formative) feedback to students ... so that they have opportunities to improve' (Brown et al 1997, p.12).

If we accept that an important purpose of feedback is to facilitate learning and help students improve, then we need to think carefully about the feedback we give students and what they are doing with it. However, in practice providing effective feedback is not always easy. Rust (2002) tells us that it will not be effective unless students are required to actively engage with it. Feedback will be most effective if it is part of the whole teaching and learning process which includes 'feed forward' - explicitly setting up assessments with students in class, students engaging with marking criteria, and learning opportunities being designed in to the course or module.

The research undertaken by the author concentrated on responses to student writing because, although a variety of new and interesting assessment methods are currently being introduced into higher education in the UK, writing, and in particular essay writing is still one of the most widely used assessment methods. As Lillis (2001) states, student writing is at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education. It is an aspect of assessment that seems to worry many of the students on the International Foundation Programme on which the author teachers, at a time when student writing is perceived as a 'problem' generally in higher education (Lillis, 2001). The analysis and conclusions drawn from this small research project are based on an 'academic literacies' approach to researching and developing student writing (see Lea & Street 2000 and Lillis 2001).

The research project

The aims of the research were to find out how students perceived the written feedback they received on their written work and how useful it was for them in terms of learning and improvement. An analysis of this would hopefully lead to positive changes in current teaching practice individually, and at a programme level in terms of reducing the variation in type and quantity of feedback students receive from different tutors and in identifying the most useful format for giving feedback to students.

The research involved a group of fourteen students on the International Foundation Programme (a one-year access to degree programme for international students) are studying a core module (IF001: Social and Academic English). Feedback was given on their first coursework assignment, which was a compare and contrast essay set in week 2 and handed in at the end of week 5. Students were given a written brief with assessment criteria that were discussed in class, and relevant class work in weeks 3, 4 and 5 was explicitly linked to the assignment. Students were also encouraged to use tutorial time to discuss essay drafts.

Eleven students completed the essay and three different models of feedback sheets were used. Comments were made which attempted to follow best practice guidelines (see Clark et al (2000), Lea & Street (2000) and Mutch (2003)). All feedback sheets also showed the marks and grade. Comments were also written on the scripts themselves, including use of a marking code that students had previously been taught. These served to indicate English language inaccuracies and address aspects of content and structure. For purposes of this research, on seven papers a lot of comments were made (according to the author's natural marking style), on two more comments were made only on the first half of the essay, and on a further two, very few comments were made at all. Feedback was returned in week 7, which was much quicker than usual.

In class, students were given back their essays with the feedback sheets attached. To encourage them to engage with the feedback, they were asked to complete a worksheet which required them to identify strengths, points to improve, areas with which they would need to ask for help, and ways in which the feedback might be useful in the future. For this exercise students were grouped according to which kind of feedback sheet they had received.

After this activity, students were asked to complete a questionnaire compiled for this research. Then they were rearranged so that each group consisted of students with different types of feedback sheets. In these groups students were asked to discuss the purpose of feedback, compare their feedback forms and consider the usefulness of talking in class about the feedback. This was followed by a plenary session where the students' views were recorded on flip chart paper.

Findings

Questionnaire
Over half of the students voiced negative feelings after looking at their essays and feedback sheets, using words such as 'shocked' and 'disappointed'. However, three students felt the feedback was useful and would help them improve and one felt satisfied. Most students found the coversheet feedback, regardless of which type, more useful than grades, marks or comments on the essay itself, because it clearly identified strengths and areas for improvement. One student felt it helped them to understand the grade /mark. Others thought the comments on the essay itself were the most useful, again because they pointed out areas to improve, but also because they illustrated comments made on the cover sheet. Indeed, the majority valued having both the feedback sheets and the annotations on the essay together.

All students found the comments easy to understand because they were clear and direct, used simple, understandable English, and were precise about particular points. When asked to explain what they understood by their mark, all students with grades ranging from F to C expressed negative comments, such as 'not doing well', 'I lost 48%', 'a bad essay', 'half not passed', 'I am shame, I feel sorry to my mother and father', 'I don't like it.' Even the two students who gained B grades (indicating very good work) did not perceive this as very positive: 'I think grade B means over average, satisfied, but less than very good, I also need to improve'.

Group Discussion
All students agreed that the feedback was there in order to help them improve or identify strengths and weaknesses of their essays. Most preferred the feedback form that had specific criteria and room for comments beside each. This was because it was easy to understand, gave more detail than the other sheets, and the comments written were very specific to the individual piece of writing. However, it was noted that if the comments had been 'final' (Brown & Smith, 1997 in Mutch, 2003) stand-alone comments such as 'good', 'ok', 'poor' etc., then this would not have been helpful, as no indication of why this judgement had been passed or how to improve would have been given. The students all thought that the section for global comments was very important.

The carbonated form (standard university cover sheet) that simply had a box for tutor comments was considered the least useful. Students felt that it was harder to 'get the point' because it was not divided into criterion-based sections and that it was harder to read because it was hand-written rather than word-processed.

All students felt that dedicating a whole session to looking at and discussing the essay feedback had been useful. They said that otherwise it would have been more difficult for them to use the feedback to improve, and that they may have not concentrated on reading and understanding the feedback, but rather just looked at the grade/mark. However, the class agreed that it would probably not be necessary to spend a whole session on feedback again, but that some engagement/discussion in class would be useful. One student suggested that the time spent on looking at feedback in class should decrease incrementally with each assignment, and the rest of the class agreed with this idea. The discussion seemed to imply that receiving both written and spoken feedback together was considered preferable to receiving just one or the other.

