

Building academic resilience: Master of Teaching students' perceptions of written feedback on assessment.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a two-year study of tertiary education students' perceptions of written feedback on assessment. Contextualised in a regional Australian university and drawing on a cohort of Master of Teaching pre-service teachers, a survey approach was used to collect data from participants in both years of their graduate-level entry program. The paper contributes to the emerging body of literature on students' perceptions of written feedback on assessment by discussing four themes that emerged from the study. It concludes with a number of recommendations for teacher educators to enhance current feedback practices.

Keywords: academic resilience; emotion; students' perceptions; written feedback

Introduction

Written feedback on assessment has the potential to enhance students' learning experiences (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Studies of classroom practice indicate, however, that it should not be assumed that students will receive and act on feedback as a matter of course. Indeed, a meta-analysis of the extensive literature on feedback found that while feedback generally enhances learning, it is mediated by a range of factors including assessment task characteristics, the educational context, and students' perceptions of the feedback (Shute, 2008). In tertiary learning and teaching contexts, written feedback on high stakes assessment has been traditionally provided on the assumption that students will receive it, understand and assimilate it, and then implement it by improving their performance in future assessment (Sadler, 1989). However, more recent research evidence from studies in tertiary contexts suggests this is an unrealistic assumption.

This paper reports on students' perceptions of written feedback during a Master of Teaching program in a regional Australian university. The data were generated in one strand of a larger research project that investigated students' perceptions and self-evaluation of their academic literacy at early and late junctures during the two-year program. The paper concludes by making recommendations for teacher educators to enhance feedback practices.

Literature review

Written feedback on assessment

The provision of written feedback in tertiary education contexts is widely accepted as an intrinsic component of the learning and teaching cycle (Adcroft, 2011). A meta-analysis of the literature on tertiary students' use of written feedback by Jonsson (2012) found that: (1) students want feedback that is "useful" in the sense that it will have utility for other assessment items in the near future, (2) "students prefer specific, detailed and individualised feedback" with a blend of critique that mixes positive and negative points without being "overtly negative", (3) students prefer to engage with feedback that is part of a natural dialogue with tutors and tend to side-step advice they perceive as authoritarian, and (4) students may lack "strategies for productive use of feedback" or fail to understand feedback due to "academic terminology or jargon" (Jonsson, pp. 66-70). As these findings imply, there

are many imperfections in the way students receive, understand, assimilate and implement written feedback. Furthermore, students may fail to understand some aspects of written feedback (Orrell, 2006) due to differences between their interpretation of it and that intended by the tutor (Adcroft, 2011). In addition, low levels of academic literacy among some groups of students tend to limit the educational benefit of written feedback (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010).

Students' perceptions of written feedback

Up until recently, students' perceptions of written feedback on assessment has gained little attention (Weaver, 2006) but, following increasing reports of mounting student dissatisfaction with written feedback on assessment (e.g., Nicol, 2010), it is an area that has started to attract increasing interest in the literature (Dowden, Pittaway, Yost, & McCarthy, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2013). In the United Kingdom (UK), Pokorny and Pickford (2010) conducted interviews with 18 students in four focus groups. They found that the participants (a) in some cases perceived inconsistencies in marking, and (b) wanted written feedback on assessment that would have utility for future improvement. Another UK study surveyed the perceptions of 166 first-year psychology students (Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2013) and similarly showed that participants were frustrated with what they perceived to be inconsistent marking and that they wanted to utilise feedback to improve their performance in future assessment. Some students also experienced severe, negative emotional responses to feedback. A further UK survey of the perceptions of 44 undergraduate students found that students perceived written feedback as unhelpful when it: failed to provide guidance for improvement, was too general or vague, focused on the negative or was unrelated to assessment criteria (Weaver, 2006). In Australia, Ferguson (2011) surveyed 566 teacher education students' perceptions of written feedback in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at a large metropolitan university. His key finding was that students wanted timely and personalised written feedback on the assessment of key concepts in their courses. Another Australian study of 162 teacher education students' perceptions of written feedback in an undergraduate program at a regional university found that virtually all (99%) of the participants wanted guidance on how to improve future assessment and all of them (100%) reported experiencing an emotional response connected to receiving written feedback (Dowden et al., 2013). Accordingly, the extant literature supports the relevance and timeliness of the study reported in this paper. Through eliciting higher education students' perceptions of written feedback, the study in turn contributes to this field of literature around contemporary learning and teaching practices.

