Using 'How To …' Videos in Feedforward Practices to Support the Development of Academic Writing

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Abstract

The transition to Higher Education is full of new challenges for students not least the challenge to develop a style of writing expected within one's discipline of study at the HE level. Feedback on students' assessments can be one way that guides students to focus on the aspects of their writing that they should aim to improve at different points of their study but often students report difficulty in understanding markers' comments and exactly how to improve on these skills. We developed a library of 27 five minute "How to …" videos to support the development of student academic writing with their key use being in the feedforward practice of markers, pointing students to relevant videos that can help to develop their writing skills at that point of their learning. Three semi-structured focus groups were conducted with students who had watched at least one of these videos, transcribed and analysed for emerging themes with four themes being identified (1. Characteristics of the videos; 2. When and why students watched the videos; 3. Using the videos to understand expectations; and 4. The effects on student writing and their marks). The data show that students valued the use of these videos in the feedforward information on their assessments. The use of examples in the videos were mentioned by students as a key benefit to them. Some students reported almost immediate improvements to marks after viewing one or more video. This suggests that using a library of videos which provide further information on how students can improve their writing is useful to integrate into feedforward practices.

Keywords: academic writing, feedback, feedforward, digital feedback tools

1. Introduction

The transition to Higher Education (HE) involves many challenges for new students but one key skill these new students need to acquire is the ability to write in a way expected at HE, and also in a way specific to their discipline of study. Many HE institutions, therefore, provide their students with centrally run or departmental run sources of support, programmes, and/or

initiatives to help students develop these important writing skills. Often, students themselves are aware of their lack of skills in different types of writing (e.g., academic essays) and will sometimes seek out this support (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson & Reddy, 2006). However, effective feedback can provide students with signposting to resources that can help them to develop the writing skills they need to succeed at University.

The Role of Assessment Feedback

Good quality assessment feedback is highly valued by students (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Menezes, 2019) and one of the key elements of effective feedback is to support students in closing the gap between current performance and desired performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). This desired performance not only involves a clear understanding of the topic itself but also being able to present this understanding effectively through written assessments. Having good writing skills is therefore vital for success. Importantly, the feedback markers provided on assessments need to ensure that students are given clear guidance on what good performance is, how their work meets that standard, and how they can close the gap between the two (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick). A vital part of feedback to enable this improvement in writing is "feedforward" information.

Feedforward information outlines where the student can improve their work next time they do a similar assessment (Duncan, 2007; Evans, 2013; Rae & Cochrane, 2008). Students value this type of information on their work as it provides them with the necessary information which could help improve their grades on subsequent assessments (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Menezes, 2019; Higgins et al., 2002). Although providing feedforward information on assessment is important, there is evidence to suggest that students are not always clear on how to use it effectively to improve their skills for future assessments (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010, Nicol 2010). Oftentimes, feedforward practices will involve written feedback on the student's work (e.g., in a "To improve…" section on a feedback form) but students frequently report misunderstandings in interpreting what the written feedback means (Nicol, 2010; Chanock, 2000). This may be in part due to ambiguities in the way the feedback is framed (Rae & Cochrane, 2008). For example, comments such as "needs more critical analysis" are often unhelpful to students because these types of comments have a distinct lack of information on what the student did wrong and how they can improve (Wolstencroft & de Main, 2021). While it is fairly easy to outline *what* the student needs to improve on (e.g., critical analysis) it is often difficult to explain exactly *how* the student should do this. This is important to consider because students frequently report being unhappy with feedback that does not clearly outline *how* they can improve in their next assessment (Rae & Cochrane). The mode of delivery is also a potential barrier for students. Some students value verbal feedback more than written feedback (Blair, Curtis, Goodwin & Shields, 2012) but this is not always practically

possible from the perspective of the marker, especially when providing individual feedback to students in large cohorts. This is where other methods of delivering feedback can be considered. For example, Evans (2013) suggests that digital tools can be extremely useful in providing effective feedback to large cohorts. Based on this evidence and the suggestion from Evans, we created digital resources in the form of videos to supplement the feedback students received on their assessments. The aim was that these videos would improve the quality of feedforward information to equip students with the tools they need to "close the gap" between their current performance and desired performance.

Creating a Series of "How To … " Videos

We developed a set of 27 "How to …" videos (see appendix for a full list of the video titles) to support students with the development of their writing skills. The videos were created in collaboration with a team of Graduate Teaching Assistants who mark assessments on our BSc Psychology undergraduate degree course. The videos were created to target key skills for students in the Psychology department of the author's institution whose assessments are largely in the form of academic essays and practical reports. Students often report feedback is not useful unless it can help them in future assessments (Duncan, 2007). Our students are assessed using the same marking criteria across all assessments of the same format (e.g., one set of criteria that cover all essays). Hence, the content of the videos mapped directly onto skills tested by these standard criteria helping to support the development of writing skills that are transferable to other assessments (Nicol, 2010).

