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**Citation:** Parker, P. M. & Baughan, P. (2011). Providing written feedback that students will value and read. *The international journal of learning*, 16(11), pp. 253-262. doi: 10.18848/1447-9494/cgp/v16i11/46715

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**Proving Written Feedback that Students will Value and Read**  
**Pam Parker and Patrick Baughan**  
**City University London, United Kingdom**

**Abstract**

This article outlines a study undertaken at City University London, involving 51 teaching staff (lecturers or other colleagues with a teaching or facilitation role at the University), who were all undertaking a staff-development module focused on learning, teaching and assessment issues (entitled *Learning, Teaching and Assessment*). Although all participants of the study were staff, they are referred to as students, as they were students of this module.

The study examined whether, having undertaken a module which addressed assessment and provision of good quality feedback, these students applied the advice they received into practice when asked to *self-assess* and provide feedback on an essay they wrote for the module. Data for the study was collected from analysing the aforementioned self-assessment which students provided for themselves.

The findings demonstrated that most had some retention of good practice principles from the day, such as providing feedback that related to the criteria, giving positive comments and outlining areas to develop. However, they provided noticeably less advice on how to develop their assessments according to the different criteria, and, despite being advised to write comments in the second person, many wrote their self-feedback as if it were for a third party.

Recommendations from this study include: that there needs to be further consideration of how to emphasise the importance of writing feedback in a personalised style; and that there is a need to ensure that sufficient advice is given to students on how to develop their future assessments.

**Keywords**

Assessment feedback; Enhancing student learning, Staff development

**Introduction**

The provision of good quality, meaningful feedback for assessments undertaken by students is widely recognised as a key part of the learning process. For example, good feedback can enhance student learning and facilitate improvement (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling 2000; Poulos & Mahony 2008; Taras 2001). There are, however, examples of students being dissatisfied with both their preparation for assessment and the quality and detail of feedback provided to them (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens 2008), with lecturers, in turn, being disappointed that students appear to have made the same mistakes in later work, giving the impression that feedback is not read (Crisp 2007 & Duncan 2007). Such studies suggest the existence of a mismatch of expectations between staff and students.

These issues have also been highlighted in each of the last three National Student Surveys (NSS) of 2007, 2008 and 2009. Collectively, these have identified concerns in student views about the usefulness and timeliness of assessment feedback, and this has led to increased interest and research within this area.

More generally, in the contemporary higher education environment, there are pressures on the student to achieve, and the lecturer to provide the highest quality student experience. Considerable time and energy is used by students preparing different assessments, and by lecturers providing feedback for those assessments.

The authors of this paper direct and teach on the University's main staff development programme, the MA Academic Practice. They decided to use part of the teaching of this programme (specifically, the first module, entitled *Learning, Teaching and Assessment*) to explore the aforementioned issues, but from a staff development perspective, with students who are themselves teaching staff, and who develop and mark assessments. The study was undertaken with three consecutive cohorts of students over an 18 month period of time.

The next section considers some of the literature that informed the study; this is followed with an outline of the methodological approach that was used, explaining various ethical, data analysis and collection issues; the findings are then presented and discussed. The conclusion includes recommendations for the teaching team for future iterations of this module.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review is structured under three sections, which include consideration of student and lecturer experiences of feedback issues, as well as other research on feedback issues.

### ***Student view***

Several studies that have examined the issue of feedback from a student perspective have found that students judged feedback favourably when it incorporated information on their level of achievement, and provided advice about future development (Brookhart 2001; Cooper 2000; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; McDowell & Sambell 1999). However, Boud (1995) found that although feedback was focused upon the assessment task, students would sometimes interpret some comments as personal. The content of the feedback therefore had an effect upon their self-esteem and was not always taken as intended or expected (Brookhart 2001; Boud 1995; Poulos & Mahony 2008 & Young 2000).

Although feedback is seen as essential and students *want* to use it for preparation of subsequent assessments if they interpret it to be useful, it does not always include suggestions for development. In a number of studies, students stated that feedback was too general and vague, lacked specificity, concentrated on negative aspects and was impersonal, rather than highlighting strengths and weaknesses and providing guidance for improvement in the future (Duncan 2007; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens 2008; Poulos & Mahony 2008). Whilst students prefer positive feedback, they want to learn from cases in which their work can be improved; thus, the way that information is provided is critical to a student (Black & William 1998; Cross, Hicks & Barwell 2001; Young 2000).

### ***Lecturer view***

Accounting for findings on student views about the quality of feedback, some studies have focused on the views and experiences of lecturers about these issues.

In research examining lecturers' perspectives on feedback, key issues cited are: the effects of increased student numbers on the feedback process; providing some feedback but limiting this because they want students to come for further face to face advice; concerns over student vulnerability if the feedback is negative; and a lack of skills to provide helpful feedback (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002 & Young 2000).

