Listening to students

How to make written assessment feedback useful

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ABSTRACT Written assessment feedback has not been widely researched despite higher education students continually expressing the need for meaningful and constructive feedback. This qualitative study employing focus groups captures and interprets the student perspective of written assessment feedback. Participants were Registered Nurses and non-traditional entrants to higher education. The findings generated a framework of themes and categories representing the feedback process experienced by the students. The themes were 'learning from', 'the process of receiving' and 'making sense of' feedback. When this framework incorporates strategies such as 'feed-forward', self-managed learning and personalized guidance it then represents a heuristic model of effective written assessment feedback. The model, created as a result of the research, should enhance the student experience and aid understanding of the complex processes associated with providing written assessment feedback.

KEYWORDS: *assessment feedback, feed-forward, focus group, qualitative research, student perspective*

Introduction

Feedback is an essential component in the learning cycle (Weaver, 2006). However, students have expressed dissatisfaction with the helpfulness of lecturers' feedback (Hounsell et al., 2008). Students assert a need for meaningful and constructive written assessment feedback (Higgins et al., 2001) to serve as a guide to their learning (Duffield and Spencer, 2002). If assessment feedback is to be effective in guiding learning, it should focus on 'growth rather than grading' encouraging and advancing student learning (Sadler, 1983: 60). Feedback will not advance learning if misunderstandings exist and students are not able to make sense of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). These misunderstandings may be attributed to lecturers

failing to recognize the student's perspective (Chanock, 2000; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Hounsell, 2004). Lecturers who do not listen to the student voice may be following a traditional model of providing written assessment feedback that could be described as a transmission process and considered to be about justifying the mark awarded (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Weaver, 2006). Additionally lecturers may be constrained by their own individual disciplinary perspective on what constitutes appropriate feedback. This situation may be creating a disparity between lecturer intentions and student interpretation of the feedback and their ability to use the written assessment feedback effectively (Lea and Street, 2000). To use written assessment feedback effectively, students must also be able to self-manage learning and lecturers have a role in encouraging and motivating this ability within students (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Although many issues related to written assessment feedback can be extrapolated from the literature, it is clear that a holistic view from the student perspective is absent and needs to be addressed (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002; Mutch, 2003; Weaver, 2006). To gain a deeper understanding of the student perspective and allow the formulation of a framework, it is imperative to listen to students and explore their opinions on written assessment feedback. The study reported here has evolved from questioning the practice regarding the relationship between lecturers' effort in providing written assessment feedback, which can be considerable, and how useful students find written assessment feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

Research design

The research was a small scale qualitative study which followed a naturalistic paradigm to capture and interpret the student perspective of written assessment feedback. By opting for this design the researchers sought to understand meaning from the student point of view in a non-controlling and open way (Patton, 2002). A focus group technique was employed as a means of capitalizing on group interaction to facilitate collection of rich responses to the questions posed (Kenny, 2005). The application of focus groups is supported in the literature with several advantages being outlined: it encourages interaction between participants, enhances the quality of the data and is useful for eliciting the student perspective (Barbour, 2005; Patton, 2002). It must also be acknowledged that the focus group may have its limitations and must be approached tentatively. The most significant challenges for this study were, first, difficulty in capturing non-verbal interactions (Sim, 1998) since researchers may have less control over the direction of the discussion than in a one to one interview (Bender

and Ewbank, 1994) and second, large groups may preclude everyone from having a chance to contribute (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). These challenges were addressed by the co-researcher taking written notes while the focus group was in process and linking non-verbal interaction to the verbal accounts. The direction and control of the discussion was facilitated by the researchers preparing a questioning route with prompts prior to the group being conducted. The size of the group was limited to allow all participants to contribute.