Each of these videos is approximately five minutes long and is captioned. The videos include examples of writing of varying quality (e.g., poor, average, and excellent examples) with an explanation from the narrator of where each example could be improved. The videos support students in three ways. First, the videos help students understand the marking criteria and how they can meet the objectives of the assessment. The use of exemplars is particularly important for this aspect because evidence suggests students value not only the use of exemplars to better understand the marking criteria but also an explanation of *why* these exemplars meet each criterion (Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003). The second way in which the videos support students is to be able to see marking and feedback "live". The use of exemplars, specifically with annotations or feedback, is best practice in this instance because it helps students to understand what the module leader is looking for and hence helps them work towards the desired performance (Handley and Williams, 2011). By the narrator explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the examples in the videos, the students are gaining "live" feedback on the exemplars, gaining an insight into what markers are looking for when marking their assessments. Third, the videos support students in their skill development for subsequent assessments. Students often are able to apply their new learning to their own work if the skills

are taught within the context of their own discipline (Elander, et al., 2006). Therefore, we ensured all the examples used in these videos related to topics relevant to their degree (i.e., topics in Psychology).

One of the key principles of effective feedback outlined by Evans (2013) is to ensure all resources are available to students from the outset and are available digitally. One positive aspect of using digital tools for feedback is that they can be accessed almost anywhere and at any time. As such, we set up these videos on an open site on our Virtual Learning Environment which meant students can access the entire library of videos across the whole academic year. However, their key use is to supplement the information provided by assessment markers in the feedforward section of the feedback form on assessments. In line with the advice of Nicol (2010) and Evans (2013), markers select two or three points that the student should focus on in their next assessment and select the most relevant videos that provide guidance on how to do this. This results in a feedforward section on the feedback form that includes a written explanation of the key aspects the student should look to work on for their next assessment, and links to the videos the marker has selected. The current study reports on student feedback regarding the use of these videos to support the development of their academic writing.

2. Method

The study was approved by the Department of Psychology's Ethics Committee. An email was sent out to all our undergraduate and postgraduate students to ask for their participation in focus groups to discuss the "How to …" videos. We stipulated that students needed to have watched at least one of these videos to take part. A total of 14 students (12 undergraduate and 2 postgraduate; 11 female, 3 male; 8 Home students and 4 International students) provided the final sample and each student was either paid £10 for their participation or was given course credit.

Three semi-structured focus groups were held with the focus group sizes ranging from three to seven students. These were round table discussions guided by three questions:

1. Which videos have you watched and why did you watch those particular videos?
2. What did you find useful and/or not useful in the videos?
3. What effect (if any) has watching these videos had on your writing?

All three focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The focus groups were conducted at the end of the academic year at which point the videos had been available for one academic year.

3. Results and Discussion

The audio files were analysed for emerging themes. Four key themes were identified and are discussed below in turn: (i) characteristics of the videos; (ii) when and why students watched the videos; (iii) using the videos to understand expectations; and (iv) the effects on student writing and their marks.

Theme 1: Characteristics of the Videos

One key characteristic that almost all students appreciated was the use of examples of writing in the videos. Students found having concrete examples to look at while the narrator talked through the strengths and weaknesses of the examples was much better than stand-alone text comments on their work. This perhaps fulfils their need for further explanation of in-text comments (Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003), possibly due to their inability to understand the language used by the marker in these stand-alone comments (Wolstencroft & de Main, 2021).

> "The examples are really useful."

> "So usually [the marker] says 'expand on what the results can show you and how far you can generalize that' but in the videos they use an actual example which means it's also quantifiable ... and I can see how my work could be so much better if I did it like that."

The fact that different quality examples were used in a lot of videos also seemed to be useful to students, in particular the different explanations of why each example was poor, good, or excellent. Again, this supports the idea that students value the explanations that go alongside exemplars (Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003).

> "The use of examples was really good, especially having poor and good examples as the narrator could explain why one was poor and why the other was good. I found that really useful."

Students also used these examples to gauge the level of their own work and the explanations guided them through each example to show how each had improved on the subsequent example. Using these videos in this way thus became a mode of self-assessment for students, one skill that's important in using feedback effectively (Evans, 2013).

> "[when looking at the examples], I would think 'Oh that's me.' So, yeah, that was really good, because the way they showed it was like a spectrum approach ... and it would be

like this is the first mark and this is how to expand on it. So you basically aim to just go straight to the third level, which is useful, especially for me."

