

PLAT177 Version 3-lz comments

This is the author manuscript of the published version available from
<http://plj.sagepub.com/content/8/1/34.abstract> (Article DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/plat.2009.8.1.34>)

Effectiveness of feedback provision for undergraduate psychology students

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Abstract

Research on feedback for undergraduate students has usually focused on either the tutor or the student perspective. Some tutors perceive that students do not read or learn from feedback, whilst students sometimes claim that feedback can be difficult to understand and unconstructive. We investigated tutor and student perspectives through online questionnaires. Fifty-seven staff and 213 psychology undergraduates responded. The questionnaires were used to determine the extent to which students learn from feedback, and the extent to which tutors employ feedback as a teaching tool. Our preliminary findings suggest that both groups agree that written feedback is not ideal, and that the two-way dialogue intended is not always effective. There may be a lack of understanding of communication on both sides. Staff feel that their feedback is clear, but students sometimes disagree, and students do not value feedback on grammar and referencing, whereas staff believe that this is useful. Further research is now being conducted to develop understanding of staff and student perspectives on feedback, and to use the findings to inform improved accessibility of feedback for students, and efficiency of feedback provision for tutors.

Introduction

It is common practice in higher education (HE) to provide students with written feedback along with marks for assessed work. Feedback intends to make the assessment process part of the students' learning experience (Biggs, 1999; Hyland, 2000), promoting independent learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and a deep approach (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002) to learning. Formative assessment has a positive effect on student learning (Black & William, 1998) and may contribute to student retention (Yorke, 2001). Hattie (1987) reported that feedback was the single most important influence on student achievement. However, there is some debate over whether students make effective use of feedback, and whether it has any real impact on their learning.

It has been argued that students may lack time to reflect on feedback (Higgins, 2000; Hounsell, 1987), due to personal obligations (such as employment and parenting) concurrent with study commitments. Some lecturers report that students are increasingly consumerist in their approach to education, extrinsically motivated and concerned only with formal achievements (James, 2001), perhaps reflecting these pressures. Higgins et al. (2002) argue that such students may only attend to feedback if it provides the "correct" answer, rather than encouraging them to develop their learning. Weaver (2006) found that most students value feedback, but sometimes find it unhelpful, suggesting that it may be the properties of the

feedback, rather than the students, that determines the extent to which feedback enhances learning.

Lecturers may also feel under time pressure, meaning that they intend feedback to be “just sufficient” for student learning, especially if they believe that students never collect work (Carless, 2006). Tutors manage this through “shorthand” comments, summarising areas for improvement with minimal explanation (Higgins, 2000; Higgins et al., 2002). Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling (2002, 2006) suggest that discussing feedback with students is effective, but this is not always practical with large groups of students. Thus efficient feedback provision is vital.

A third issue may result from the language of feedback (Higgins, 2000). Feedback often describes “fuzzy” concepts (Higgins et al., 2002), the meaning of which is implicit and potentially inaccessible to students (Higgins, 2000; Hounsell, 1987; Lea & Street, 2000). Modern students may be less familiar with academic discourse than has traditionally been the case (Ramsden, 1992), and little support is provided to students on how to understand and use feedback (Weaver, 2006).

Some conflict between lecturers’ meanings and students’ interpretations of feedback may arise from the different purposes for which comments are written (Randall & Mirador, 2003). Feedback comments are written for two audiences - they are read by other academics and students - and for two purposes, to justify grades and for formative purposes. Emphasis on quality procedures and summative assessment leads to use of institutional discourse, whereas focus on the student audience and formative feedback leads to more interpersonal and humanistic language (Crook, Gross, & Dymott, 2006). Randall and Mirador (2003) found that student focussed, formative-type feedback was more supportive and accessible to students than quality focussed, summative-type feedback.

