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An Exploration of Dialogue to Promote Assessment Feedback Literacy

ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges of assessment feedback in a business school in the UK. Like many business schools, it operates at volume with large class sizes and an internationally diverse student cohort. To operate effectively, it has adopted a bureaucratic administrative approach to assessment in order to address concerns over timeliness, consistency, and quality of feedback. Drawing on socio-constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, this study explores the role of dialogue and reciprocity in the assessment feedback process with a focus on grade descriptors and their role in fostering student success in their learning. Through an action research approach with a cohort of students on a three-year module, the study examines how grade descriptors are experienced by students and student perceptions of their purpose and function within the higher educational organisational context and the positioning of tutor and student in the assessment process. The findings suggest a desire amongst students for a more collaborative learning approach and the benefits for students of doing so. The paper concludes with discussion of the implications of adopting a more dialogic approach to assessment feedback for students, tutors, and universities.

KEYWORDS

feedback literacy, student engagement, dialogue, reciprocity, assessment

INTRODUCTION

The considerable literature on assessment feedback has explored the difficulties students often face in engaging with and interpreting feedback; what scholars have referred to as assessment literacy (Carless and Boud 2018). The consequences of these difficulties are evident through student satisfaction surveys (Office of Students 2019). As practitioners within higher education, working at business schools in the UK, we have frequently experienced challenges from students related to the feedback they have received on assessed work. These are difficult conversations because as tutors, we are not able to amend grades independently or arbitrarily, and for students the grounds for appealing a grade are circumscribed by university regulations. Repeatedly fielding these complaints from students ignited an interest amongst the authors to explore the literature on students' engagement with feedback. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the role of assessment feedback as dialogue and how this in turn influences learning, engagement, and overall assessment literacy.

Business and management is the most popular subject area studied in UK higher education institutions, with 474,970 enrolments in 2020–2021 (HESA 2023). Offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the subject has proven highly attractive to universities due to the relatively low cost of delivery, ability to operate at volume, and the potential to recruit a large proportion of high

fee-paying international students. For some critics, the business school, characterised as having the newest and boldest building on campus, is the "cash cow" of a modern university (Parker 2018, xii). To succeed in this market, curricula and modes of learning are organised to accommodate large and culturally diverse cohorts. Institutions seek to demonstrate their alignment and connections with practice and professional bodies, whilst utilising league tables and the prestige afforded by regulatory regimes of accrediting bodies, assuring the quality of education to potential students.

Given its concern with maintaining relevance to practice, business and management education frequently uses case studies, group work, presentations, and essay writing to evaluate students' ability to apply course materials to real-world situations. The variety of assessments are perceived to help students develop a range of skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, which have direct application beyond their academic studies (Weldy and Turnipseed 2010). These assessment methods potentially provide valuable feedback to students, allowing them to identify areas for improvement and to outline opportunities for skill development in order to prepare for their future career (Segbenya et al. 2023).

Previous research focuses on the bureaucratic administrative regime of higher education in which assessment feedback is managed, highlighting the negative impact of instrumental feedback management on individuals (Hatziapostolou and Paraskakis 2010). In an endeavour to promote a less adversarial and antagonistic approach to feedback management, our efforts focus on problematising instrumental feedback management and emphasising the socio-constructive aspect of assessment. We do this because we feel it fosters a holistic feedback approach that prioritises trust and reciprocity, facilitates better understanding, and effectively utilises feedback throughout the learning process. Guided by the social-affective dimension of the feedback triangle (Yang and Carless 2013), we explore through an action research study the extent to which approaching assessment and feedback as a dialogue may improve students' engagement with feedback and the quality of their performance. As such, the paper advocates greater consideration of the teacher-student (Brooks 2012) and student-student relationships (Hill and West 2020), calling for teachers in higher education to practise a pedagogy that acknowledges a mutual understanding of assessment, feedback, and the surrounding practices.

In what follows, we review the literature on assessment feedback and dialogue in feedback before outlining the research aim and questions. Following the literature review, we offer a discussion and justification for the research methods that underpin the research. After that, we present the findings of the research before reflecting on the implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feedback and feedforward (Hattie and Timperley 2007) as part of the higher education assessment process play an integral role in supporting students' learning and are critical in raising student achievement (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). Despite this, higher education practitioners, researchers, and students have repeatedly claimed that the assessment and feedback process is problematic, with a mismatch of expectations from the different actors involved (Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014). To address this perceived dissonance, focus has concentrated on improving the formulation, delivery, timeliness, and overall quality of feedback for students (Winstone and Carless 2020).

Research into feedback scholarship (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) draws on the concept of student feedback literacy and advocates for students to be considered as active players in the feedback process (Harrington 2011), and to "enhance work or learning strategies" (Carless and

Boud 2018, 1316) for those who use it. To develop this point, Handley, Price, and Millar (2011, 548) offer a conceptual framework for exploring the different phases of students' engagement when producing essays. Broadly speaking, these facets of student engagement can be categorised into students' involvement and tutor involvement. For instance, formulating the assignment brief, evaluating the assignment, and providing feedback can be seen as tutor involvement while creating and submitting the assignment as well as engaging with the feedback constitutes student involvement. The framework proposes that students' active engagement with feedback occurs at the final stages of the process, where students receive their grade and feedback on their assignment. It remains, however, firmly within the tutor transmission approach to feedback (Winstone and Carless 2020).