Whilst the research demonstrates that students have valid concerns about their feedback, there is also evidence that lecturers have concerns about whether it is actually responded to or even read by students. Crisp (2007) conducted a study looking at the feedback given to a cohort of students on two essays, which were assessed by the same lecturer. Students undertook the first essay, were provided with feedback about it, and then asked to undertake the second. The findings indicated that 67% of

the students scored almost identical marks for the two assessments, which suggested that they spent limited time actually applying their feedback. The study revealed that some students actually only look at the mark and say they take little notice of the comments, particularly if they are satisfied with the mark given (Crisp 2007). Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002) found that although 97% of students stated they read their feedback, 81% said that they spent less than 15 minutes doing so. And significantly, Duncan (2007) found that in addition to not reading the feedback, not all students collected their work and feedback for their work, if they were able to obtain the actual mark through other means.

### **Assessment feedback**

The above sections have suggested that there are concerns about quality and use of feedback from the perspectives of both the student and the lecturer. It also points to some suggestions for the enhancement of feedback.

Within the literature, a number of authors have provided recommendations for good practice in providing feedback. These include: students being informed of what good performance is in the context of the particular assessment, module or programme; how their current performance relates to this; and how to 'close the gap' in relation to this; also, the need to provide feedback that is related to the assessment criteria, offers corrective advice, and encourages lecturer-student dialogue (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Sadler 1989). In addition, more attention has been paid to the potential value of students self assessing because they understand the standard they are aiming for and the positive role this may play in their learning and development of professional competence (Lew, Alwis & Schmidt 2009, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

### **Study Context**

As indicated above, the authors of this article are both involved in teaching on the MA Academic Practice programme. All new lecturers are now required to undertake the opening *Learning, Teaching and Assessment* module (LTA hereon), which addresses learning, teaching, assessment and feedback issues, and around which this research study was based. Subsequent modules are optional, and can be undertaken as part of the programme, or on a 'stand-alone' basis.

The LTA module includes a full teaching day in which principles of assessment design, assessment methods, and feedback issues form the focus. The module is assessed by way of a 3,000 word essay about a learning and teaching challenge the student wishes to explore. The authors therefore believed that it would be useful to undertake a study with the students from consecutive cohorts, in which each student self-assessed their essay after completing it, providing both a mark and written feedback. It was hoped that this would also aid their professional development in providing good quality feedback to their own students. The students were made aware that their tutors would subsequently provide separate feedback to them based on their individual essays and about the self-assessments they had written (thus, each student received two forms of feedback from tutors).

### **Methodology**

The authors considered a range of approaches and data collection tools for the study, but some were dismissed due to possible perceptions of students about the approach. For example, one approach that was considered was that of asking students on the module who had already undertaken some marking to provide examples of their feedback, so that these could be examined. However, it was decided that this was inappropriate because of concerns about inadvertently seeing student names and/or results, but also the possibility of students of this module feeling threatened about their feedback being examined at a time when the University was raising student feedback as a concern in light of NSS results. It was therefore decided to use a self assessment tool, which is further detailed below.

The authors elected to use an evaluative approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. McCormick and James (1990) suggested that evaluation can be useful as a means of improving the opportunities for learning amongst students and enhancing the quality of educational provision. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether the students on the programme had learnt from teaching, discussion, and group workshops provided during the module about assessment and good feedback practices, and whether they (or the extent to which they) were able to apply this in practice. Previously they had been provided with an explanation about the essay they would be writing and the requirements.

The data was collected using documentary analysis of the students self assessments of their essays, which were submitted at the same time as the actual essays. Documents can provide a very useful source of information in certain types of study, and additionally are usually available at a low cost or without cost. Further, they are stable in that they can be analysed and re-analysed, and represent a rich source of data (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The documents used in this study were primary documents produced as part of the assessment process by the student for the authors.

The self assessment documents were analysed against pre-determined criteria which were developed from the themes which emerged in the literature review undertaken by the authors. These themes included: whether the feedback was specific and focused to the criteria; whether there were positive comments and comments about areas to develop; whether there was advice about how to develop the areas; and for whom the feedback was written.

As the participants for the study were all students undertaking the module, it was decided to use a convenience sample, and all 62 students from the three cohorts were invited to participate. Of these, 51 (82%) agreed. All students were provided with a clear explanation of the study, and they were all assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The data collected was recorded using numbers rather than names, and was kept in a secure place.

## **Findings from the study**

This section presents the key findings of the study, organised according to the criteria explained in the previous section, as well as an additional criterion of 'marks awarded'.

### ***Marks awarded***

Whilst this was not an area highlighted in the literature related to feedback, there have been issues raised about reliability of marks by some students both within the authors' institution and within other sources of literature, and so the self assessment the students completed was considered in terms of the overall marks the students awarded themselves, as compared with those awarded by the tutors. Whilst a mark was awarded for each criteria it was decided that looking at the overall mark would be sufficient.