Thus students and lecturers differ in their perceptions of feedback. Carless (2006) found that tutors believed that their feedback was adequate for promotion of learning and improvement, whilst students reported dissatisfaction with the same feedback. Similar discrepancies have been reported throughout the literature (MacLellan, 2001), leading some authors to propose student involvement in the assessment process, dialogue between students and academic staff about the process of assessment, and a student-centred, social constructivist approach to assessment (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005; Taras, 2001). The results of the National Student Survey (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008) also demonstrate that feedback is an important issue within HE, with more students reporting dissatisfaction with this aspect of their courses than other aspects. Interventions to improve student understanding of assessment criteria have been effective in improving student learning (Rust et al., 2003), and similar benefits may result from interventions around feedback use and provision.

The current project therefore set out to investigate whether the problems reported in the general HE literature outlined above were also endemic within psychology, with a view to developing recommendations for improvements in the effectiveness and efficiency of feedback provision (for tutors) and feedback understanding (for students). This report outlines findings from the preliminary stages of the project, in the form of results from an online questionnaire, but ultimately, the aim of the project is to establish dialogue and shared understanding between the two groups of participants in the feedback process.

Method

Participants

Respondents included 213 undergraduate students from a range of UK university psychology departments, of whom 88 (40%) were male and 132 (60%) were female. They were aged between 18 and 23.

In addition, 52 academic staff from a range of UK university psychology departments took part, of whom 22 (42%) were male and 35 (58%) were female. Staff were aged between 24 and 67.

The majority of both groups were native English speakers, the majority of students were full-time and based on campus, and the majority of staff taught this group of students. This sample does not appear too dissimilar, in our experience, to a representative sample of UK psychology students, although it may be slightly biased in terms of including more young and male participants than the population, who may be more inclined to participate in online surveys than older or female individuals (Braithwaite, Emery, de Lusignan, & Sutton, 2003). However, there is no evidence in the literature to suggest that feedback is differently perceived according to either age or sex, and so this is unlikely to be a serious issue with regard to interpretation of results.

Materials and Procedure

An online questionnaire was advertised nationally through the Higher Education Academy Psychology Subject Network, the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments, and personal contacts of the authors.

Two versions of the questionnaire were produced, one for staff teaching undergraduate psychology, and one for undergraduate psychology students. Both questionnaires contained around 70 items, including both closed and open questions. They were designed to investigate staff and student perceptions of the purpose of feedback, its effectiveness, the extent of its use, and its quality, based on respondents' personal experiences. This method was chosen to ensure convenience of access nationally, and to maximise response rates from both groups. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous to facilitate honest and complete responses.

Results

Questionnaire responses were analysed in terms of the percentage frequency of responses or average ratings for closed questions, and in terms of themes for open questions.

Individualised written feedback was by far the most common form of feedback provision, being used by all staff respondents, although other forms were also provided, including tick sheets, generic written feedback, oral feedback and podcasts. The majority of our questions asked participants specifically about individualised written feedback.

Individualised written feedback was itself provided in several formats. Staff report that they target such written feedback comments at the student, double markers and external examiners. About half provide written comments in the text, about half provide a summary, a third use a standard tick sheet (institutional or departmental), and a third use a module specific tick sheet. Student responses were consistent with this.

There was some disagreement between staff and students with regard to how much feedback was used and how beneficial it was for learning (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of staff and student responses to closed questions (%)

Item on questionnaire		Always	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
How often do students/you read feedback?	Staff	16	29	43	14	0
	Students	93	3	3	0	1
How often do students/you understand feedback?	Staff	8	62	21	0	0
	Students	34	50	14	0	2
How often do students/you ask for clarification?	Staff	0	0	44	46	10
	Students	4	15	37	15	28
Does feedback help students/you to learn?	Staff	10	40	44	6	0
	Students	47	45	13	3	2

Feedback was provided by staff and received by students on a range of issues, including psychological content and understanding, reading, writing style and grammar, structure and organisation, referencing and critical evaluation. Written feedback was the most frequent type of feedback, but group and one-to-one oral feedback were also used.

Staff and students largely agreed on the content of feedback, and upon its usefulness with regard to learning (see Table 2), with just one minor difference: "praise for doing something specific well" and "comments about what is wrong" received similar rankings in both groups, but are reversed in order between staff and students).