Purposive sampling was utilized to allow the selection of participants who were able to offer information about the phenomenon being investigated (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). Participants were Registered Nurses undertaking Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 9 study; they were non-traditional entrants to higher education, all undertaking a part-time 'top-up' degree and having experience of written assessment feedback. The participants were from two modules within one particular programme. It has been recommended that participants who are already in naturally occurring groups are best placed to inform on a particular phenomenon (Barbour, 2005).

Ethical approval was given by the Institution's Ethics Committee to conduct this study with students. In taking cognisance of the ethical principles that guide research, participants entered the study as informed volunteers; their integrity was safeguarded and the interests of any significant others related to the topic (lecturers) being explored were protected. The following procedures were applied: participants were provided with an information sheet; they were asked to sign a consent form; their opinions were treated with respect by the researchers; ground rules were set emphasizing the need for participants to respect the views of and maintain the confidentiality of other focus group members and lecturers; participants were assured that there would be no detrimental repercussions to themselves and that there may be no benefit to themselves. Data were handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

The focus group interviews were conducted using a predetermined 'questioning route' which allowed consistency in the questioning and facilitated analysis of the data (Krueger and Casey, 2000). A pilot focus group of four students who were representative of participants in the study was conducted. This allowed the researchers to consider whether the questions flowed, were clear and easily answered by the participants. Following the pilot the questions required minor adjustment. This process is recognized as a useful strategy (Krueger and Casey, 2000; McLafferty, 2004). Two focus groups lasting one hour on each occasion were conducted. There were six participants in each focus group. It is acknowledged that the sample chosen to conduct this study was small and from one institution only,

and hence the findings may be limited. The researcher undertaking the role of moderator introduced the focus group, confirmed the ground rules and guided the group to ensure a non-threatening environment and appropriate group dynamics (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The discussion generated by each focus group was audio recorded and the data were transcribed verbatim.

Method of data analysis

Thematic Content Analysis suggested by Burnard (1991) was employed as the method of analysing the focus group transcripts to ensure that the thoughts and feelings of the participants were represented in an honest way. Burnard (1991) proposed a 14-stage process of analysis, which was used to categorize and theme the data and elicit meaning from the data, thus illuminating the phenomenon under investigation (Polit and Beck, 2006). This systematic approach was thought to be of importance because, as Thorne (2000: 68) states, 'unquestionably, data analysis is the most complex and mysterious of all the stages of a qualitative project'. The data analysis involved, firstly, the researchers together immersing themselves in the raw data by listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts (Speziale and Carpenter, 2003). Secondly, the researchers together made notes to try to make sense of the data and to learn what was going on (Polit and Beck, 2006). Thirdly, the researchers independently worked with the transcripts and highlighted excerpts of narrative which appeared to describe the participants' perception of written assessment feedback and noted in the margin key words/phrases that seemed to capture the student perspective (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Following debate, themes and categories were then generated. The researchers subsequently developed a coding scheme by utilizing a 'Template Analysis Style' (Polit and Beck, 2006), which allowed sorting of the emerging themes and categories (Meadows, 2003). The template underwent repeated revision as the researchers worked together, refining and analysing the themes and cat-egories by 'dwelling' with the data and constantly probing the importance of the emerging ideas (Speziale and Carpenter, 2003).

To enhance validity an expert researcher with considerable experience in conducting focus groups and reviewing transcripts was invited to review the transcripts and independently generate themes and categories prior to reviewing the researchers' coding scheme. The expert's findings concurred with the coding scheme and the researchers' initial interpretation. However, it was highlighted that one theme 'the nature of student involvement' perhaps warranted further exploration. The researchers took cognisance of this point being made by the invited expert researcher. To allow effective data management and remove the laborious task of cutting and pasting pages of narrative material manually, the focus group transcripts

were imported into a computer software package called 'NVivo™' for coding and sorting. To enhance the validity further, the researchers consulted with individual participants. These participants were invited to confirm how well the themes and categories related to selected verbatim statements (Burnard, 1991).