We contend that account should be taken of the possibility that active and dialogical engagement with feedback can take place at an earlier stage of the framework, though this requires a de-centering of the tutor in the process. Recent research discusses the shift in the conceptual landscape of feedback, a reframing of the "learning milieu" (Boud and Molloy 2013, 708), where students are active agents in the feedback process who work with and apply information from others to benefit future learning tasks (Winstone and Boud 2020). Through dialogue, students gain a deeper understanding of feedback's purposes (Carless 2016), integrating them into their learning practices, while tutors reciprocate by better comprehending students' learning needs, preferences, and challenges, allowing for more targeted and tailored feedback (Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon 2011). Jones (2003, 152) refers to the notion of joint learning, claiming that "reciprocity exists when all involved in the service-learning partnership are teaching and learning, giving and receiving." Trust and reciprocity are critical elements to achieve this objective and ensure a stable relationship develops between the teacher and the student.

The feedback triangle (Yang and Carless 2013) provides the interplay between three elements central to prospects for the enhancement of feedback practice. This framework focuses on the content of feedback (cognitive dimension), the interpersonal negotiation of feedback (social-affective dimension) and the organisation of feedback provision (structural dimension). The interplay between these elements is central to enhance feedback processes, to promote dialogical feedback, and to self-regulate student learning. It acknowledges students' (and tutors') emotional experiences and reactions to feedback and emphasises the importance of addressing them (Hill et al. 2021). In short, it involves an understanding of feedback as a social process embedded in a sociocultural context, considering the diversity and experiences of the participants involved (Rovagnati, Pitt, and Winstone 2021).

To move away from an information transmission perspective which tends to overlook the active participation of students, the contextual factors of feedback provision, and the characteristics and identities of those involved, we need to reject a linear representation of assessment and feedback (Winstone et al. 2022). Furthermore, we need to embrace the view that students should receive continuous quality feedback that can modify their pre-assessment dispositions and gradually transform their understanding of feedback (Carless et al. 2011). The goal is for students to see feedback as a developmental process that supports their understanding and use of feedback in future assessments (Boud and Molloy 2013). To achieve this, students should be in dialogue with feedback providers and peers, where sense-making is a collaborative and constructive practice.

To develop this point, we argue that dialogue or reciprocal exchanges with students is critical in helping the student to develop a fuller appreciation of the terminologies used in grade descriptors. Accordingly, we adopt a definition of feedback as "all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations" (Askew and Lodge 2000, 1). As Parkison (2018) notes, framing the assessment and

feedback process as a dialogue runs contrary to the assessment as a compliance and accountability approach. Assessment and feedback as dialogue turns the focus to the individual participants, recognising their agency in the transformative learning context. With this approach, Parkison argues that the relational condition of the participants becomes impossible to constrain, and the process opens opportunities for the emergence of an ethics of care and an unpredictable generative inter-personal learning dynamic premised on collaboration and connectivity. Dialogue, in this context, is more than conversation or exchange of ideas; it involves relationships forming in which participants think and reason together, a form of relational pedagogy (Gravett and Winstone 2022).

Although theorists who discuss reciprocity cite the importance of addressing the power differentials between teachers and students (Bovill et al. 2015; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014), few studies show how that can be done. They fail to explain through which means or with what tools and processes trust and collaboration can be developed in order to boost student's engagement and understanding of the feedback. Our research aim focuses on: (1) how reciprocal exchanges about grade descriptors between tutors and students enhance students' engagement with feedback; (2) how these exchanges improve students' overall learning experiences; and (3) the role of reciprocity and trust as key elements in fostering the socio-affective dimension of the feedback process. Through this study, we seek to explore the practices and resources that maintain symmetry, trust, and effective interpersonal negotiation in the feedback dialogue.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an action research approach to gain insights into how students engage with feedback (Bryman and Bell 2016). Action research gives priority to reflections and bridges the gap between theory and practice by inviting participants to bring multiple perspectives to understanding, solving problems, and improving existing systems (Klima Ronen 2020). This approach allows educators to simultaneously investigate and solve an issue, making it iterative and adaptable (Beneyto et al. 2019). Our decision to adopt dialogic feedback stemmed from a fundamental educational philosophy—to genuinely support and connect with students.

The data was developed with third-year undergraduate students who were registered on a "Consumer Culture" module in a higher education institution in the UK. All 120 students who registered on the module were invited to participate in the research. Each received consent forms and a participant information sheet explaining the aim and purpose of the research. As educators and researchers involved in the module, our positionality was critically reflected upon throughout the study. We acknowledge that our dual roles could influence participant responses and our interpretation of data, and we made efforts to mitigate these potential biases through reflexive practices and an open, non-judgmental dialogue. The methodology of our study included a process of summative reflection among team members, implemented to ensure the sincerity and credibility of our data (Tracy 2010).