Method

The instrument for data collection in this two-shot study was a survey with a blend of closed questions to elicit responses on a five-point Likert scale followed by open-ended questions about students' perceptions of written feedback (Ferguson, 2011). The participants were pre-service teacher education students completing a Master of Teaching degree in a regional university in Australia. Two questionnaires were administered online: one in the first semester after students received written feedback on their earliest assessment tasks and the other in the fourth semester shortly before students completed their two-year course (see Appendix 1). The data were analysed using an interpretive approach (Creswell, 2009) and discussed according to emergent themes. Relevant qualitative data were selected to illustrate each theme so that students' opinions could be represented directly. Similar methodologies for eliciting Australian teacher education students' perceptions of written feedback – including the same theoretical framework and survey method – were utilised by Ferguson (2011) and Dowden et al. (2013).

Results

The first survey had a 40% response rate with 98 students opting to participate and the second survey had a 32% response rate with 44 students participating. These relatively high response rates to surveys in the online context were apparently achieved by simply inviting students to collaborate in a research project seeking to improve the overall learning experience in the Master of Teaching degree.

Quantitative analysis of the data was inconclusive with no particular trends emerging from either survey. A plausible reason for this is that the cohorts of students who participated in the surveys were represented by disparate groups of students from different disciplinary backgrounds with differing expectations relating to learning and teaching.

Qualitative analysis of the data from the two surveys revealed a number of themes. The Year 1 survey elicited more emotion-laden responses whereas the Year 2 survey elicited comparatively more measured and reflective responses. Four interrelated themes emerged from the survey. The strongest theme that emerged from our study was students' desire for guidance on future improvement. The other themes that emerged were: perceptions of vague or incomprehensible feedback, emotion-laden responses, and frustration with inconsistent marking practices.

Theme 1: Guidance for future improvement

Students want helpful feedback they can utilise for future improvement. This finding is strongly supported in the extant literature (Carless, 2006; Dowden et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Jonsson, 2012). Students expressed their appreciation when written feedback included helpful guidance:

Feedback was constructive and will assist in all future assignments. Areas for improvement were made clear and the manner in which they were suggested was considerate (Year 1, online student).

The feedback was personal ... It was great to get feedback that told me areas I had done well in, and overall, why I received the mark I did (Year 1, online student).

Conversely, students were critical when they believed guidance from markers was insufficient for future improvement:

I found the written feedback quite minimalistic. Although I only received a pass, there was no real information about what I could do differently to increase this mark (Year 1, online student).

Thus far I have received Distinctions. I have no clear idea how to improve and get High Distinctions (Year 1, on-campus student).

I only received positive feedback on my first assessment task and therefore had no idea why I had gotten the mark I did and how I could improve (Year 1, on-campus student).

The Year 2 survey participants demonstrated an increased depth of discernment and understanding about written feedback and the pains that some staff would go to on their

behalf. On the one hand some reflected on their experience over the four semesters of their course and expressed a measure of gratitude for the quality of written feedback they had received:

I have found written feedback to be constructive and supportive in nature (Year 2, online student).

Dr [Name removed] was helpful and gave rich constructive feedback (Year 2, online student).