Research findings and discussion

Data analysis yielded three clear themes and eight associated categories. The themes and categories represented the feedback experience of the students. The emerging themes focused on 'learning from the feedback', 'the process of receiving feedback' and 'making sense of the feedback'.

Theme 1
Learning from written assessment feedback

This theme comprises two categories: contextualizing; and engaging with the feedback. The findings suggest that there is some misconception regarding the purpose of written assessment feedback both from a lecturer and student perspective. This may be linked to a lack of understanding by both parties of the nature of assessment be it formative or summative.

The notion that assessment and feedback is a transmission process centred on deriving and justifying a mark, rather than encouraging learning, seems to predominate. Pitts (2005: 226) insists that we need to dispute the view that 'feedback is written for the file, to justify a mark given and to keep some official record of each student's progress'. Monitoring student performance is important, but the processes involved must impact on the student's learning. Sadler (1983) argues that lecturers frequently make a fundamental miscalculation and regard assessment as supplying only a grade or brief comments to their students yet expect improvement as a result.

The data also suggests that students appear to fall into two distinct groups: 'active students' and 'passive students'. Their level of engagement with written assessment feedback appears to be variable, with students falling between two ends of a spectrum. Some students actively utilize the feedback and are very keen to learn from it and develop academically. However, other students seem to lack motivation and understanding, with a distinct lack of intent to learn; for them, a pass mark seems to be their ultimate goal. Student application of feedback is a skill which requires lecturers' investment to develop (Orsmond et al., 2005). If students have not been prepared to connect with their feedback they may show little evidence of development or intrinsic motivation to learn (Mutch, 2003). The skills of self-management should be encouraged by lecturers who 'feed-forward'

(Duncan, 2007) to enhance the student experience by encouraging engagement and hopefully maximizing learning. Students should be empowered to be 'conscientious consumers' (Higgins et al., 2002) who value the feedback process and demonstrate an ability to critique their own work. Participants took either an active or passive stance and gave the researchers insight into this theme by sharing their thoughts as illustrated below.

> 'Its good if you sort of know which bit [of the assignment] you've fallen down on and what you could improve on … I feel that's what we're here to do is to improve.'

> 'I really didn't take much notice of it [the assessment feedback] to be honest.'

To maximize the impact of feedback, cognisance must be given to the psychology of giving and receiving feedback as well as feedback content (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Feedback must also be understandable, timely and acted upon by students (Yorke, 2003). However, this becomes particularly difficult within a modular curriculum which has an end-loaded assessment process where students receive feedback some time after module completion. Unfortunately in this situation students seem to regard the learning and the module as being 'over' and do not regard the process as being developmental (Weaver, 2006). As students move between modules and lecturers they may lose a shared understanding and struggle to enter the particular discourse underpinning lecturer's comments (Higgins et al., 2001; Weaver, 2006). The function of the feedback process then becomes evaluative rather than about encouragement and/or achievement. Furthermore, when modularization means more summative rather than formative assessment, it may be counterproductive to the development of students' academic knowledge and skills (Atkins, 1995).

Lecturers in the contemporary higher education arena should be driven to ensure that feedback to students on assessed work is given in a way that broadens learning and assists improvement (Orsmond et al., 2005). Providing assessment feedback should be seen as a 'social practice' that places emphasis not only on the comments but also on the means by which the feedback is produced, distributed and received (Mutch, 2003).

Theme 2
The process of receiving written assessment feedback
This theme is essentially about the process of providing the students with feedback. The process consists of four categories – timing, method, elements and format – which are all central to the process of receiving feedback.

The students' experience of timing of feedback in practice varied between a couple of weeks, a couple of months and sometimes never. This

indicated that there did not seem to be consistency in how lecturers responded, although university policy states that students should receive feedback in a set timeframe (Mannion and Eadie, 2005). Students expressed various opinions relating to the time gap from handing in the assignment and receiving feedback. Most but not all were keen to receive feedback while it still mattered to them.