Another important characteristic of the videos was their length, each being approximately 5 minutes long. Previous evidence has shown that students prefer videos that are less than 10 minutes but more than 3 minutes in length (Manasrah, Masound & Jaradat, 2021), and that they are more engaged with shorter videos (~6 minutes; Hsin & Cigas, 2013). This may be because shorter videos reduce the cognitive load on students (i.e., the amount of information they need to hold in their working memory; Sweller, 1994). As one student stated, *"[the length of the videos hit "the sweet spot of my concentration".* The short length may also be particularly beneficial to students who have limited time. For example, many students have other commitments (e.g., family, part-time work) that they need to balance along with their studies (Lowe & Gayle, 2007) so offering resources that do not require a significant time investment can be useful.

> "I liked the fact that the videos weren't too long."

> "Yeah, you just want to have that refresher or that bit of advice on the sentence structure. But you don't want to spend an hour doing it if you've got a limited amount of time."

> "I did like the fact that they weren't too long because obviously when you have assignments or stress, you just don't want to be watching, like, media for ten, fifteen minutes."

> "Oftentimes I feel like I'm using these to aid sort of a fury of trying to write a report or an essay or something and it's great that it's five minutes."

Theme 2: When and Why Students Watched the Videos

Students had different reasons for accessing one or more of the videos. As expected, and in line with the idea that some students seek out support for their writing (Elander et al., 2006), some students had reported identifying a weakness in their own writing and therefore took a more proactive approach, accessing the library of videos in search of videos focussing on specific aspects of academic writing. Most students said they watched relevant videos while writing their assessments rather than when they got their feedback, using them for particular sections of their writing where they didn't feel confident often as a refresher to remind themselves of what they need to do.

> "[I watched the videos] because I hadn't written a practical report before so I wasn't confident in writing them"

> "I used to just like, before I started writing about my introduction, my discussion, for example, I'd go to a video, watch it and like sort of follow it and write mine."

> "And while I'm writing my essay, my assignment or whatever, I just go back to whichever sort of section I'm not confident then watch [the video] again and like, pause it when I need to."

> "So I thought let's just sit down for 5 mins in the middle of writing and get that refresher to see what to do."

However, some students were more reactive, reporting that they only started watching the videos after they had been provided with the links on their assessment feedback forms. This may be because these particular students are lower in self-regulation. Learners who are high in self-regulation are more able to set goals, to more effectively regulate their performance against these goals, and to better regulate their levels of motivation, cognitive processes and behaviour during learning (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). Students low in self-regulation may therefore be less likely to take a proactive approach to gaining support for the development of their writing skills, and more likely to view the videos when directed (i.e., reactively). This perhaps indicates the need for links to specific resources to be used in feedforward practices for students who may not instinctively seek out this kind of support.

> "So, I started looking at them after I got feedback on a report from my discussion section."

Nevertheless, for some students, watching these videos as a result of engaging with the feedforward information on their assessments subsequently resulted in a more proactive approach. This mirrors the feedback model proposed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) whereby one of the purposes of effective feedback is to facilitate self-assessment, and for this to help develop strategies and tactics the student can use to produce an "outcome" (e.g., an essay). By the student actively engaging in these videos after being directed to them, they have been able to assess their own performance against an example of "desired performance". This in turn has led to the realisation that watching the videos can be a useful strategy or tactic to improve the quality of subsequent outcomes produced (i.e., their future assessments).

> "In my first essay I waited until I had my feedback then watched the videos, but now I'm watching the videos before writing which is more useful."

Theme 3: Using the Videos to Understand Expectations

Students also reported that the videos helped to develop their own sense of what was expected of their writing at university. This ties in with the idea that feedback should help students know what good performance is and to be able to more clearly understand where their own performance is in relation to that (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Additionally, existing evidence shows that the use of exemplars helps students see what they should be aiming for (Handley & Williams, 2011).

> "I didn't know what I was doing so this [the videos] gave me a really concrete thing."

> "I struggled a lot with relating back to previous literature in my practical reports so the videos really helped me because I could see what I should be doing."

> "I've used them when I've been completely stuck with something and I was trying to write my practical and I couldn't think of any way to, you know, use critical evaluation and so the video did sort of prompt me and I thought 'Oh I can do this,' so I went away and did it."

This was true for students early on in their degree as well as later on. This highlights the comments of Evans (2013) who states that there is perhaps an (incorrect) assumption that students further on in their studies (e.g., postgraduate students) have fewer writing problems.

> "I think we all come to Uni with preconceptions that we know how to do things but [these videos] made me realize we need the support."

> "You think that maybe you shouldn't be looking at these videos so late on in the degree because you should be able to write a practical report, but I learnt so much."

International students found it particularly useful in informing them of the expected writing style in HE in the UK. One international student said:

> "I opened the future research video and I thought 'Wow is this how we have to do it?' I didn't know it. Before I used to write just a sentence, but I now know it's different."