The authors believed (or made the interpretation) that where students had awarded marks within 10% of those awarded by the marking team, this showed that the students had understood the marking criteria. One (2%) student actually provided the same mark as the marking team; 20 (39%) students awarded marks within 5% of the team; and a further 11 (21%) awarded marks within 6–10% of the team. However a further 19 (38%) of students awarded marks of 11% or more either lower or higher than the tutors, with five (10%) of these awarding themselves a mark of more than 20% above that awarded by the marking team.

### ***Feedback comments***

The remaining data was analysed against the criteria outlined above in the methodology section which relate to good practice when providing feedback.

### *Specific and focused to the criteria*

In relation to whether comments were specific and focused on the criteria, the following findings emerged:

- One (2%) student provided a mark only and no comments.
- Eight (16%) students provided comments that were not related to the criteria but were general.
- 19 (37%) students provided comments related to some of the criteria but not for others which were predominantly those related to clarity of reasoning and style, and organisation and presentation.
- 23 (45%) students provided comments that related to all the criteria.

### *Justification of marks with positive comments*

In relation to whether marks were justified with positive comments, the following findings emerged:

- One (2%) student provided no comments at all.
- 38 (74%) students provided some positive comments for some of the criteria.
- 12 (24%) students provided positive comments for all five of the criteria.

### *Identification of areas to develop or steps to improve*

In relation to comments provided by students on areas that could be developed, or advice given on steps to improve the work, the following findings emerged:

- One (2%) student provided no comments.
- Two (4%) student provided no comments about areas to develop.
- Five (10%) students provided comments on areas to develop but these were not related to the criteria.
- 16 (31%) students provided comments about areas for only one of the five criteria.
- 15 (29%) students provided comments about areas that could be developed for two of the five criteria.
- Nine (18%) students provided comments about areas that could be developed for three of the five criteria.
- One (2%) student provided comments about areas that could be developed for four of the five criteria.
- Two (4%) students provided comments about areas that could be developed for all five criteria.

In addition, most of the comments were general without any specific guidance on how to develop for these areas. Some examples of this are included in the table below.

*“More work required on reflective models.” (student 3.8)*

*“More critical analysis of literature required” (student 3.11)*

*“Examples and professional practice context could have been expanded upon and explored further.” (student 3.5)*

*“Perhaps more use of documents could have been used to support the wider educational context” (student 2.14)*

*“A more in depth analysis would have added more clarity to this paper” (student 2.4)*

Table 1: Examples of self-assessment comments from students.

### **Audience for the feedback**

In light of the literature suggesting that students found the feedback impersonal, the authors also examined who the feedback was written for: directed to 'self' (as was expected and advised for this assessment); to 'the student' (as would be the expected normal practice); or to a third person. The findings were:

- One student (2%) provided no feedback.
- 16 students (31%) had written the feedback as was expected to themselves.
- Five students (10%) had written the feedback to students.
- 29 students (57%) had written the feedback for a third person.

### ***Length/volume of feedback***

The last area the authors examined was that of the length of the feedback, as students anecdotally have said that the feedback they receive is too brief on occasions. The feedback written for the self assessment was considered in terms of length, as indicated by number of sentences used. As there were five criteria, the authors felt that there should be a minimum of five sentences and less than this was considered brief; six to 15 sentences which enabled some more detailed feedback and advice to be given was considered sufficient feedback, and above 15 sentences was considered detailed feedback. The findings were as follows:

- One student (2%) gave no feedback.
- Nine students (17%) gave less than five sentences of feedback.
- 30 students (59%) gave between six and 15 sentences of feedback.
- 11 students (22%) gave above 15 sentences of feedback with a few of these providing about a page and a half.

### **Discussion**

The marks awarded against the criteria demonstrated a high level of consistency between the students and the tutors for the range of up to 10% below or above the mark awarded by the tutors. In total, 30 students (62%) were in this category. Where this was not case, it would have been interesting to ask the students how they felt about the difference and whether they could see why this occurred. Students were invited to discuss the mark or feedback given by the marking team with the authors, particularly where there was a difference; however no students requested this. Reasons for this can only be speculated upon but it might be that with the feedback provided by markers they believed the mark was fair, or because they passed anyway they felt they would gain nothing by discussing this. This raises interesting opportunities for further study but due to the focus of the study being upon good practice in assessment feedback there had been no plans in place to explore this further and so no fuller explanation of this can be given.

Data on providing feedback that is specific and focused to the criteria shows that most students (42, 82%) did give feedback that was related to the criteria. Nine students (18%) either gave general comments or no comments and this is an area that the core literature cited above comments upon. If assessment criteria are used, then it is reasonable to expect that the feedback would relate to these rather than be just general statements, and it would address student concerns raised about vague and non specific feedback (Duncan 2007, Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens 2008, Poulos & Mahony 2008).