Table 2
Mean rankings of different types of feedback by staff and students

Content-type of feedback	Perceived helpfulness (staff)	Perceived helpfulness (students)
Advice on how to improve	1.47	1.79
Praise for doing something specific well	2.36	2.93

Comments about what is wrong	2.79	2.84
A model answer	4.26	3.42
Praise for doing well (not specific)	4.77	4.62
Ticks and crosses	5.35	5.37

Note. 1 was most useful, 6 was least useful.

Overall, 98% of staff and 92% of students felt that the quality of feedback provided was satisfactory or better (on a 5 point scale ranging from very unsatisfactory to very satisfactory).

From thematic analysis of the open questions on the questionnaire, there seemed to be agreement that written feedback is not ideal, and that oral feedback is preferable; however, staff commented that workload is an obstacle to this. Staff feel that their written feedback is easy to follow, but students do not always agree. Likewise, students do not value feedback on grammar and referencing, whereas staff often think that this is useful. Staff and students both recognised that handwritten feedback can be problematic in terms of readability, but staff were concerned that typing was too time consuming. Staff commented that they often repeated the same feedback, and saw this as indicative that students were not listening to them, whereas students said that they did not know how to use the feedback. Students also reported that tutors sometimes contradicted each other.

In terms of the purposes of feedback, students felt that it was intended to improve grades, whereas tutors emphasised its role in developing skills (including written communication and critical evaluation skills).

Discussion

The initial analysis from the current project has shown that psychology staff and students in UK universities agree on many issues around feedback. There is general consensus that the quality of feedback is good. However, both groups are aware that written communication is failing in some ways and would like to see more detail, and more specific feedback, particularly with regard to constructive guidance and more improvement focussed feedback. Both groups also agree that more oral feedback is desirable, consistent with Orsmond et al. (2002, 2006). For staff, however, there is recognition of workload issues with regard to improving written feedback and increasing the amount of oral feedback provided to students. Students report problems with understanding feedback and with being able to apply feedback to their learning. However, overall, the questionnaire data seem to suggest that, whilst there is room for improvement, feedback is valued by both staff and students alike as a learning tool.

Thus it seems that the situation in psychology resembles that described in the more generic HE literature. The students in this sample are engaging with their feedback, but are sometimes finding it difficult to understand how to use it to improve, consistent with the findings of McLellan (2001), Weaver (2006) and Carless (2006). This may be partly as a result of the conflict experienced by staff in terms of their "audience", given the requirement to provide feedback which will support student learning but also act as a quality control for assessment (Randall & Mirador, 2003), and also because staff time is limited and so feedback provision has to be efficient

(Carless, 2006). Interestingly, students are somewhat more positive about the impact of feedback on learning than are staff.

It is important therefore to consider ways to improve the efficiency of feedback provision and its accessibility to students. We intend to expand on current data through the use of focus groups. Qualitative data has been collected from separate staff focus groups and student focus groups from within three UK universities. This will facilitate the comparison of staff and student views directly within each institution, whilst allowing us to draw conclusions generally by considering ideas from across the different universities. The final stage of the project will involve the use of the 'Delphi' method (a quasi-anonymous method used to obtain consensus amongst a group of experts - e.g., Löfmark & Thorell-Ekstrand, 2004) to develop and refine recommendations for practice. Inclusion of both staff and students within the groups will facilitate dialogue in a safe environment between the two groups. This will encourage the development of a shared understanding of the nature of and purpose of feedback between the two groups, consistent with the social constructivist recommendations identified in previous literature (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Rust et al., 2005; Taras, 2001). and ensure that our forthcoming recommendations for feedback provision meet the needs of both groups equally.

Improvements to the feedback process may involve increased emphasis on the student, rather than quality control systems, and more personalised, specific detail regarding strengths and areas for improvement. However, such recommendations must take into account staff concerns around pressure of work in order to be successfully adopted. Nevertheless, given that feedback is crucial to learning (Black & William, 1998), retention (Yorke, 2001) achievement (Hattie, 1987) and student satisfaction (HEFCE, 2008), then solving the 'feedback problem' is both necessary and urgent.

Acknowledgements

Our gratitude is due to the Higher Education Academy Psychology Subject Network, for funding this miniproject, and to Beverley Ayers for her work as a research assistant.

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