In the first phase of our research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 students a week before the assessment submission deadline. The semi-structured interviews (n=30) centred around specific questions regarding students' interpretations of grade descriptors. The second phase involved inviting these students to participate in focus group discussions (n=4, students = 24) which occurred one-week post-assessment, allowing for collective reflection and comparison of experiences. The extended timeframe, encompassing periods before and after assessment submission, allowed us to observe an evolution in students' thinking.

The interviews were conducted by the module leaders and centred around a discussion of the undergraduate grade descriptors (a copy is provided in the Appendices). All students were given

access to the grade descriptors at the beginning of term and were required to attach it to the first page of their course work in order to confirm they had read, understood, and checked their essay against the descriptors. The interviews took place prior to the assessment submission deadlines to allow students the opportunity to apply insights from the discussion to their papers. Typically, the interviews lasted for approximately one hour. Our approach was consciously welcoming and open-minded, fostering an environment of respect and receptiveness. We allocated thinking time, ensuring a balanced participation where students and tutors alternately contributed to the dialogue. We took care to demystify the academic language embedded within the descriptors, this led to a series of targeted questions aimed at deepening students' comprehension and application of these grading criteria: "What strategies do you think are most effective in ensuring your work aligns with the expectations of grade bands?"; "In your own words, how would you differentiate between a 'satisfactory' and an 'excellent' demonstration of the grading criteria in your work?" The interviews fostered a meaningful collaboration and provided contextual understanding (Nicol 2010). Students could ask specific questions about the descriptors, and we explained how to create robust work that matches the grade descriptors. For instance, students were interested in knowing what it meant to demonstrate "breadth" and "depth" in their assignment from a tutor's perspective.

One week after the submission deadline, focus group discussions were held with the students, and they were asked to reflect on how their perceptions, understanding, and expectations may or may not have changed regarding the grade descriptors. We used these focus groups to encourage students to share their experiences collectively. This dynamic led to richer data as participants built upon each other's insights, revealing common challenges and successful strategies that did not surface in one-on-one interviews. These group discussions revealed shifts in students' perceptions and understandings after they completed the full process of interpreting and applying the grade descriptors. Each focus group discussion (FGD) lasted approximately 90 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth discussion and varied viewpoints. The recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

Using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) and following Bazeley's (2009) three-step formula of "describe, compare, [and] relate," the transcripts from the interviews and focus group were examined and analysed to identify themes and subthemes. Debriefing sessions were held to avoid misunderstandings and missing information. The transcriptions were coded line-by-line using NVivo 11 (QSR International) computer software. The coding process iteratively evolved throughout the analysis as the collected data was read and reread (Thomas 2016). Codes were then grouped into subthemes and umbrella themes, carefully named according to their content. Each theme comprised mutually exclusive subthemes comprising both negative and positive thoughts. We initially identified 15 codes in total. After refining the data, a higher level of synthesis of the codes was obtained, resulting in three major themes which we present in the next section. To ensure participant confidentiality (Kaiser 2009), all data was anonymised. Personal identifiers were removed or altered in the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used when referring to specific students.

The researchers took steps to ensure that students who did not participate in the research were given the opportunity to benefit from some of the initial findings and insights from the dialogue between the researchers and participants. The full cohort of students was invited to attend an assignment clinic, which was recorded as part of the final lecture for the module. This session fostered interactive discussions around the assessment question and grade descriptors. Students were also shown exemplary essays from predecessors, facilitating a shared understanding of the descriptors. Although not all students showed interest in participating in the research, the educators believe that

the exercise provided the entire cohort with the opportunity to engage in dialogue about the grade descriptors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we focus upon three themes that emerged from the discussion with participants. These themes are: (1) dialogue around grade descriptors fosters trust, empowers students, and facilitates better understanding and use of feedback (2) dialogue with students demystifies the terminologies used to justify grade boundaries and descriptors, and (3) dialogic feedback and students' reciprocal exchanges improve their engagement, understanding, and overall learning experience.

Theme 1: Dialogue around grade descriptors fosters trust, empowers students, and facilitates better understanding and use of feedback

While the literature on feedback and assessment points to the usefulness of grade descriptors in helping students to structure their assignment, complete, and assess the work of their peers (Bloxham and West 2004), the findings from our research indicate that grade descriptors are perceived to be vague and rather unhelpful. This is exemplified by Rita's comment below:

> In my opinion, grade descriptors are written in a less understandable language. Some parts such as "independent learning" give the brief understanding of what has been done by the writer, but it gives a good sense of justification for the tutor, not the writer. (Rita, interview)

Rita's use of the phrase "less understandable" begins to pick at the purpose that the grade descriptors perform, and she questions for whom the descriptors are produced. Focusing on "independent learning" Rita feels that the meaning of the descriptors could be conveyed in a better way, suggesting that they need to be expressed in ways that enable students to improve the quality of their work, rather than as an instrument for tutors to justify grade bands. Rita's comments support Sadler's (2005) argument that ""criteria" and "standards" are often confused and that despite the use of criteria, the fundamental judgement teachers make about the quality of students' work remains largely subjective and substantially hidden from student view.

