Feedback to Feed Forward: student response to tutors' written comments on assignments

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Abstract

Much time is invested by markers in providing feedback to students that is personalised, aimed at providing them with information to feed forward into their next piece of work. Given the investment of time by tutors in the feedback process, we were necessarily concerned with how it is used by students and keen to explore and develop practice. This paper therefore draws on an action research project to explore students' perceptions of assessment feedback and the impact of an intervention to enhance its use. This paper presents an initial review of this work, highlighting the way that it has developed feedback processes and students' engagement in self-regulated learning.

Keywords
Formative; assessment; feedback; self-regulated; learning.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged in academic circles that assessment is a fundamental component of the teaching and learning processes and as such it is currently receiving much attention on the national and international educational agendas. Following the seminal review of Black and Wiliam (1998), the profile of formative assessment has been significantly raised (Tierney, 2006). Black and Wiliam concluded that there were strong links between formative assessment and effective pedagogy, identifying that successful formative assessment involves:
• teachers sharing learning intentions with children
• pupils engaging in self-evaluation
• the provision of feedback which leads pupils to recognise the next steps and how to take them
• teachers being confident that every pupil can improve.

Indeed Black and Wiliam's conceptualisation of formative assessment is very much aligned to that of Sadler (1989) who asserts that formative assessment is concerned with how judgements about the quality of student responses can be used to shape and improve competence. This definition implies the closing of a gap between students' actual level of competence and a desired level. Sadler (1989:120) connects formative assessment with feedback and states:

> Teachers use feedback to make programmatic decisions with respect to readiness, diagnosis and remediation. Students use it to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of their performances, so that aspects associated with success or high quality can be recognised and reinforced, and unsatisfactory aspects modified or improved.

Although this is very laudable, Wotjas (1998) reported on the research findings in one university, suggesting that some students were concerned only with their mark and not with the feedback. This is endorsed by Duncan (2007), who notes that many students from his own institution show little interest in the written or oral advice offered to them by the markers. We would want to argue that students do want feedback and that time invested by markers in providing personalised feedback to students, aimed at providing them with information to feed forward into their next piece of work, is vital (Hounsell, 2007).

Nevertheless, given the concerns raised with regard to students' use of assessment feedback and our own realisation, that we seem to have little comprehension of students' use and understanding of assessment feedback, it was deemed appropriate to investigate these matters and identify an appropriate feedback strategy which also involved the students in developing their metacognitive behaviour. This interest also stemmed from evidence that although there although there is a growing research interest in the use of formative assessment feedback (Ecclestone, 1998), there is a need for further investigations with regard to students' perspectives (Higgins et al., 2002).

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to illuminate the initial findings of a study designed to investigate student perceptions of a range of feedback strategies, following the introduction of an intervention strategy.

At the outset of the study, we reflected on the assessment and feedback processes across our degree programme and it became evident that our main technique is, arguably, very linear (Figure 1).
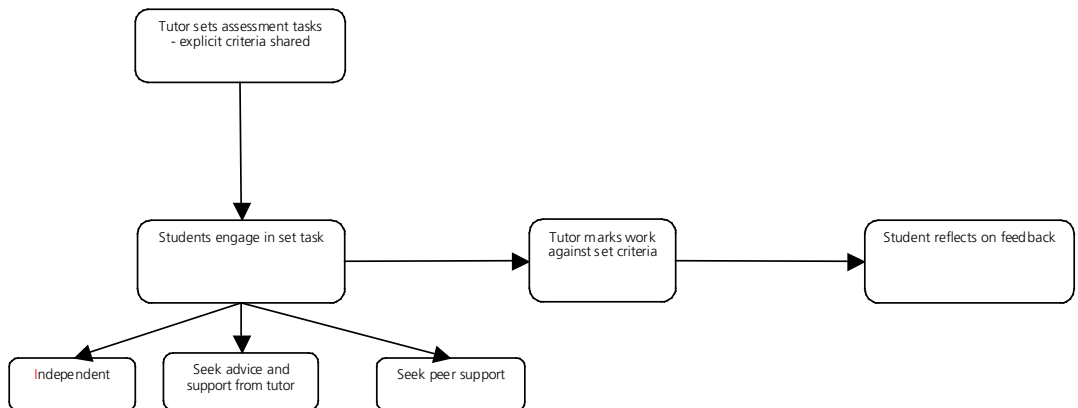