> 'I quite like to have it back [the feedback], because you're sort of constantly thinking when is it due, when is it due.'
> 'You want that feedback quickly.'
> 'Sometimes it's actually quite nice to hand it in and forget about it [the assignment].'

The timing of feedback is crucial to student learning as highlighted by Gibbs and Simpson (2004) who say that 'If students do not receive feedback fast enough then they will have moved on to new content and the feedback becomes irrelevant to their ongoing studies and is extremely unlikely to result in additional appropriate learning activity, directed by the feedback' (p. 19).

The mode by which the lecturers communicated feedback to the students also seemed to indicate variation in practice. Three methods emerged: post, collection or electronic. Two, post and collection, were currently used; electronic feedback was suggested by the students.

> 'If it [the written assessment feedback] goes *online*, that would be good because then you would get your mark and your feedback at the same time.'
> 'I think certainly getting it [the feedback] at home maybe quite nice … and reflect on it before you see anybody else and without anybody saying, how did you get on?'
> 'You just got handed it [the feedback] when you left the class.'

Lecturers did not seem to be taking advantage of electronic communications media to give feedback to students. Students' comments suggest that this means of communication would, however, be useful.

The elements of the feedback that the student receives could potentially include a mark, a feedback sheet, a criteria matrix and a copy of the essay. Again there was considerable variation in which elements the students saw as being important, as illustrated below.

> 'The first thing your eye looks at is the mark; you want to know if you have passed.'

However, other students seemed to be more curious and keen to establish their unique strengths and weaknesses:

> 'I'd like a bit more use of the matrix … write in each bit how you fulfilled or not fulfilled that part of the matrix.'

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'I think having the essay back with comments in the essay I prefer.'

Other students seemed to be left out of the feedback loop altogether.

'I've one module that I've had absolutely no feedback to this day.'

If all these elements are important to the student, as their comments above suggest, then perhaps all these elements should be used consistently.

The final category within this theme related to how the lecturers presented the students' feedback, whether this was handwritten, typed and personal to the student.

'I've had both [handwritten and typed feedback] and I think the typed is easier to read but you still get the personal touch with the handwritten, it makes you feel that it is more addressed to yourself.'

'I've had a couple [written assessment feedback] that used my name, which was personalised.'

The overwhelming emphasis from the students in relation to this category is that they valued personalized feedback.

Theme 3
Making sense of written assessment feedback

This theme is concerned with the students' ability to interpret and comprehend the feedback and consists of two categories: the nature of the comments, and the opportunity to have face-to-face dialogue with their lecturers to facilitate understanding of the feedback.

The students highlighted various issues relating to the nature of comments provided by the marker. The issues centred on clarity/lack of clarity, the need for helpful advice, explanations, examples, areas of strength and weakness. The students overwhelmingly expressed a desire for clear, constructive, informative comments that could be interpreted easily. They particularly valued feedback that gave them positive encouragement. Unfortunately in many instances there was a focus on the negative aspects of the work and lack of explanation and examples used by lecturers to inform the students fully.

'I wasn't particularly happy with the comments because I didn't understand half of what they'd written. I was told I should have done X, Y, and Z and I didn't quite understand.'

'I've had comments that I could have developed certain areas … so within a word count of say … three thousand words … what should I have left out … because I think every one of my three thousand words is valuable and every point that I have made is a valid point, so what could I have missed out in order to explore these areas or develop other areas would have been helpful to know.'

'There's no point in criticising [the essay] … unless they're actually going to give you an idea of what you ought to be doing.'

'…[the marker should] give you an example of what you've done that's not correct and an example of how it could be corrected, that might actually make you pick up on it [the feedback] better.'

The above quotations reinforce that feedback is crucially important to students. However, the literature on feedback emphasizes that students are often displeased with the feedback they receive in terms of deficiency in specific advice to improve (Higgins et al., 2001), being difficult to interpret (Chanock, 2000) or having a potentially negative impact on students' egos (Carless, 2006).