The business school where the student was registered had compelled students to include the grade descriptors on the first page of their assignment. The aim of this policy was to encourage students to at least demonstrate that they were cognisant of the descriptors when submitting their assignments. However, the participants admitted that even though they complied with the policy, this did not necessarily mean they paid attention to the descriptors or understood their significance or meaning. A quote from Tunde in the focus group discussion illustrates this point.

> Students do not engage with them. I have never seen students go through it really and making us include them in our essays does not help because people would copy and paste it and put it on their own and say, here you go, I have done it. (Tunde, FGD)

For Tunde, merely inserting the descriptors into their assignments was an exercise performed merely to satisfy the administrative requirements of the institution. Tunde acknowledges that students do not, or are incapable of, appreciating the purpose or meaning of the descriptors. For Rita the problem extends beyond recognition and comprehension, she points to a more systemic issue

around how descriptors are encoded and decoded by the tutors themselves and how they are subsequently used in the assessment process.

> Every lecturer would have a different understanding of grade descriptors. Besides, not all module leaders would be modest enough to deliver interviews about this, and you would not know what they expect . . . they will not explain terminologies like critical engagement . . . I really enjoyed this discussion with you, I felt confident and secure. (Rita, interview)

Rita's remark reinforces the need to acknowledge the subjectivities involved in awarding a grade to students' work by different academics. More importantly, Rita is hinting at a hierarchical issue; tutors' subjective interpretation of grade descriptors is considered to be the defined truth. For Rita, a collaborative exercise, in this case, dialogue, which gives students and tutors the opportunity to understand the meaning of the grade descriptors and their role in the assessment process would encourage and support students in pursuing a deeper engagement with the grade descriptors. For Rita, provision of descriptors is insufficient; it is only when there is an openness to the inevitable interpretative work required of tutors and students that the descriptors become significant and useful.

Rita's reference to feeling "confident and secure" in the quote above, highlights the need for a collaborative approach and lays bare the relative positions of knowledge and power between the tutor and student, a point Desiree develops further.

> When you read these, they are just words and if you do not have the experience of understanding, of being in a position of privilege where you have been explained these things to then it is difficult. But you explaining what this (descriptor) means, giving us the opportunity to contribute and speaking to us as if we are equals and not beneath is very beneficial and empowering. (Desiree, interview)

Like Rita, Desiree suggests that academics need to engage students in order to build trust (Hill et al. 2021), maintain reciprocal relationships, manage their expectations, and facilitate an informed understanding of the grade descriptors (Nonaka 1991). It is important to acknowledge that, by giving participants an opportunity to work with the tutors to break down the terminologies used in the grade descriptors, this study's approach to data collection sought a more equal position between tutor and student. Instructors encouraged reciprocal relationships by creating opportunities for students to ask questions, seek clarification, and provide input on their feedback. By embracing the notion of reciprocity, instructors established an environment where students' emotions and perspectives are valued, and students' active involvement in the feedback process was encouraged. Students saw themselves as contributing to the pool of knowledge by posing questions and expressing their thoughts individually and as a group. This implies that the process of grading is not solely the responsibility of the tutors but rather, it should be a collaborative effort between the tutors and students. By engaging in a dialogue with students, tutors can better understand their thought processes, perspectives, and areas of difficulty. This, in turn, enables them to provide more meaningful feedback and insights, which can help students better understand and improve their performance.

Theme 2: Dialogue with students demystifies the terminologies that are used to justify grade bands and descriptors

Having explored students' lack of understanding and engagement with grade descriptors, one objective of this research was to explore the extent to which dialogue about the descriptors could bridge the gap in knowledge and expectations between students and teachers. We were interested in finding out how a dialogue with students could facilitate a better understanding and in so doing, improve their performance in the assessment.

Following our dialogue, participants acknowledged that the exercise helped in demystifying the ambiguities surrounding the descriptors. This is reflected in Anthony's response when we unpacked terminologies like "rigorous" and "extensive" as presented in the grade descriptor.

> Like our seminar tutor for international business, he kept talking about theory, critical engagement; he kept saying things like I need to see what you are arguing and where you are coming from, but I never really thought about it that way. (Anthony, interview)

Anthony appears to be unable to penetrate the terminology or find relevance to his practice. His comments illustrate a sense of frustration due to a perceived lack of clarity regarding what is expected from his assignment. Ultimately, he blames his final grade on this ambiguity within the descriptors and assessment marking criteria.

Presenting descriptors and criteria in textual form for students to read, is relatively efficient for the institution. It does not place additional demands on tutors nor eat into contact time. What remains, however, is that the mismatch between tutor offer and student need and the clarification of the descriptors to enable a bridging of interpretations is left unaddressed (Duncan 2007). What Anthony's commentary does highlight is that there is enthusiasm amongst some in the student body to engage in a dialogue if the benefits of the dialogue can be clearly expressed or experienced.