When examining the actual feedback students had given themselves, 50 (94%) provided positive comments, but only 12 (24%) of the 50 had provided these for all criteria. The remaining students gave positive comments only for some criteria or as general comments. Only one student did not give any comments. The literature states students prefer positive comments, so it is possible that, because these were self assessments, this may have influenced the responses (Black & William 1998; Cross, Hicks & Barwell 2001; Young 2000).

As discussed above, an area which students really want their feedback to focus upon is that of advice

about areas to develop and steps for future development (Brookhart 2001, Cooper 2000; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; McDowell & Sambell 1999). Despite not one student awarding themselves full marks against any of the criteria, this was an area where good principles were not taken into account. Two students (4%) provided comments for areas that could be developed on all the criteria, one student (2%) provided comments for four of the criteria and nine students (18%) provided comments for three. Whilst there were also students who provided comments on one and two criteria, it is disappointing that only 12 (24%) provided comments for three to five criteria. Also significant here was that, despite suggesting that areas of their work needed development, there was little advice provided about how to do this. These students were in many cases new to the theoretical knowledge in this area, because it was not their discipline, so this might have prevented specific advice about what additional theory could be included. However, as students with teaching experience, some suggestions might still have been provided related to the standard being aimed for (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Examples of advice that might be given included: how to improve reflection, organization, logical argument and application of theory to practice. This was a disappointing aspect of the feedback, given that a full teaching day had been used to address assessment and feedback issues and that the students had been given advice on what was expected. The authors wonder if some lecturers perceive indicating areas to develop is sufficient, without the need to provide advice on *how* to do this.

Other areas that were examined from the data included who the feedback was written for. As expected nine students (31%) had written feedback to themselves and five students (10%) had written the feedback to students (i.e. in the second person). However, again disappointingly, 29 students (57%) had written the feedback to a third person, which supports comments from students in other studies about feedback being impersonal (Duncan 2007, Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens 2008, Poulos & Mahony 2008). For students to value the feedback provided by lecturers, it needs to be written to them so they have some dialogue with it.

The last area that was examined was that of the volume of feedback, given that students anecdotally state their feedback is brief. As noted in the presentation of the findings, the authors felt that anything below five sentences of feedback was limited, and yet one student (2%) provided no comments and nine students (17%) provided five or fewer sentences of feedback. The authors question how students can use the feedback for their future development when it is this limited. However, it was pleasing that the remaining 42 students (81%) did provide more than six sentences and eleven (22%) of these provided extensive feedback.

Overall, it was felt that it was interesting that when the teaching day on assessment and feedback was undertaken, the discussion amongst the students indicated that they were aware that their own students should receive a mark and written feedback, and that this feedback should be personal, outline areas of strength, and provide advice on those areas that needed development. Yet when examining their self-assessments, the data collected did not support these views.

### **Implications and recommendations**

This study has enabled the authors to examine this area across three cohorts of students and has enabled valuable data to be gathered for both the content of the assessment day on the module but also for future staff development in this area generally. This data demonstrates that whilst some good principles for the provision of feedback have been taken into account, such as providing the feedback related to the criteria and providing positive comments, other areas, such as the provision of advice for future development and making the feedback more personal, were not fully taken into account. This led the authors to conclude that the implications of this are that lecturers should continue to be made more aware of the principles of good practice when providing feedback so that their own students do start to value and read the feedback and also to ensure that they write and present feedback in an appropriate way that is helpful to their students. These implications have resulted in the following

recommendations:

- The relevant teaching day on the LTA module that lecturers undertake needs to more explicitly emphasise particular feedback principles, such as who the feedback is written to.
- The student view about what feedback means to them should also be made more explicit, perhaps through some student interviews or video clips.
- A marking exercise should be included so marking and feedback can be undertaken as a practical activity focused on a potential student and the principles of good practice.
- A guide for all lecturers about good practice principles in provision of feedback should be developed.

## Conclusion

The authors acknowledge that undertaking a self assessment exercise might influence the students' normal practice when giving feedback, and create its own anxiety for students, although self assessment should aid the development of professional competence (Lew, Alwis & Schmidt 2009). However, useful data has been collected during this study and the profile of good practice when giving feedback has been raised with those who have undertaken the module.

One area that the authors noted when examining the considerable range of literature in this area was that there is still little advice on how to frame the comments, what discourse should be used, what volume of comments is most useful and within what context. (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006 & Poulos & Mahony 2008). Given the student issues about feedback outlined in the literature, there needs to be further study undertaken about what students' need from their feedback.

The authors are continuing to undertake further work related to feedback that is given to students and will consider how this can be linked to the feedback students are seeking.

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