In order to help them make sense of feedback students expressed a need to engage with the marker during face-to-face dialogue to discuss the feedback. Also some students asserted that there could be value in discussing feedback and sharing experiences with their peers. The opportunity to speak to their tutor or have class discussion after feedback was a luxury that very few students appeared to be afforded. However, this is what the majority wanted in order to make sense of the feedback and use the experience to improve their work in the future.

'I would like to receive my assignment before I met up with the tutor … I would like to read it through … I would like to read the comments … I would like to make a list of things that I could discuss … and then see the tutor one to one.'

'I would like the opportunity within the class to discuss the assignment, how it went and how it could be improved.'

The assertion that students desire more discussion has also been suggested in the literature as feedback messages can be invariably convoluted and difficult to interpret (Higgins et al., 2001; Ivanic et al., 2000). Students require opportunities to build an understanding of the feedback messages 'through dialogue'. The feedback messages then can be used to further their learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Pitts, 2005). However, Mutch (2003) cautions that 'receiving feedback and discussing it face to face can be a challenging process which, without careful management, can turn into confrontation' (p. 37).

Written assessment feedback model

Together the themes and categories can be presented as an all-encompassing conceptual framework. When this framework incorporates the strategies that can possibly enhance the feedback process, it then represents a heuristic model of effective written assessment feedback (see Figure 1).
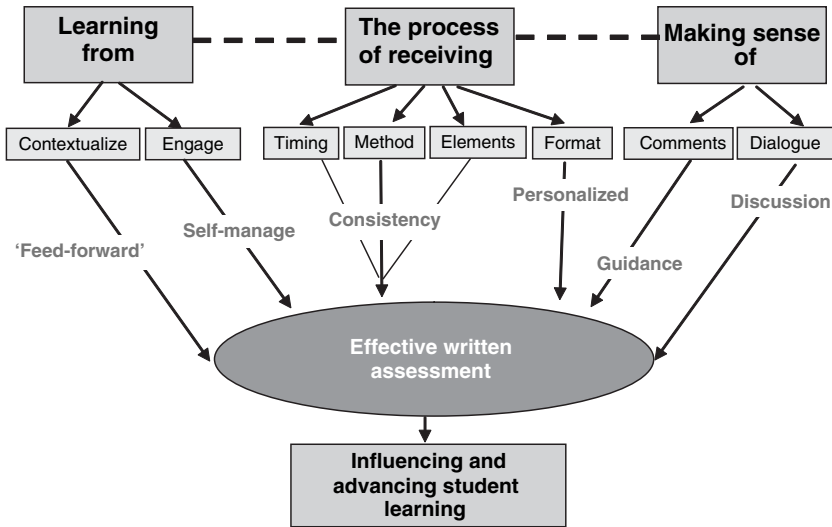
Figure 1 **A heuristic model of effective written assessment feedback**

The strategies suggested are: feed-forward into assessment; encourage self-managed learning; be consistent in giving feedback; make feedback more personalized; give clear guidance to students on how to improve; and lastly allow students the opportunity to discuss feedback.

Conclusion

To enhance the culture of learning, the first strategy proposed is that of 'feed-forward' (Duncan, 2007). With 'feed-forward' the intention is to guide students to deploy feedback from one assignment in subsequent assignments, hence encouraging student learning (Higgins et al., 2001; Hounsell et al., 2008; Orsmond et al., 2005). The findings from this study indicate that students require the assessment item to be clearly presented, assessment cri-teria to be communicated before they commence their assessment, and instruction on how to make best use of the feedback they receive. In order to ensure 'feed-forward' is maximized a clear purpose regarding the assessment process is essential. Both lecturers and students need to appreciate the type of the assessment, be it formative and/or sum-mative, and that the intention of feedback related to the type of assessment is aligned. Responsibility for setting this culture of learning lies with the wider organization, department and lecturers. This responsibility comprises two distinct but mutually inclusive elements: firstly, embedding a clear assessment strategy in the curriculum (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2005)

that will allow enhancement of student learning; secondly, ensuring that the design of assessment items encourages worthwhile and significant learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Any proposed assessment strategy must be derived from a coherent institutional feedback policy (Rust, 2002) and owned and shared by lecturers and their students.