Left unaddressed, the consequences of ambiguity within the descriptors can have longer term implications. This is especially the case when the feedback from the assessment explicitly or implicitly incorporates the language found in the descriptors. This can result in what Duncan (2007) refers to as mechanical feedback, where the vagaries of the descriptors are transposed into the feedback. From a tutor's perspective the use of descriptors within the feedback merely references the criteria used to assess the work, reinforcing the centrality of that criteria, and so potentially addressing quality assurance concerns. When read by the student, however, this feedback simply amplifies the original problem of the descriptors lacking meaning. This point is evident in the comment below from Thelma:

> In the first year, every module I got a 54%, and I worked so hard, but I just did not know what I was doing, and it was horrible. I just did not understand the feedback; it was general rather than specific. I was so angry, and I was so sad because I worked so hard, and it just went horribly wrong. I really did not get it at all . . . But now I think I know what went wrong after two years, imagine! I now know what it means when the tutor says my essay lacks critical engagement and is superficial. I can now understand the difference between a 50, 60, and 70 grade bands. (Thelma, interview)

Thelma's feelings of regret and frustration at the missed opportunity to improve her essays are evident. Thelma apportions blame, not to a lack of effort on her part, but on the inability of her tutors to provide her with explicit and personalised feedback that can lead to improved performance. Whilst there may be some consolation for Thelma that the interview and dialogue helped her to

demystify the ambiguities surrounding the terminologies used in expressing the grade bands in the descriptors, these expressions of participant frustration exemplify the disconnect between the tutor's use of descriptors in assessment setting and feedback, and student understanding and interpretation. The descriptors perform an important role in fulfilling quality assurance demands. They are promoted by and so satisfy internal and external audit; it is therefore unsurprising that the practice of tutors in the context of this study suggests a leaning towards compliance, arguably at the expense of the overall learning experience.

Theme 3: Dialogic feedback and students' reciprocal exchanges improve their engagement, understanding and overall learning experience

A key aim of this study was to observe the extent to which a dialogue with participants can improve their knowledge and confidence with assessment regimes (Brown, Gibbs, and Glover 2003). The comments from the participants above point to how a dialogue with tutors on the purpose and meaning of descriptors transforms how descriptors are viewed and understood by students. Within these comments is a sense of revelation, but also disquiet with how the lack of insight has had consequences on their personal learning journey. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the students were in their final year of studies. When reflecting on this new knowledge, there is a sense of regret at not knowing this sooner with the inevitable question of "what could have been possible." The opportunity to discuss grade descriptors also provided students with an opportunity to consider how descriptors mediate the relationship between them and the tutor. For Abel, although the discussion was viewed positively, it left him feeling disgruntled:

> I think the grade descriptor is now very clear, and I think students' overall experiences would be better if this type of exercise was integrated into our courses. Now I understand it much better and in fact, looking at the grade descriptor, it seems that it was written for the marker and not the students which defeat the very purpose. (Abel, interview)

Although Abel is dissatisfied with how the descriptors had been used, for him they are subjective and appear more useful in justifying grades rather than helping students to improve their work. This view has been documented by Bloxham et al. (2015) who call for faculties and academics to be transparent about the complexities, intuitiveness and tacit nature of assessment criteria, especially as the application of them can often lead to marking inconsistency. Abel does, however, acknowledge that the dialogue with the tutors supports his learning journey. The call for the dialogue to be an integral part of a module also reinforces the idea that a stronger appreciation of how descriptors operate, enables students to incorporate this knowledge within their development plans.

> I liked being able to listen to everyone's thoughts on the grade descriptors, it helped me to consider other elements of the grade descriptors that I overlooked. Sometimes I get carried away with my expectations and don't pay enough attention to the specific requirements. (Jane, FGD)

As Jane suggests, the collaborative and supportive environment helped her better understand the grade descriptors and their role in helping her to self-assess and improve the quality of the final output, improving her grade. By promoting a less adversarial approach and encouraging ongoing dialogue, this discussion contributes to the development of feedback literacy and emphasises the

value of feedback as a tool for learning and improvement. The dialogue also encouraged participants to reflect on previous assessments in order to understand the extent to which their essay measured up to the grade descriptor. This is evidenced in Monica's remark.

> It (dialogue) made me think of one of the modules that I had last semester. I think it was "strategy" and I got a pretty low mark for the amount of work I put in for it and the feedback was really limited . . . The only useful thing I got from the feedback is that I should have engaged more with the material from the lectures. After our discussion, I have realised that I did not apply enough theories and I did not offer sufficient depth and use the right terminologies, so I did not think that feedback was useful. (Monica, interview)

Monica's commentary reveals the potential of dialogue in relation to the grade descriptors to address the mismatch in expectations around the grades tutors awarded versus the efforts students put into their assessment. Not only was there a greater appreciation of the role and meaning of the terminologies within the descriptors but armed with this new knowledge and shared understanding there was a greater willingness to engage with the descriptors and the feedback both personally and within the student group. This reinforces Nicol's (2010) contention that a monologue approach to feedback alienates students in the learning process, it fails to ignite student interest and does not encourage them to take a greater responsibility for understanding and interpreting feedback for their self-development. This view is further expressed in Peter's account.

