

Reflection on the highs and lows of written feedback

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Presentation abstract

In-person, dialogic feedback tends to be prioritised in learning development (Babcock and Thonus, 2018) and is generally regarded as the most effective option (Hattie and Clarke, 2019). However, there are times when written feedback is more convenient (Burke and Pietrick, 2010). As students' reactions to written feedback cannot be easily gauged (Dison and Collett, 2019), it is difficult to know if it is being given in the right quantity, depth, and format, to be most helpful (Nicol, 2010).

This presentation outlined research conducted to find out how students feel about the written feedback they receive from a UK university writing centre where written feedback is offered to students on placement. Examples of this feedback was provided to the audience for a sense of what this looks like, as the format and tone can vary between institutions.

249 students who had sent an essay for email feedback were invited to complete an online survey using Google Forms, for which there was a response rate of 22%. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 11 students, to explore responses in more depth.

Most students requested written feedback due to its convenience, however some students who identified as neuro-diverse preferred written feedback over in-person feedback as it allows them to process information in their own time. That written feedback could help foster inclusion in this way was an unexpected finding. Additionally, rather than finding the feedback overwhelming, the detailed nature of the feedback increases the students' perception that the university cares about them. This made them feel valued and important and improved their sense of belonging.

This talk concluded by looking at how the findings of this research have informed the team's written, and verbal, feedback.

Keywords: written feedback; feedback to neurodiverse students, feedback, dyslexia

Community response

'Thank you, this was an interesting session. It was really interesting to see scope of different responses and very encouraging to see that many students used the detailed feedback with great care. I assume to some degree this will be sampling bias - the ones who care more about feedback are more likely to respond to your question for their views as well - but it is still good to see that this group exists.'

'The session made me think about the need to focus on higher order concepts such as structure and critical thinking. I wondered if feedback and errors could be coded, for two purposes; 1) to help tutors given quicker feedback; 2) to help students spot themes in their feedback.'

'For students this may come with some particular challenges, as you mentioned. Namely, the feeling that the use of pre-written and copied advice made a student feel s/he was not seen as an individual. To help mitigate this, would it make sense to acknowledge the use of these text blocks? Perhaps the letter could explicitly refer to them in short introductions that are clearly written just for this student and then make it clear you copy advice in. For example:

"I sometimes worried the about structure. For example, I can't quite see how the thought on ... in para.... relates to the next point about ... in para ... Here are some strategies we recommend to work on connecting your thoughts into a coherent argument" [COPY IN STANDARD FEEDBACK]. Could you try to apply this to your text?"

'Another point I was thinking about was balancing the usefulness of feedback and avoiding overload. I sometimes integrate feedback into group teaching. I invite students in a group

to send me work in progress and then teach a class based on anonymised authentic examples of their texts, identifying what works, what does not work and then showing strategies to develop this text. I try to pick examples evenly from the group, so ideally, many or (in smaller groups) all students get at least one small example where the group helps them improve their texts, but most importantly, all students get to see strategies to work on specific issues live and in action, which increases the chances they can apply them to their own work later on.'

Author's reflection

I really enjoyed delivering this session, and particularly responding to questions. Given that this presentation was a reworking of the journal article (Shackel, 2023), with a slightly different focus, I regret not giving it a more distinct title!

One aspect of this presentation I particularly appreciated was the opportunity to revisit my research through the conference's focus on diversity and inclusion. The implications of my research for neurodiverse students are perhaps the most significant findings. It is only with the distance from conducting the research, and the opportunity to reinterpret the material in the context of the conference, that I have come to fully understand this. For example, one delegate suggested voice recording as a way of speeding up the feedback process; however, in discussion with another delegate after the session, they said that they felt that that would sideline some of the benefits of the feedback we offer. It is absolutely the case that it was the written format that students with processing difficulties such as dyslexia found helpful.

I really appreciate the point that has been made above about perhaps flagging up to students where text is being cut and pasted in. I could well imagine saying something along the lines of "I noticed that you have a tendency to write very short paragraphs, such as paragraph x, x and x. Feedback that I often give students with this issue in their writing is: xxxx'. That would mitigate against some of the depersonalisation that we discussed when using cut-and-paste blocks of text in written feedback. I will absolutely feed that back to the team and I could well imagine us adopting this process. Thank you.

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