Some feedback I have received has been thorough, encouraging and helpful [but] at other times I don't get much from it at all. (Year 2, online student)

On the other hand, a few students drew on their experience of the course to provide pointed criticism of written feedback they had received. For instance, one student was critical of the standard of one instance of written feedback:

I have recently received written feedback that has been incomprehensible. Incomplete sentences, incorrect grammar and [contradictory] comments. I have found it very discouraging to have my professional work treated with such disregard ... it sends a very poor message to pre-service teachers. (Year 2, online student)

Another student was critical of a remark made by a marker:

In a recent assignment the marker made a very condescending general statement about the marker's belief of my ability in the subject – which was grossly wrong as the assignment [assessed only] a very narrow interpretation of the subject. (Year 2, on campus student)

Theme 2: Too vague or lacks sense

Some students perceived written feedback to be vague or lacking in sense. Emotions connected to frustration and annoyance were not far from the surface:

[Tutor's] feedback was trivial and unclear. I asked for [more feedback] so I could learn where and how to improve. [The resulting] comments seemed arbitrary, unfounded and almost condescending (Year 1, on campus student).

Feedback was very limited and was too general (Year 1, on-campus student).

Feedback was completely useless as it did not explain anything ... this only confused me and resulted in frustration and annoyance (Year 1, on campus student).

Theme 3: Emotional responses

Some students seemed to utilise the survey as an opportunity to vent their emotions. While the extant literature occasionally acknowledges that receiving written feedback on feedback is an emotional time for students (e.g., Carless, 2006; Dowden et al., 2013), Varlander (2008) is wise to advise that tutors should pay more attention to the fact that emotions mediate cognition and that emotions therefore colour students' perceptions of written feedback. In particular, a number of Year 1 survey participants provided emotion-laden responses:

I was very emotional just before I opened the document with my grade. Once I realised I got a good mark I felt fine and focused on the feedback (Year 1, on-campus student).

It seemed to me that the assessing process was very similar to Grade 3 marking in about 1963. Red lines going everywhere words inserted/deleted ... for a returning student after a very long break, it was pretty shattering (Year 1, online student).

My feedback ... made me feel unworthy to be a teacher and disheartened me ... [I doubt] I have the ability to continue my [degree] (Year 1, on-campus student).

The literature has documented the potentially damaging effect of poorly conceived feedback that is perceived as a personal attack (e.g., Hunt, 2001) or, when a student has low self-esteem, feedback may be perceived as a sweeping judgement on the student's suitability for tertiary level study, rather than a stand-alone evaluation of an assessment task (Young, 2000).

Theme 4: Inconsistent marking practices

Perceptions of inconsistency among markers is known to be a major source of irritation and dissatisfaction among tertiary students (e.g., Rust, 2002). Frustration about American Psychological Association (APA) referencing conventions emerged as a touchstone for frustration about inconsistent marking or feedback in both of the surveys. Students believed APA referencing was difficult to master:

The APA system of referencing is difficult to master ... I have found that I have avoided using references as I could not figure out how to correctly reference them. (Year 1, on-campus student)

Others found written feedback from markers on APA referencing was difficult to understand:

I found the layout of feedback in regard to APA mistakes very hard to understand. (Year 1, online student)

Several students believed that they should not lose marks for minor errors relating to APA referencing:

APA is very difficult to follow and I often feel it is unfair to lose marks for minor APA issues. (Year 2, online student)

When students referred to inconsistency or differing expectations among markers, they continued to highlight APA referencing as an issue:

I have noted many inconsistencies in the way markers interpret APA referencing. This can be very confusing ... contradictory advice makes it very difficult to know what is required. (Year 2, online student)

[Receiving marked] assignments covered in negative feedback related to ... different interpretations of APA referencing was extremely irritating (Year 2, on-campus student).

Discussion

The findings of this study were broadly similar to existing studies in the literature, in that students generally want personalised written feedback on how to improve work (e.g., Ferguson, 2011), but different, in that the extant literature has generally underemphasised the need for written feedback on assessment to cater to students' emotional responses when they receive their marked assessment items (Varlander, 2008).

We found that the teacher education students who participated in our study appreciated well-conceived guidance on how to improve future assessment but felt short-changed when this was not provided. When written feedback was found wanting, students variously expressed their emotions in terms of frustration, irritation and annoyance.

Recent studies have suggested that improving students' perceptions and understanding of written feedback is likely to involve engaging tutors and students in dialogue (e.g. Nicol, 2010). In addition, preparing student for receiving feedback by prior scaffolding has been suggested (Varlander, 2008; Orsmond & Merry, 2011). Ultimately though, whether students perceive written feedback favourably is likely to be dependent on the overall quality of communication and warmth of the teacher-student relationship (Jonsson, 2012). Dowden et al. (2013) point out, however, that the widespread practice in Australian universities of employing casual markers who have no connection with students means that dialogue is not always possible.