> I read the feedback when I got my mark, and I was happy. But I never improved . . . if you don't know how to improve in the feedback that they give you then it's a bit more complex. I've just realised that I don't really engage with my feedback. I really don't want to be like okay what's my mark? I would never think about it as an opportunity to learn and to kind of better myself and not just my writing. . . . Of course, going forward, I would be more conscious of what I am writing and when I look at the feedback, I will be thinking about it in terms of the grade band, it wouldn't be just text for me as I would be interpreting it vis-à-vis the descriptors and the band. (Peter, interview)

The above narrative provides a better picture of how this collective knowledge acquired through dialogue clarifies the descriptors, improves engagement with feedback, and, more importantly, supports feedforward. By participating in the dialogue, Peter became aware of the need to consider the relevance of feedback and how he can operationalise this within his learning practices. Fred admitted that the dialogical exercise opened their eyes to how effective engagement with feedback can improve their performance.

> My strategy for feedback was terrible. I never really engaged with the feedback . . . I didn't always feel like I deserved the mark I got. And now I am challenged and can see how the discussions [about feedback and the grade descriptors] have helped me to improve. (Fred, FGD)

The thread that runs through Fred's excerpts (and the preceding narratives) is that through undertaking the dialogue the students have come to experience a new interest in feedback. Fred, for instance, has come to have a clearer insight into descriptors and criteria, and this has occurred

following the collaborative discussion of the grade descriptors. In turn, this enabled Fred to reconceive feedback as a challenge that he needed to attend to. Indeed, involving students through dialogue into the role, purpose, and meaning of descriptors and feedback socialises them to some of the terminologies within higher education. It introduces them to the implicit rules of academia and evaluative procedure (Nonaka 1991). By interacting with tutors and their peers, students gained a deeper understanding of the grade descriptors, developed a mutual understanding of the evaluation process, and improved their self-evaluation and application of the descriptors to their work.

CONCLUSION

Our interest in assessment and feedback was born from responding to student dissatisfaction regarding their grades. Rather than using the formal complaints and quality assurance processes to deal with these challenges, an attempt was made to develop an understanding of the discourses used in representing the grade descriptors. This was attempted through collaboration with students, premised on open conversation, wherein students and tutors worked together to break down the terminologies used to express the grade bands. A key goal of the research was to ascertain whether a dialogical engagement about the descriptors improves the interpretation of feedback and leads to improved student performance. The discussion between the tutors and the students exemplifies how interpersonal feedback as dialogue can influence learning, engagement, and assessment literacy. The collaborative and supportive approach helps students better understand the grade descriptors and their role in self-assessing their work. By promoting a less adversarial approach and encouraging ongoing dialogue, this discussion contributes to the development of feedback literacy and emphasises the value of feedback as a tool for learning and improvement (Carless and Boud 2018).

The findings indicate that the conventional monologue approach to feedback, where students are presented with descriptors and are provided with written feedback, is not conducive to creating active participants in the learning journey. Students are not always able to engage with feedback because the descriptors they are provided are perceived as vague, and students fail to understand their purpose or the terminologies surrounding them. This has subsequent implications on how the feedback is received and interpreted. This combination of issues positions the student as a passive recipient in the assessment process instead of ensuring students are well briefed and prepared for the assessment and subsequent feedback. It is therefore little wonder that the content of the feedback and feedforward is not acted upon.

In contrast, when tutors engage students in the assessment process and encourage discussion and debate about the role, purpose, and meaning of terms used, the dialogue is helpful in clarifying points where there may be confusion, managing students' expectations. In doing so, tutors improve the clarity of grade descriptors and students' overall performance. What this points to is that rather than consider feedback as a final stage in the assessment process, the process needs to start much earlier with an engagement with grade descriptors. This is a recognition that the application of grade descriptors to student outputs is a complex process, and tutor judgement or interpretation of student work is subject to interpretation (Bloxham et al. 2015). Along with the findings from our research, we advocate for tutors and colleges to involve students in dialogue regarding assessment criteria or grade descriptors. This collaborative approach aims to co-create and establish a shared understanding of the terminologies used in the descriptors. Such dialogue facilitates better comprehension and utilisation of the descriptors, ultimately enhancing the quality of work, overall performance, and interpretation of feedback.

This study sheds light on the role of each party in the process, the demands on them, and the practices used to maintain reciprocal exchange and trust. Barriers to student engagement with the

grade descriptors should be discussed whilst considering the socio-affective dimensions of the feedback process. Feedback is received emotionally; and tutors distance themselves by managing feedback instrumentally within an administrative bureaucratic regime. The role of the dialogue is to problematise this arrangement with those involved and address the ethical aspect of assessment. As students invest time and effort into their assignments, generating emotional expectations regarding the feedback they receive, tutors can create a reciprocal and supportive feedback environment by actively listening to students' emotions, empathising with their experiences, and providing constructive guidance. This dialogue fosters a sense of mutual respect and shared responsibility in the feedback process.