Figure 1 A linear approach to assessment and feedback

In such an assessment and feedback model, the engagement of the students is minimal. As illustrated by Figure 1, student engagement is very much dependent upon the individual who, having engaged in the set task, may choose to seek support from tutors or peers or may work entirely independently. The point is that there are no specific opportunities to engage students in self and peer assessment and, on receipt of written feedback, as illustrated by the model, it is anticipated that students reflect on feedback.

The model in which we were immersed was very much tutor-driven, yet much research associated with assessment and feedback promotes student engagement. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), for example, identify that in higher education over the last two decades, there has been a shift in thinking about the student learning process. We have moved from considering student learning as simple acquisition, based on teacher transmission, to considering learning as a process whereby students are actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge. Arguably, however, our current assessment and feedback processes do not mirror such a conceptualisation, rather:

Teachers 'transmit' feedback messages to students about what is right or wrong in their academic work, about its strengths and weaknesses, and students use this information to make subsequent improvements.
Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006:200)

Yet a central argument of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick is that, in higher education, formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners, because, in theory, they should help develop 'deep learning' (Biggs, 1999). The term self-regulated learning is used here to emphasise the emerging autonomy and responsibility of students with regard to their own learning. It is consistent with Bandura's (1986) conceptualisation of self-regulation, whereby it involves three interrelated processes; self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reaction. An implication, therefore, is that for formative assessment

to impact upon learning, students must 'connect' with it (Higgins et al., 2002). We were therefore keen to explore our practice, to understand if students do 'connect' with any of our feedback strategies and to seek an opportunity for development.

To instigate the investigation, a questionnaire based upon the Higher Education Academy's 2004 SENLEF (student-enhanced learning through effective feedback) project was designed. Questionnaires were distributed to 125 final year students studying for a BA honours degree in primary education with Qualified Teacher Status and 121 responses were yielded. The questionnaire was designed to investigate their perceptions of a range of feedback strategies that had been employed across the programme and fundamentally, to investigate what they perceived to be the main strengths and areas for development. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage rich responses from the students (Coolican, 1994).

A content analysis of the data revealed a number of themes that were illuminative in developing our understanding of how students understand and use feedback, and fundamentally, resulted in us questioning our current practice.

Oral feedback

Evidence from the questionnaires highlighted that, although tutors provide a variety of feedback to students, 72% of the respondents commented that oral feedback following lesson observations of their teaching was the most valuable. In order to meet the standards for Qualified Teacher Status, the students involved in this questionnaire are required to undertake teaching placements in schools to develop their teaching and learning skills. Students are observed during teaching placements with a view that the observation will generate a discourse about teaching and learning. The rationale for this is for students, teachers and tutors to discuss the main strengths and areas of development in a student's practice, with a view to setting targets.

Such a dialogue takes place immediately following a taught lesson, to allow students to begin to develop their targets as soon as possible. In addition, it is an expectation during such discussions that all parties have a 'voice', the notion being that the students have a part to play in unravelling their practice in order to develop it and ensuring that they do not develop, as Yorke (2003) identifies, 'learned dependence'. The students' responses raised to consciousness the possibility of adopting the principle of providing opportunities for a focused discussion about academic performance, similar to that which occurs during school placements.

