Generic Online Multimodal Feedback on Summative Assessments

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Feedback on assessments: a well researched pervasive and tenacious point of discontent

Feedback has become a buzzword in Higher Education in the United Kingdom. As successive National Students' Surveys show current feedback practices as a source of discontent rather than reassurance and guidance, the question of what good feedback should or could be has come under tight scrutiny by academics and students alike. Tightly linked to and informed by the increasingly dominant literature on Assessment for Learning, the academy's interest in feedback predates the National Students' Surveys In *Do unto Others or not: Equity in Feedback for Undergraduates* (Taras 2007), Maddalena Taras, notes a fundamental "anomaly" within the way in which HEIs support learning at undergraduate level: academics are constantly engaging in cycles of iterative feedback (Peer Review), recognise and embrace those as fundamental means of learning, but function within a system which barely transfers such good practice to Undergraduate learning and teaching (albeit doing so better at postgraduate level).

The link between formative assessment and effective feedback is at the heart of two major recent best practice guides: the report published by the Higher Education Agency at the conclusion of the Student Enhanced Learning Through Effective Feedback project (SENLEF); Enhancing Student Learning through effective formative Feedback (Juwah, Macfarlane, Matthew, Nicol, Ross, Smith 2004), and the NUS Great Amnesty on Feedback (2008) which provides an in-depth research and analysis of students' perception of feedback in the wake of the poor results of the 2007 and 2008 surveys, along with ten principles of good feedback. The NUS reportgenuinely brought these issues to the fore as it was accompanied by various local campaigns - the success of some of these highlighting the importance of collaborative thinking on feedback between academics and students, as did the SENLEF project,.

"Exam feedback helps me learn"

The seventh principle of the NUS Great Amnesty on Feedback clearly voices the fact that students also wish to receive feedback on examinations; so this form of assessment, perceived and felt as predominantly assessment *of* learning, could also find a formative dimension. However, feedback on summative assessment has visibly received less systematic attention and has been less at the centre of the debate. There are clear and compelling reasons for this: interest in and experimentation with feedback stem from reflective thinking on teaching and learning, and on a preoccupation with formative values which are usually perceived as lacking in summative assessment, designed as it is to sanction acquisition or application of knowledge at the end of a course and taking place after all teaching has ended. Feedback does not sit well with summative assessments for other more pragmatic reasons: it sits beyond the curriculum.

Great emphasis is placed in the literature about feedback on assessments on the importance of students being actively engaged and having opportunities to apply the feedback to subsequent work. With summative assessment, particularly within the constraints of modular degrees and within large modules, this may not be feasible and certainly seems a daunting task in the face of increasing student numbers.

The particular case for feedback on summative assessments in language modules at Londonmet

On the Open Language Programme, offering feedback on summative assessments follows a compelling rationale. It would make sense institutionally as language modules are clearly sequential, unlike some other modules across the University,. It is not uncommon for up to 30% of our students to register for the next language level in the following semester.   Our very subject dictates a strong focus on feedback at all points, because encouraging learners to understand and conceptualise foreign language acquisition as a set of lifelong transferable learning skills is at the core of recent developments in the field of L2 pedagogy and attainment.[1]

Another reason why feedback on summative assessment represents an important priority for the OLP is linked to the current vicissitudes of our assessment structure where at least 60% of the assessment takes place between weeks 11 and 13 with very limited opportunities for feedback. Past practices relied on no feedback. Changing the assessment structure and avoiding the end of course assessment

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[1] Let us for instance think of the Key Stage 2 Framework(DCFS April 2007) for MFL teaching in Primary schools which places great value on the acquisition of language learning strategies and knowledge about language. The work of the Council of Europe on the European Common Framework of Reference for languages places a great emphasis on self evaluation and goal setting and reviewing in relation to calibrating languages capability.

congestion may at first glance appear to be a logical fix. Could it not be, however, that exploring meaningful ways of giving students feedback within the current structure might in itself inform the need for change in enlightening ways and empower lecturers to reflect upon ways in which one can bring about assessment *for* learning.

This sets the mood for a pilot project undertaken in the spring semester of 2008-09 intending to trial a form of online generic feedback relating to the Oral test which students sit on OFL041N, French Advanced Plus 1 in week 11 or 12. This test is a ten minute oral presentation partly based on a research project that students submit in week 9. Students are asked to present a plea on a chosen aspect of their research and they do so in front of the entire class. It is summative in nature as it sanctions students' oral competence at the end of the course and, in that sense, has all the trademarks of an oral examination.

Why Generic Feedback?