So, what were the outcomes for the participants involved in this study? While there are limitations to how far we can take grades as evidence of student learning, all participants of the study passed the module, with the highest grade awarded being 84% and the lowest grade at 68%. Of the 30 participants, 12 achieved the highest classification of grade in the module. When compared with their historical grade, these marks constitute improvements in performance. A series of brief follow-up interviews were undertaken with participants from the study once they received their grade and feedback. Five participants confessed that they had received their highest grade from their undergraduate studies in the module, and they put their improved performance down to engaging with the exercise.

The comments from the students vividly illustrate the limitations of the instrumental approach to assessment feedback and the consequences for the student in terms of not supporting the learning journey. The findings suggest that if grade descriptors are approached as integral to learning and communicated to students through collaborative dialogue and reciprocal exchanges, students' understanding of the criteria on which their essays are evaluated can be improved. This strategy would ultimately have a twofold benefit by helping students improve their performance and in doing so, reduce the considerable institutional resources consumed in handling complaints stemming from individual students on the grades awarded to them. This is not to ignore the time, emotional costs, and resources required for tutors to open themselves up to this dialogical approach. For tutors working on courses with large student cohorts, the shift from instrumental assessment to a dialogical approach will appear insurmountable due to the complexity associated with engaging a large number of students in dialogical interviews and group discussions, particularly when this time has not been factored in academic staff workload. If, however, the assessment feedback approach is incorporated into the learning journey, treated as an integral part of the curriculum and learning content delivery, the resource demands become more manageable.

While our aim was not to seek representativeness in this research, it is possible that the participants who were interested in the study are above average students. Future research might want to consider participants with different strengths and abilities. For instance, we would be interested in exploring the extent to which a dialogical engagement with grade descriptors and feedback would improve the performance of students who are less engaged in their studies. Furthermore, given that this dialogue was undertaken with third year undergraduate students, future research could explore the effectiveness of a dialogical feedback practice with first years, as it would be interesting to track their performance in assessments from year one to year three.

By engaging in a dialogue about their work, all participants open themselves to the human element in assessment and the learning experience. It fosters a more collaborative and supportive learning environment. This is especially important given concerns over AI generated essays. Approaches which promote active participation in the feedback process, where tutors help reduce anxiety and increase engagement, may contribute to students taking ownership over their learning.

Students can also receive personalised feedback and feedforward tailored to their individual strengths and weaknesses, which can help to improve their overall performance. By engaging in a dialogue with students, tutors can provide feedback that considers the complex situational factors in play, helping to ensure students receive a more comprehensive and meaningful assessment of work.

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ETHICS

Research was approved through the authors' university ethical review process.

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APPENDIX

Mark	Undergraduate Grade Descriptor
85-100%	**Scholarship**: Excellent application of a rigorous and extensive knowledge of subject matter; perceptive; demonstrates a critical appreciation of subject and extensive and detailed critical analysis of the key issues; displays independence of thought and/ or a novel and relevant approach to the subject; reveals both breadth and depth of understanding, showing insight and appreciation of argument. **Independent learning**: Work draws on a wide range of relevant literature and is not confined to reading lists, textbooks or lecture notes; arguments are well supported by a variety of means. **Writing skills**: Writing skills are excellent; writing is clear and precise; arguments are logical, well-structured and sustained, and demonstrate thorough understanding; conclusions are reasoned and justified by evidence. **Analysis:** Work demonstrates a robust approach to analysis that is evident of a deep understanding of relevant concepts, theories, principles and techniques. For quantitative modules analysis is complete and entirely relevant to the problem.
70-84%	**Scholarship**: Very good application of a rigorous and extensive knowledge of subject matter; demonstrates a critical appreciation of subject; displays detailed thought and consideration of the subject; reveals very good breadth and depth of understanding. **Independent learning**: Work draws on a range of relevant literature and is not confined to reading lists, textbooks or lecture notes. **Writing skills**: Writing skills are well-developed; writing is clear and precise; arguments are logical, well-structured and demonstrate thorough understanding; conclusions are justified by evidence. **Analysis:** Analytical steps carried out carefully and correctly demonstrating that it is based on a sound understanding**.** Analysis is relevant to the problem and is complete and is placed in a clear context.
60-69%	**Scholarship**: Good, broad-based understanding of subject manner; makes an effective use of understanding to provide an informative, balanced argument that is focussed on the topic; reveals some attempt at creative, independent thinking; main points well covered, displaying breadth or depth but not necessarily both; broadly complete and relevant argument. **Independent learning**: Sources range beyond textbooks and lecture material and are used effectively to illustrate points and justify arguments. **Writing skills**: Arguments are presented logically and coherently within a clear structure and are justified with appropriate supporting evidence; capably written with good use of English