Another point that came up in group discussion was students' perceptions of the grade. Many were very disappointed, and it emerged that most students, when decoding the mark, perceived marking as negative marking. In other words a mark of 51% means that 49% of their work is 'wrong'. After realising that the tutor approach to marking entails bestowing grades for things achieved, rather than losing grades for things 'done wrong', students seemed to feel much more positive.

Key issues

Firstly, it was disturbing to note the negative reactions students had on reception of their feedback and on the perception of their marks, particularly when we consider that one of the purposes of feedback is to motivate students and that motivation and encouragement is perhaps especially important in early assessments to allow students opportunities to improve within a course. (We see formative feedback as being more important in Semester A than Semester B on our two-semester programme.) Rust (2002) also believes it is particularly important that assessment is 'non-anxiety-provoking' for non-traditional students who are struggling to understand the new rules of discourse. These particular students are also writing in an additional language and dealing with other cultural and social issues involved with being an international student. Some of their

comments about being 'shamed' tie in with the caution by Clark et al (2000) that feedback might affect self-esteem, where students take 'what you have written is inadequate' as 'you are inadequate'.

It seems necessary, therefore, to think about balancing negative and positive comments as well as engaging in some kind of ongoing dialogue with the student to show that this is not necessarily a final judgement but part of a formative process. This may help to break down the power barriers between tutor and student, thereby reducing anxiety and promoting learning, questioning and a willingness to 'try things out' during the process. Lea & Street (2000), Clark et al. (2000) and Lillis (2001) all emphasise the importance of welcoming the student into the academic community in this spirit of collaborative learning, rather than excluding them.

The marks and grade do not have a formative purpose, acting more as discouragement in this case and not seeming to match students' expectations of their work. It would therefore be useful to provide students with some kind of grade descriptors or at least some simple explanation of tutor perceptions of grades. It is important also to consider disciplinary differences here, as many students may routinely receive grades in the 90% range in subjects such as computing and maths, whereas in other disciplines grades such as these would be extremely rare.

Regarding use of the feedback sheets, it is clear that students perceive those divided into criterion-based sections with room for comments as the most useful. An additional global comment is also seen as highly valuable or even essential. Feedback forms also accommodate tutors' concerns over the time it takes to mark and give effective feedback. There are a variety of other suggestions for saving time, such as building a database of frequently used comments or dealing with generic problems in class, online or via handouts. Tutorial time can also be allocated to exploring individual feedback further (Clark et al., 2000).

The findings suggest that the nature of the written feedback itself is just as important. Students valued clear, direct, understandable language, and precise, specific and detailed comments. Other researchers who have investigated the types of comments that tutors use, stress the importance of being explicit, breaking down power barriers to enable tutor and student to take part in a more meaningful dialogue. Being explicit involves recognising that generic comments about writing are not always transferable from one piece of writing to another, so a comment such as 'badly-structured' for example, may not be very useful because a 'good' structure in one assignment, one module or for one tutor is not necessarily perceived as 'good' in or for another (Lea & Street, 2000). Also, if it is to be effective, feedback needs to allow students to consider how to improve, not just what to improve. If no explanation is given on what is 'wrong' with the structure or what kind of structure is expected, then they are not able to use this comment and take it forward.

Lea & Street also advocate using non-judgemental comments and questions which attempt to enter into a dialogue with the student, rather than categorical statements and symbols which may be misunderstood. For example, compare 'Meaning unclear' with 'Could this be interpreted differently?'. Mutch (2003) finds that most tutors do not use brief 'final' comments, but instead do try to make developmental comments. However, much of this is 'implied development' which needs to be made explicit to the student. For example, 'Evidence of using some good basic sources' could be interpreted as a) a closed comment which needs no further action or b) a suggestion that students should go on to look at more advanced sources - implied development (Mutch 2003, p.32).

Talking space seemed to be appreciated by these students and it seems discussion of feedback is indeed essential if it is to achieve its formative purpose. Yet a few students still answered in the questionnaire that they would not use the feedback to do anything differently in future work. This may be because they see each piece of coursework as a separate entity with very individual

characteristics and find it difficult to transfer what they have learned about one to another. It may well be worth considering how formative feedback on drafts could be worked into the formal assessment process.

Conclusions

To sum up, this small study confirms, as Ramsden (1992) and Clark et al (2000) have said, that students value feedback and like to receive detailed responses. Students also share our perception as teachers of feedback as having a formative function. However, to be successful this needs to be an integral part of the whole learning process with feed-forward at the beginning, where carefully designed assessment is introduced, discussed and clarified. Learning opportunities for this assessment are provided, tutors respond to the assessment, students respond to this feedback and the dialogue becomes an ongoing medium of further learning.

Students may need help and training in how to best use feedback and how to interpret grades. Feedback sheets should have comments divided into criterion-based sections as well as global comments. Thought and care should be taken about the kind of comments that are written and how these will be perceived and understood by the student. There should be space for students to engage with the feedback, including talk space (see Lillis 2001 for further discussion about 'talkback' and dialogue with students about student writing) and for that ongoing collaborative discussion to continue in an atmosphere of equality. This may facilitate students actively using the tutor responses to develop future learning, especially if there is a real opportunity for them to use the insights gained in future assignments.

Providing effective feedback for a formative (as well as summative) purpose may be time consuming, but it is an important part of the learning process and, if recognised as such, can be efficiently built into the teaching programme.

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Biographical Note

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