Written feedback

Seventy per cent of the responses indicated that written feedback is used to inform and improve future work. The indication from the questionnaire is that students at our institution seek to utilise written feedback in order to improve future work, yet although this is highly positive, there remains a large proportion of students, 22%, who rarely look at and therefore do not act upon written feedback. The results from the questionnaire endorse the literature on feedback that reveals that students are often dissatisfied with the feedback they receive, in terms of lack of specificity with regard to how to improve (James, 2000); it being difficult to understand (Chanock, 2000); and, as James (2000) identifies, it may have potentially negative effects on students' self-confidence and motivation. For example, students were asked to identify an example of feedback which they believe is not useful and in response to this, some students commented as follows:

When it does not tell you how to improve.

Telling me what I have written but with no constructive comments.

Written feedback I cannot read. Feedback which is similar to everyone else's and not specific to me.

Tutor's personal views on what issues they believe are important that are not to you.

Negative feedback given in a way that makes you feel devalued.

If it is always negative – low self esteem = no motivation.

Negative followed by negative – makes you feel you can't do anything right.

Negative feedback – when you're trying hard but you get 'put down'.

The data, in summary, indicates that students welcome written feedback which they can act upon and that serves to improve practice. However, the results also indicate that not all written feedback is useful or of a rich, formative nature. This concern caused us to consider how we could enhance our strategies for providing quality feedback to trainees.

On the basis of the findings that trainees welcomed rich written feedback and oral discussions about their practice, a specific intervention strategy was put into place. The rationale for this was threefold, aimed at engaging students in the feedback process (including raising students' self esteem and therefore motivation); capturing those who 'rarely do anything with feedback' and empowering students as self-regulated learners. Higgins et al. (2001) advocate discussions between students and tutors about tutor expectations. Mindful of this and the positive responses from the students regarding lesson observations and discussions, a small-scale action research initiative was put into place.

The intervention strategy
The intervention strategy became focused on the implementation of a feedback discourse opportunity, whereby one-to-one tutorials with all Year 1 students took place.

The tutorial was structured in the following way:
• Students received traditional written feedback on an assignment,
• Students were asked to prepare for a tutorial by:
• identifying any aspects of the feedback they did not understand
• preparing the questions they would like to ask, either in relation to the feedback or in relation to their next assessment
• identifying their targets/goals for development in order to progress their skills of academic writing.

The rationale for introducing the tutorials was to move to a model of assessment and feedback which was more cyclical and which actively engaged the students.

The 'adapted' linear approach to assessment and learning (Figure 2) demonstrates that students have a role to play in the feedback process, actively engaging with the feedback to set targets and being involved in a feedback discourse with tutors in order to impact positively on future work. The underlying principle is that such an approach would aid students in achieving learning goals because they understand the goals, have some ownership of them and are able to assess progress (Sadler, 1989).
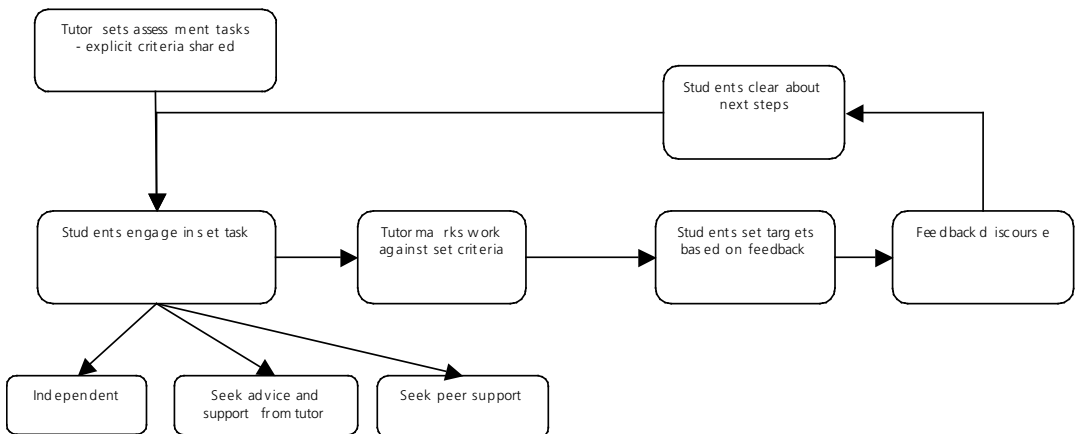

Figure 2 An adapted linear approach to assessment and learning

To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention a Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to the full Year 1 cohort (221 students), yielding 158 responses, to gain an overview of students' perceptions of a range of feedback in light of their experiences.