Mark	Undergraduate Grade Descriptor
	throughout; free from major errors; complex ideas are expressed clearly and fluently using specialist technical terminology where appropriate. **Analysis:** Some minor slips in the steps of the analysis and some minor gaps in understanding of underlying principles**.** Analysis is relevant to the problem and mostly complete. A good interpretation which conveys most of its meaning.
50-59%	**Scholarship**: Some but limited engagement with, and understanding of, relevant material but may lack focus, organisation, breadth, and/or depth; relatively straightforward ideas are expressed clearly and fluently though there may be little or no attempt to synthesise or evaluate more complex ideas; exhibits limited independent creative thought; adequate analysis but some key points only mentioned in passing; arguments satisfactory but some errors and perhaps lacking completeness and relevance in parts. **Independent learning**: Sources may range beyond lecture material and textbooks though effective engagement with and use of the wider literature is limited. **Writing skills**: The question is addressed in a reasonably clear, coherent and structured manner but some sections may be poorly written making the essay difficult to follow, obscuring key points or leading to over-generalisation; competently written with a good use of English throughout (few, if any, errors of spelling, grammar and punctuation). Answers that have upper second-class qualities may fall into this category if they are too short, unfinished or badly organised. **Analysis:** Minor slips and occasional basic errors in analysis. Underlying principles are mostly understood, but clear gaps are apparent. Analysis falls short of completeness and is a little irrelevant in place but a reasonable interpretation which goes some way to convey its meaning
45-49%	**Scholarship**: Minimum acceptable level of understanding; extremely basic and partial understanding of key issues and concepts; some material may be used inappropriately; uninspired and unoriginal; relies on limited knowledge; analysis poor or obscure, superficial or inconsistent in places; arguments incomplete, partly irrelevant or naive. **Independent learning**: Sources restricted to core lecture material with no evidence of wider reading. **Writing skills**: Though errors may be few and generally insignificant, answer may be poorly focussed on the question, lack rigour and/or consist of a series of repetitive, poorly organised points or unsubstantiated assertions that do not relate well to one another or to the question, although some structure discernible; borderline or poor competence in English (some problems of spelling, punctuation and grammar that occasionally obscures comprehension).

Mark	Undergraduate Grade Descriptor
	Analysis: Some knowledge of the analysis to be followed, but frequent errors. Some attention paid to underlying principles but lacking in understanding and frequently irrelevant. Some interpretation is given, but it does not place the analysis in any real context
40-44%	**Scholarship**: Minimum acceptable level of understanding; extremely basic and partial understanding of key issues and concepts; some material may be used inappropriately. **Independent learning**: Sources restricted to core lecture material with no evidence of wider reading. **Writing skills**: Though errors may be few and generally insignificant, answer may be poorly focused on the question, lack rigor and/or consist of a series of repetitious, poorly organised points or unsubstantiated assertions that do not relate well to one another or to the question; borderline competence in English (some problems of spelling, punctuation and grammar that occasionally obscures comprehension).
30-39%	*Minimum requirements have not been met.* **Scholarship**: Inadequate knowledge of relevant material; omission of key ideas/material; significant parts may be irrelevant, superficial or factually incorrect; inappropriate use of some material; mere paraphrasing of course texts or lecture notes; key points barely mentioned; very weak grasp or complete misunderstanding of the issues; inclusion of irrelevant material; does not address the topic or question. **Independent learning**: Restricted to a basic awareness or no awareness of course material and textbooks; very meagre use of supporting material or unsupported assertions; use of irrelevant or unconvincing material. **Writing skills**: Unacceptable use of English (i.e. comprehension obscured by significant and intrusive errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar); poor and unclear, or totally incoherent, structure. Answers that 'run out of time' or miss the point of the question may fall into this (or a lower) class. **Analysis:** Erroneous analysis with mistakes. Very little attention paid to the underlying principles of the analysis. Far from complete with little relevance to the problem. Limited interpretation that reveals little, if anything, about the meaning

Mark	Undergraduate Grade Descriptor
20-29%	**Scholarship**: Displays a superficial appreciation of the demands and broad context of the question but is largely irrelevant, fundamentally flawed, or factually incorrect; inappropriate use of material; mere paraphrasing of course texts or lecture notes; key points barely mentioned; complete misunderstanding of the issues; inclusion of irrelevant material. **Independent learning**: Restricted to a limited awareness of basic course material; unsupported assertions; use of irrelevant or unconvincing material. **Writing skills**: Minimal structure, though may only list key themes or ideas with limited comment or explanation. **Analysis:** Analysis has very significant omissions demonstrating little understanding of problem or underlying principles. Analysis may be ill suited to problem. Very little interpretation of meaning of the analysis.
0-19%	**Scholarship**: No recognition of the demands or scope of the question and no serious attempt to answer it. Complete misunderstanding of the issues; inclusion of irrelevant material. May have simply failed to address the question/topic set. **Independent learning**: No evidence that the most basic course material has been understood; unsupported assertions; use of irrelevant or unconvincing material. **Writing skills**: Without structure; comprehension may be completely obscured by poor grammar, spelling, punctuation. **Analysis:** Virtually complete failure to carry out analysis. No evidence of understanding of underlying principles and bears no relevance to the problem. No attempt to interpret or explain the meaning of the analysis.