Little has been written about the value of generic feedback in the literature about good practice in feedback on assessments. When it is mentioned at all, it is with reference to its expediency in relation to giving timely feedback based on a few samples of marked assessments. Generic feedback – one "text" for all - can reduce the extensiveness of the task on hand, particularly where teachers face large numbers of students on a given module. A large number of students was not a driving consideration for us. Generic feedback was perceived as a powerful tool in engaging students with feedback as they spontaneously focus on trying to identify which comments may or may not apply to their individual work. In this sense it directly responds to the first of the seven principles of the SENLEF project: *"Good feedback practice facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) of learning."*(Juwah, Macfarlane, Matthew, Nicol, Ross, Smith 2004)

As the focus would be on giving feedback on oral presentations which all the students in the group had attended, generic feedback also offered an important opportunity to engage students in reflecting not only about their own performance and learning outcomes, but also about one another's outcomes. Significantly, the active part the students would have to play in decoding the feedback also reinforced the importance of collaborative learning in L2 acquisition which had been a strong focal point in teaching and learning throughout the module.

Opting for generic rather than individual feedback, occasioned a substantive trading off of "quality against speed" (Gibbs, Simpson and McDonald 2003) as this required extensive reflexion about what and how the students had engaged with the guidelines supplied to prepare their presentations in order to identify areas that had possibly remained unclear. One gain in quality that was certainly traded off was the personal opportunity on the part of the tutors for reflection and evaluation of teaching and learning and the identification of intended learning outcomes which would need to be reviewed or strengthened.

Multi-modal feedback

The research published in the NUS Great Amnesty on Student Feedback, clearly shows that students favour verbal feedback (72% indicated wanting verbal feedback, only 25% received it) and notes *"a profound disconnect between preferences for feedback and the realities of receiving it."*(NUS, 2008).

Could creating what is effectively a "podcast" generate a more positive and content rich form of engagement? Might it also be more effective?

The generic feedback produced for this assessment was multi-modal in that it consisted in a Power Point Presentation filmed with Jing software and supported by narration. For the use of this approach, I am greatly indebted to the work of a colleague from Coventry University, Billy Brick, who uses screen capture software (Camtasia) to deliver feedback clips to students on their written work in EAP modules and who presented a paper at the 2008 Languages in HE conference, Transitions and Connexions held in York on July 7th and 8th.

Cognitive learning theory (Mayer 1999) strongly backs up the notion that dual coding (visual and aural) is more powerful as it allows for information to be processed by both visual and verbal working memory systems, thus improving performance and reducing cognitive overload. The possibility of accessing, pausing and replaying dual coded feedback videos from anywhere for prolonged periods of time exponentially increases potential retention and reduces the interference of emotive factors making it a powerful medium to deliver information which is freer of constraints at the level of content.

Furthermore, dual coded "discourse" gives the possibility of linking content and format in ways that will enhance learning. In *A Cognitive Approach to Instructional Design for Multimedia,* an extensive review of the way in which cognitive theory can inform multimedia design for learning, Sorden (2005) argues that dual coding is all the more effective and assures better cognitive transfer when it relies on the "modality principle" whereby the combination of "image" (visual) and words (verbal – the narration) are intertwined and when the "redundancy effect" is avoided. For this, it is important that the visual and auditory information do not fully make sense in isolation from one another, but rather complement each other. The slides represented a mixture of images and text, however when text was used it functioned as image (a visual image of syntactic repetition in presentations that were structured as lists) and redundancy with the narration was carefully avoided.

The content of the feedback was negotiated carefully between evocation of good practice and not so good practice. In some instances, comments or examples were clearly referring to individual presentations (usually to highlight good practice) but in other cases many of the comments were not attached to specific cases. The generic

feedback intentionally did not include any reference to aspects of linguistic competence that could have invited corrective feedback but instead focused mostly on the way in which the students had prepared, organised and delivered their presentations, and how this had helped or hindered them in communicating their message both fluently and with accuracy irrespective of individual differences in linguistic competence. In this sense the feedback produced was strategic in nature.

In order to generate active participation from the students in the decoding of the information, I purposely left out some information about which individual performances could have been further enhanced by the generic comments being made and kept away from prescriptive recommendations, preferring instead to ask students to select three things that would have helped them perform better. At the end of the video, students were advised to email me the three aspects for improvement and some feedback about the clip if they wished to request individual feedback, the format of which they should choose themselves.

Evaluation and Student Feedback

The evaluation of this project took two forms. As the video was placed on the VLE (WebLearn), I was able to track its use by the students. The video clip ("Feedback sur le test oral 2" in the table below) was the most viewed course item in the semester with 27,5% of all visits – even though it was released two weeks after the end of the course. One student asked whether it could be made in a downloadable format so that he may be able to keep a personal copy and I was pleased to re-record the narration in Power Point itself. The Power Point slideshow with sound is the second most visited course item on the table (feedback des tests oraux). Individual tracking of students also indicated that all students had played the video four times on average. Interestingly, students on this module continued to use the WebLearn module for an extensive period beyond the end of the course making particularly high use of more "recreational" links available.