Furthermore marks for a subsequent assignment were gathered to investigate the potential impact of the intervention. It is worth noting, however, that potential changes to student performance may not be solely attributed to the intervention. Nevertheless, for illustrative purposes we were concerned with investigating any interesting phenomena.

In addition to the questionnaire, we capitalised on an opportunity to engage in a 'focused conversation' (Nutbrown, 1999 cited in Clough and Nutbrown, 2002) with two students from the cohort. This took place following the one-to-one tutorials, as we were keen to capitalise on an opportunity for two students to talk about the full range of feedback experiences. The two students had received contrasting marks on the assignment. 'Alison' had received a high award in the 2:1 class band (68%), and 'Becca' a low third-class mark (42%). It is important to note, however, that although the focused conversation with Alison and Becca provided rich and relevant data, it came at a cost. One, for instance, is generalisability. The approach illustrates what happened in two particular contexts, but not necessarily what will or must happen.

Students' perceptions of feedback
Students were invited to rate the effectiveness of the following methods of assessment feedback that they had experienced.

Table 1 Students' scores to indicate the effectiveness of assessment feedback methods

Question	Scores				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Q1 Written feedback on cover sheet	0%	3%	22%	59%	16%
Q2 Annotations on assignment	0%	4%	32%	47%	16%
Q3 Highlighted criteria grid	2%	6%	40%	26%	26%
Q4 Personal reflection and target setting prior to tutorial	2%	0%	37%	45%	16%
Q5 One-to-one tutorial	4%	1%	13%	45%	38%

Key: 1 – not at all effective; 5 – highly effective

Perhaps the most illuminative aspect of the questionnaire was that it revealed explicitly that the students very much welcome all of the feedback strategies that are employed across the programme, with low ranking responses relating, in the main, to the use of the highlighted grid (an in-house level descriptor grid, based on the sector level descriptors) and annotations on work. This was further elaborated on by Alison and Becca, who discussed the difficulty in interpreting the marking symbols used by tutors:

> *I think that (annotations on written work) was the least successful one, only because I didn't know what some of the annotations were for. We knew 'sp' was spelling but 'ww'?? I asked the tutor this in the tutorial, it's 'wrong word'.*

> (Alison)

It is also worth noting that low ranking scores related to the one-to-one tutorial came from students who, at the time of collating the data, had not had the tutorial due to tutor absence. The overall indication, however appears to be that the current Year 1 cohort of students at our institute welcome a majority of the feedback that they receive and find it to be 'effective'. For example, the students commented on the questionnaires that written comments were:

> *Really useful.*

> *Really helpful to have targets set for you and to work on.*

> *It was useful to know where I was and some tutors noted where I needed to add more information.*

And during the discussion with Alison and Becca, they both indicated that they used feedback to set targets and to impact upon future work. For example:

> *She [the tutor], gave me 'next steps' on the feedback sheet and I used these to make targets. We brought the targets with us to the tutorials and [the tutor] went through everything.*

(Alison)

> *I read my written feedback and annotations, and on my maths one I feel I did better… I was more analytical… I was told to be more analytical…I've gone more in-depth on this maths one and tried to explain what I mean more.*

(Becca)

Notably, however, the one-to-one tutorials were rated significantly higher than all of the other feedback strategies employed, with 83% responses rating the tutorials with a 4+, with 38% of this rating being awarded a 5. This appears to imply that the students welcomed the intervention, and comments from the questionnaires indicate that the student perceived them as advantageous because they:
• provided reassurance
• improved confidence and boosted self-esteem
• could address problems
• could ask questions
• have written comments explained
• were specific and 'personal' to the individual student.