Theme 4: Effects on Writing and Assessment Marks

Some students reported an almost instantaneous improvement in their academic writing after watching one or more of the videos

> "After I watched my first video, I got 10 marks more for my next essay."

> "I had a lightbulb moment and thought 'Wow, this is amazing!' and I put it in my practical [report] and I got 10 marks more so they [the videos] do work."

> "Like, for example, when I was doing my discussion I've watched the video, I've done my discussion. And I got quite a good feedback regarding my discussion with those. That was useful."

Although providing additional tools (e.g., exemplars) and interventions to support student writing can result in improved performance (and marks) for some students, this is not always the case (Wimshurst & Manning, 2012). In the current sample, some students reported a level of frustration after markers signposted them to a video they had already watched while preparing for that assessment which clearly indicates their usage of that video had not resulted in "good performance" on that particular writing skill.

> "Although it can be quite frustrating when you've watched them and they [the markers] tell you to watch it again."

Nevertheless, these different experiences could be explained by the type of skill each student is trying to improve. For example, essay structure can be a fairly "quick fix" and can have an almost immediate effect on marks but a more advanced skill like critical writing will take time to develop. Since we did not ask participants what aspects of their writing they were looking to improve, it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions regarding the disparity in experiences. Additionally, there may be individual differences that affect how well the students can apply the advice given in the videos to their own work. For example, both self-regulation skills and previous experiences of managing self-assessment can affect how well students use resources provided to them to help support their learning (Evans, 2013) so it's possible that students who have a high level of these skills are better equipped to act upon the advice given in the videos and thus see more positive effects on their work.

Limitations

One of the key limitations of the current study is that we only gathered data from a small subset of students who had watched the videos and so may only form a narrow viewpoint of student perceptions of the usefulness of these videos. Additionally, we did not speak to students who had not watched any of the videos and thus cannot comment on why this might be. There is some evidence to suggest that some students are reluctant to engage with feedback that is delivered digitally (Timmers & Veldkamp, 2011) but this is also the case with written feedback. For example, Duncan (2007) reports that some students do not even collect their work yet alone read and engage with written feedback. A possible explanation for this may be due to the different types of learners. Passive learners may be less likely to engage more

generally in feedback compared to active learners (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) so within the context of the current study, these students may also be less likely to watch the videos not only proactively but also reactively to feedforward information on their assessment. Additionally, Rae and Cochrane report that some students do not engage with the feedback if they are happy with their mark so this could also explain why some students may not watch the videos.

Another limitation is the type of data we gathered from students. Although the purpose of the study was to gain rich data about students' use of the videos, perhaps a cruder way of measuring their effectiveness is to track changes in the marks of student assessments (both for those who use and do not use the videos). This would provide some quantitative evidence of the efficacy of these videos for supporting improvements in student writing.

4. Conclusion

Ensuring feedforward practices are providing clear instruction on what students can improve on in their next assessment is important for the development of students' writing skills. The current study discusses students' perceptions of the efficacy of using digital tools in the form of a library of "How to …" videos to support students' understanding of the information provided in the feedforward section of their feedback form. The evidence in the current study suggests that providing direct links to short, relevant videos which include examples and explanations can help students to develop aspects of their academic writing and thus reach or at least get closer to the expectations of their discipline. Directing students to specific videos at certain points in their studies can help them to focus on aspects that they need to improve at that point in their development and thus can be a useful tool to integrate into feedforward practices.

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Appendix

A list of the "How to …" videos used to support academic writing in essays and practical reports.

For an example, see http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/0bpfv (Video topic 12: How to write a good introduction in an essay")

1. How to write with clarity
2. How to read an academic paper
3. How to critically analyse an academic paper
4. How to find and select relevant evidence
5. How to use evidence to make a point or argument
6. How to provide a balanced argument
7. How to select points for your argument
8. How to structure your argument
9. How to develop your argument
10. How to ensure studies are clearly explained
11. How to construct the overall narrative in an essay
12. How to write a good introduction in an essay
13. How to structure the main body of your essay
14. How to write a good conclusion in essays and practical reports
15. How to construct a practical report
16. How to construct the overall narrative of a practical report
17. How to write a clear abstract
18. How to write a clear rationale in a practical report
19. How to write clear hypotheses in a practical report
20. How to clearly describe methods and designs in a practical report
21. How to report results clearly in a practical report
22. How to format table and figures in APA style
23. How to summarise your results in the Discussion section of a practical report
24. How to critically discuss your findings in a practical report within the context of previous research
25. How to discuss the implications of your results in a practical report
26. How to discuss the strengths and limitations of your study in a practical report
27. How to propose ideas for future research in a practical report