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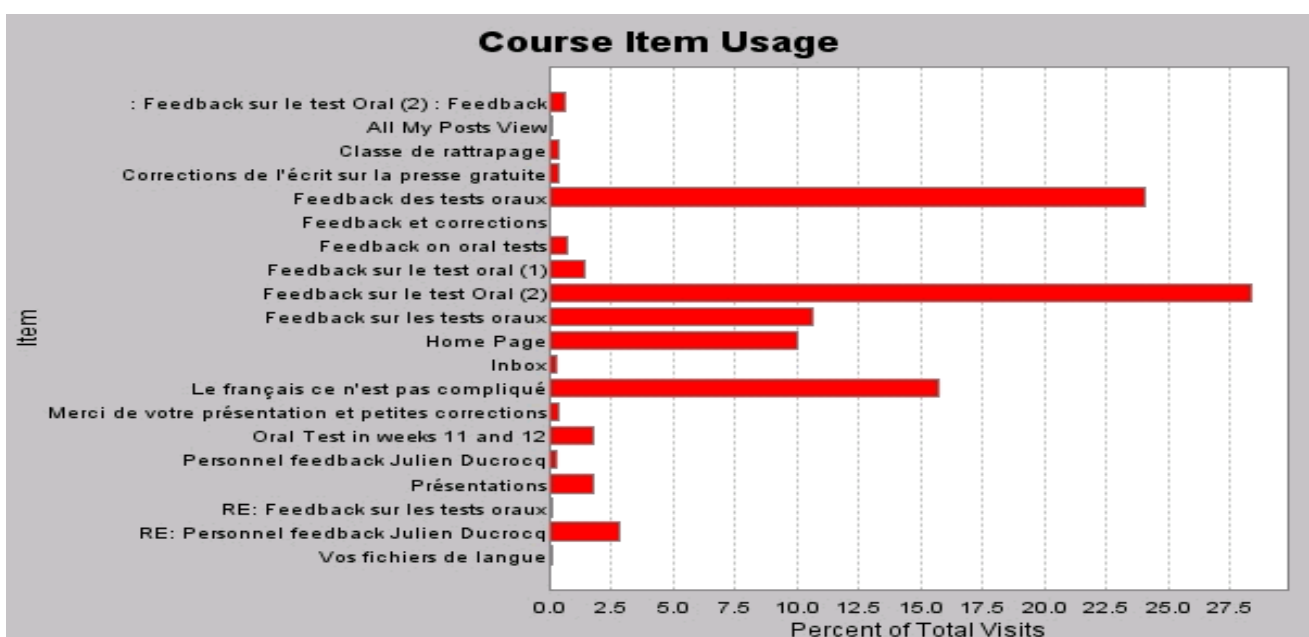
Five students out of a group of fifteen emailed me their feedback and requested personal feedback in the same format. Here are some of their reactions:

> *"I really liked the feedback for the oral that you posted on weblearn. Especially the format. I believe this kind of feedback is very useful and that it plays a critical role in an individual's learning process."*

> *"I found the recorded feedback for the orals very interesting. It was like watching a podcast!"*

> *"I was very impressed by the feedback. Thank you very much for your time and effort. Your points were very clear and concise."*

Conclusions and feed forward

The production of the video was a time consuming exercise but it did have a high impact as it required extensive reflection about what and how the students had engaged with this assessment task, and facilitated a focussed evaluation of aspects of teaching and learning along with the identification of elements of the intended learning outcomes which would need to be reviewed or strengthened.

One outcome that had not been initially envisaged in the project is the essentially recyclable nature of generic feedback for future cohorts of students. Although the video had not been designed for this purpose, it was used and made available to the next cohort of students in order to clarify the aims and expectations of this particular type of assessment. The cohort taking this module in the Autumn semester of 2009-10 also responded positively to this type of feedback and the presentations produced for their oral tests by those who had viewed the feedback independently indicated a high level of engagement with and awareness of the issues raised in the video. Similar conclusions were confirmed with the subsequent cohort of students. A new generic feedback video on oral tests will be produced shortly, including elements of best practice from the 2009-10 cohorts and making use of slides from selected presentations, provided that students give consent.

Could feedback on summative assessment become a regular part of teaching and learning in HE? More initiatives are needed, as is more flexibility in remodelling assessment structures, in order to fully share the benefits of the iterative cycle of feedback which is so central to student learning.

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Jing can be downloaded from http://www.jingproject.com/

Biographical note

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