For example:

> *I found the one-to-one tutorials useful and a good opportunity to talk about issues and to generally have reassurance about how I was doing.*

> *It improved my confidence and self-esteem, I know what to work on and how things can be improved.*

> *Very effective to explain written comments and annotations and clarify any misconceptions.*

This was also endorsed during the focused conversation, and Alison stated:

> *For me I found the it was the one-to-one tutorial that was the best, I found it really effective I think because the tutor was really nice and it was motivating, it gave me confidence really as she really talked to me about how to move on… if it's on the cover sheet you see it as bad points and you think, oh no!*

It is interesting to note, however, that tutors did report an adverse effect upon a small number of high achieving students who felt that they now were 'under pressure' to achieve even more highly.

Academic impact
To ascertain any potential academic impact of the intervention, an analysis of marks achieved for coursework 2 (i.e. following the intervention) was conducted.

Table 2 Variations in students' marks gained for coursework 2

	Increase of more than 10%	Increase of up to 10%	Same mark achieved	Lower mark achieved	Total
Number	38	122	24	60	244
Percentage	15.57%	50.01%	9.83%	24.59%	100%

Table 3 Trainees' starting points (i.e. marks achieved for coursework 1)

	Increase of more than 10%	Increase of up to 10%	Same mark achieved	Lower mark achieved
Cw1 – 70+		5 (2%)	3 (1.2%)	2 (0.8%)
Cw1 – 60+	3 (1.2%)	30 (12%)	7 (2.8%)	25 (10%)
Cw1 – 50+	11 (4%)	64 (26%)	8 (3.2%)	23 (9.4%)
Cw1 – 40+	15 (6.24%)	20 (8%)	5 (2%)	9 (3.6%)
Cw1 – 30+	9 (3.6%)	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)
Cw1 – 20+		1 (0.4%)		

One hundred and eighty four trainees (75%) had achieved the same, or higher, marks for coursework 2, as compared with coursework 1. It is interesting to note that many trainees who achieved a mark increase in excess of 10% had gained a low mark for coursework 1 (i.e. less than 50%). The gaining of this low first mark, the personal tutorial and target setting are reported by trainees to have been the support and 'wake up call' they needed. Of the trainees who gained high marks for coursework 1 (i.e. more than 70%) only 5 (2%) succeeded in improving their marks; 3 (1.2%) gained identical marks and 2 (0.8%) scored lower marks.

It is important, however, to raise a note of caution at this point about the use of marks as a tool to measure student performance. There is a body of research (Harlen and Crick, 2003; Butler, 1988; Craven et al., 1991) which highlights the power of marks or grades to demotivate students, as students inevitably compare their marks with each other and set about the goal of simply achieving a higher mark on each subsequent piece of work. The focus upon learning can be lost, thus supporting the argument for students to receive marks within a context of supported self-assessment.

Reflection on our practice
Our aim is to provide opportunities for our students to develop as self-regulated learners and through reflecting on our practice, it has become evident that there were perhaps aspects of our assessment and feedback processes in which we were not facilitating this. Figure 1 demonstrated that in our linear approach to assessment and feedback, opportunities for student engagement were minimal. In seeking to remedy this, the introduction of one-to-one tutorials for the Year 1 cohort has provided opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection through promoting target setting and to engage in a feedback discourse with tutors, which has been welcomed by the students.

Although the intervention strategy has arguably been a very welcome and positive experience for our students, we believe that there are further implications that need to be considered in our future work.

First, the 'adapted' linear approach (Figure 2) has served the role of encouraging students to begin to engage in the assessment and feedback process, through promoting target setting and feedback discourse opportunities. However, socio-constructivist approaches to student learning and assessment also emphasise the role of peers (Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2005), and there is a growing body of knowledge that indicates that peer assessment opportunities can be powerful means of engaging students because:

> *Their communication with one another can use shared language forms and can provide tenable models, so that achievement of some can convey meaning and value of the exercise to those still struggling. An additional factor is that students often accept, from one another, criticisms of their work that they would not take seriously if made by their teacher.*
>
> (Black et al., 2003: 50)

On this basis we have reflected on our 'adapted' linear approach and believe that there is scope for its development.