Based on the data, we believe the collective student voice embedded in the findings of this study has implications for enhancing teacher educators' practice, including when casual markers provide written feedback. This might best be interpreted as 'advice' to markers on composing written feedback from the students whom they assess:

1. Avoid empty praise

This study found that teacher education students – who learn about assessment practices as an integral part of their course – were annoyed and frustrated by the practice of markers who offer praise without providing cogent critique. Research in similar contexts has shown that students want personalised feedback to show them how to improve future assessment (e.g., Ferguson, 2011; Dowden et al., 2013) but when guidance is replaced by empty platitudes, praise becomes unwelcome and morphs into a source of annoyance. Indeed, the literature indicates that the practice of praising students as an integral part of written feedback may not be effective. For instance, a meta-analysis of 607 research studies on feedback in educational contexts found that praise had the effect of *reducing* future performance in more than one third of the cases (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). Thus, the familiar practice, in teacher education contexts, of lacing written feedback with praise may actually stunt students' motivation to strive for improvement and lull them into making inflated evaluations of their performance or ability. Indeed, Shute generally recommends markers to "use 'praise' sparingly, if at all" (2008, p. 178).

2. Don't get personal

Markers should avoid making personal comments at all costs. In particular, casual markers cannot 'know' students, thus they should avoid any presumption along these lines. As this study demonstrates, there is a serious risk that personal comments will be construed as condescending and/or patronising. It is well established in the literature that feedback drawing attention to students' personal characteristics tends to impede learning, whereas feedback focusing on task performance generally promotes learning (e.g., Shute, 2008).

3. Be consistent

Students need to be confident that their markers are consistent, reliable and accurate in their judgments, otherwise they will tend to perceive problems that are both real and imagined (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). A simple example of an 'imaginary' problem could be a student who mistakenly believes they have lost credit when they see a corrected apostrophe in their marked script. The results of this study indicated APA referencing was a serious concern for many students. The solution to this and allied problems is likely to be multi-faceted:

- (a) Lecturers, tutors and casual markers in schools and faculties need to be proficient and up-to-date with the relevant referencing system. This is unlikely to be achieved without a systemic approach to assuring common understandings among markers as well as minimum expectations of markers' knowledge of the particular referencing system;
- (b) Resources for referencing need to be both accurate and user-friendly but achieving an optimal combination of these qualities will probably involve a trade-off. For course work below Research Higher Degree (RHD) level, it may be preferable to choose simpler resources that sacrifice a little accuracy or detail in the interests of usability; and
- (c) Communication with students concerning all aspects of assessment needs to be crystal clear (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011) otherwise students tend to raise concerns pertaining to perceived inconsistency of marking that are trivial and peripheral to the intended learning outcomes in their courses.

These recommendations, which contribute to new understandings for effective teacher education, suggest that: (1) greater awareness and attention to the task at hand by markers, (2) systemic provision of specific and consistent instructions to markers, and (3) maintaining high expectations of markers (for instance, by assessing their knowledge of APA referencing), have the potential to generally improve students' perceptions of written feedback on high stakes assessment.

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Appendix: Survey [Abridged]

1. Reflecting on written feedback you have received recently, please indicate on the Likert scale the extent to which you agree with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree):
 - (a) The written feedback I received on the return of my assignment was helpful to me.
 - (b) I had an emotional response to the written feedback
 - (c) The written feedback alerted me to areas of strength
 - (d) The written feedback satisfactorily explained why I was awarded the grade I received.
 - (e) The written feedback will help me/helped me in my next assignment involving writing.
 - (f) The written feedback will help me/helped me in other units in the MTeach course.
 - (g) The written feedback suggested areas I could improve.
 - (h) Even if it was critical in part, the written feedback still encouraged me.
2. Please comment on the written feedback you have received.