Encouraging and supporting students to self-manage their learning will influence how students feel about themselves and instil confidence to engage with feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). It should also maximize the learning of both active and passive students; however, passive students may find the concept of self-managed learning more demanding. Not only is it difficult to engage passive students in learning, it is challenging to engage part-time students, who often join programmes as non-traditional entrants and present with a variety of educational profiles. By embracing and encouraging self-managed learning within the curriculum, the challenges that feedback presents for all students should hopefully become less daunting.

In order to ensure consistent channels of communication, lecturers must follow a timely and standardized approach guided by institutional policy (Rust, 2002). Any feedback policy should be open and transparent and accessible to all. It is proposed that the electronic medium may be best suited to meet student needs when imparting feedback. However, there may be challenges in using this electronic medium, such as the supporting infrastructure, lecturers' reluctance to engage and students' ability to use it. Also a disadvantage would be that the assignment could not easily accompany electronic feedback unless the assignment was submitted electronically. As the electronic medium becomes more universally integrated into assessment processes the above challenges should be minimized.

Although feedback should be consistent and perhaps delivered via the electronic medium, there is still a need for a second strategy to assist communication and make feedback more personalized. Lecturers should make an attempt to individualize and personalize the feedback to their students (Higgins et al., 2002). This perhaps could be supported by using students' names within the feedback narrative and inviting dialogue via the comments. It is acknowledged that the use of student names would be inappropriate in institutions which engage in anonymous marking. However, lecturers can still take the opportunity to personalize the feedback narrative without using names. Proformas can also be used; however, lecturers must be cautious to ensure they do not become prescriptive and depersonalized.

To facilitate understanding, and utilization of the feedback, guidance in the form of deep meaningful explanations and exemplars is the strategy that should be adopted (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2005). If feedback is in the form of meaningful explanation this should encourage the students to

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engage in reflection on their work and also promote self-managed learning. If feedback is to be constructive, students may require guidance on interpreting and making best use of the feedback. It has been acknowledged that sometimes feedback can be confusing for the students. To resolve this lecturers should use clear, accessible language that the students can interpret and understand, giving positive feedback rather than focusing on overwhelmingly negative comments which unfortunately can often be the case (Weaver, 2006). In some circumstances, students with particular difficulties may require help to make sense of the feedback and they could perhaps be given an opportunity to maximize guidance via face-to-face dialogue (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Orsmond et al., 2005; Pitts, 2005).

The heuristic model presented here draws together the pertinent issues from the literature in a holistic way with the student perspective being particularly prominent. This area of inquiry is important because educationalists frequently highlight the value that feedback has to student learning, and feedback is one of the most powerful single influences on student growth, development, learning and achievement (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). While the study was conducted with part-time post-registration nursing students, the strategies recommended in this article are applicable to other disciplines, and to students who follow a more traditional route. Future study is recommended focusing on gathering data from a larger sample from a range of disciplines, incorporating full-time students as well as those studying on a part-time basis. This could enhance the applicability of the findings to other groups.

The development of this heuristic model has resulted in scholarly debate and encouraged individual professional reflection by academics in the institution used in this study. By engaging in debate and reflection the practice of providing assessment feedback is enhanced. One particular concept, 'feed-forward', has been embraced as being highly significant in relation to supporting learning from assessment. 'Feed-forward' has been adopted as a teaching and learning strategy in the institution to improve each student's capacity to understand what and how they learn, and to encourage lifelong learning. The model has also influenced policy and been incorporated into staff development to enhance institutional practice within this area.

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