For example, as in the linear approach, much of the emphasis is on the tutor, with the tutor setting assessments and providing feedback. In such a context, students appear to be portrayed as passive, learning only as a consequence of the decisions made by the tutor (Dann, 2002). Yet, being mindful of the work of Torrance and Pryor (1998) it can be argued that formative assessment should be essentially focused on the student experience; that it must inevitably involve them reflecting on what they have achieved and how they have achieved it.

Therefore, our aim is to develop assessment and feedback strategies which involve all parties, so that students are involved in a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), engaging in the process of social learning and shared sociocultural practices in the assessment process (Figure 3)
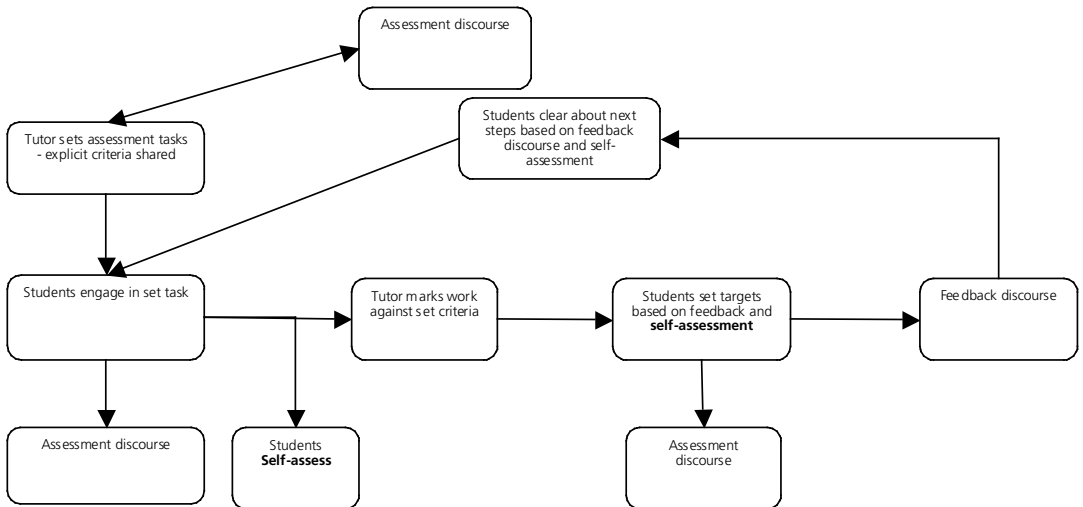

Figure 3 Connecting with feedback to support and develop self-regulated learning

Figure 3 demonstrates our desire that students are active in the assessment and feedback process at all levels, built on the notion that:

Students are not simply receptacles for transmitted information, but active makers of meaning within particular learning contexts.

(Higgins et al. 2002:54)

And that feedback:

… has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument for the further development of each student's learning

(Hyland, 2000:34)

As Sadler (1989) argues, the purpose of formative assessment should be to equip students gradually with the evaluative skills that their teachers possess.

Conclusion
The first year of the introduction of a feedback intervention strategy has shown that students can be effectively supported in engaging with feedback about their practice and that this enhances their development of the competences and skills required at the outset of their degree programme.

Figure 3 identifies a model of practice that captures the features of formative assessment as identified by, for example, Black and Wiliam (1988) and Sadler (1989), that serves to have a positive impact on student achievement through effective engagement with formative assessment practices. In such a model students are fully engaged in the assessment process, thus enabling them to achieve their desired level of competence.

Our intentions in developing the programme have, by and large, been met and the outcomes in the first year have been promising. We have made a good start on the task of developing a community of practice in the assessment process and in developing students as self-regulated learners and we hope to build on this success.

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