**Marking and providing feedback face-to-face: staff and student perspectives**

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**Abstract**

The setting, marking and providing feedback on assessments forms an important part of a tutor’s role. Studies into the use of feedback and how it is interpreted by students indicate a mismatch between what students are looking for and what tutors think they are giving. Tutors comment that students are more interested in the mark than the feedback, and yet students indicate that they do not get enough feedback, or that it is not useful. This study investigates student and staff perceptions of the linking of marking and feedback in face-to-face sessions. A cohort of year one university students were given the option of receiving either written feedback or a 15 minute meeting with one of their tutors to have their essay marked with them. Forty nine students chose face-to-face marking, the remaining 35 students received written feedback. Focus groups were used to investigate the student experience. Staff members were also asked to reflect on the process. Students and staff found the experience of face-to-face marking beneficial and positive. Both felt that the time spent together allowed for a feedback dialogue about the piece of work, and that staff could explain and justify why marks were given.

**Keywords**

Marking linked to feedback; feedback dialogue; face-to-face marking

**Marking and providing feedback**

The value of feedback in learning is well established, with abundant literature relating to feedback in higher education and how best to provide it in order to promote learning (Rust et al., 2003; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008; Orsmond and Merry, 2011). With university education often following a modular curriculum, the timing of assessment may occur at the end of a stand-alone module, meaning that feedback comes too late for the student to benefit. But despite the understanding of the importance of good feedback, there still appears to be a gap between what staff believe they are doing, and what students feel they are receiving, a divide which leaves students and staff dissatisfied (Bailey and Garner, 2010; Nicol 2010; Price et al., 2010) and leads to poor evaluation of feedback in national student surveys (Higher Education Funding Council, 2014). Whilst tutors think they are giving extensive feedback, and may spend many hours in producing written comments, the evidence is that the feedback is often not understood, or is not communicated in a way which is helpful to the student. Students comment that they do not know what is expected of them or that they do not understand the language used by the tutor (Weaver, 2006; MacLellan, 2001). This is particularly pertinent for students just starting at university, they have a whole language relating to assessment and feedback to learn and first year students are unlikely to make use of independent learning in order to improve their work following feedback, although this is the intention of the marker (Robinson et al., 2011).

In Carless’s study (2006) of tutor perceptions of their feedback compared with student perceptions, the author identified recurring differences; “tutors believe they are providing more feedback than students do”, and “tutors perceive their feedback to be more useful than students do”. Tutors also commented that often the students were only focussed on the mark and not the feedback. Jones and Gorra (2013) gave students the option of receiving more extensive feedback on a piece of work, once their mark was known. Students were more likely to seek additional feedback when their marks were not in line with their expectations, so if they received a lower, or a higher mark than expected, they would request further feedback. The percentage of students who did seek this feedback was only 10% of the study cohort, leading the authors to suggest that staff should not be spending time on providing extensive written feedback to students who do not request it, thus allowing resources to be redirected.

How, therefore, do we engage staff and students in the feedback process such that time spent in providing feedback is not wasted, and that students get what they want from their tutors? A consensus has developed that the feedback process is far more nuanced, contextualised and complex than simply handing back a piece of coursework with some written comments and a mark. This has led to an increasing recognition that feedback should be a two way process between tutor and student, leading to better understanding of what the tutor is looking for, and how the student can make improvements (Dowden et al*.,* 2011; Boud and Molloy, 2013). One of the outcomes for the student must be that they become “self-regulated learners”, which requires an understanding not only of what the feedback means, but how to receive it and act on it. Nicol (2010) gives several examples of how the process of providing feedback does not have to rely on a tutor writing individual comments on each student’s piece of work, and allows students to have more interaction with the feedback process; for example, use of peer assessment, provision of exemplars of work and encouragement of discussion about how work is graded.

The view is that dialogue can overcome some of the problems identified by students in interpreting comments written by the tutor (Orsmond and Merry, 2011). Amongst the feedback-dialogue practices investigated by Blair and McGinty (2013) were one to one tutorials at which students had the opportunity to discuss their marked work with their tutor. Students expressed an increased self-confidence and valued the opportunity to find out how they could improve their work. However, as the authors point out, discussions with tutors about an assessed piece of work can emphasise an expert-novice discourse which requires a degree of confidence which may be lacking in first year students. This is identified by students who were asked to comment on feedback relationships with tutors (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010); in some cases where students were offered one to one feedback sessions they did not take them up as they felt uncomfortable or lacked confidence, particularly if they were behind in their work. The emotional impact of receiving feedback should also be considered; a piece of poor feedback, badly delivered can have long term effects on student motivation and future learning (Varlander, 2008; Molloy et al., 2013). The nature of the relationship between tutor and student is therefore important in allowing a productive dialogue, in a supportive atmosphere.

The primary aim of providing feedback is to help achieve an improvement in performance, whether in a practical setting, or in a written assessment, and to this end, feedback has become intimately linked with marking, both for student and tutor (Ferguson, 2011). Many universities have large classes, particularly in first year, and low staff to student ratios. In these situations, marking work and returning it to students takes a lot of time, and much of the literature around marking assessments focusses on how to make the whole process less demanding of staff time, for example by using computer aided assessment (Davies, 2009) or peer assessment (Harris, 2011). Moderation and external validation all add to the time it takes to return work (Bloxham, 2009), and few teachers would rate marking as one of their favourite parts of teaching, indeed it is often referred to as ‘a burden’. Marking tends to take place in a quiet corner, often at home, completely separated from the students. So on the one hand, staff are under pressure to be efficient in providing rapid and anonymous turnaround of marking, and on the other hand, to provide rich, directed feedback which is as personalised as possible; it is a balance between ‘what I (tutor) have time and energy to do’ and ‘what you (the student) really want or need’. Boud and Molloy (2013) state that we risk feedback becoming ‘one of the unpleasant side effects of teaching’. In addition, time spent in providing feedback tends to increase as the student progresses through their university career as assessments tend to increase in length (hence taking more time to mark) as well as depth, and class sizes get smaller. It could be argued that the reverse should occur, with more time being spent giving feedback in the early years, when new students have little experience of university assessments and are likely to base their expectations on what happened at school (Surgenor, 2013).

The practice of marking and grading has received critical attention in higher education, particularly in relation to reliability and process (Bloxham, 2009; Tomas, 2014), but there is very little research into the sharing of the process of marking with the student. In 1978 Good suggested marking examination scripts with the student present (Good, 1978). There is no evidence that this practice was taken up, possibly because of the increased awareness of unconscious bias in marking (Newstead and Dennis, 1990; Malouff et al., 2013) which led to many universities adopting ‘anonymous marking’ policies (National Union of Students, 2008) and moderation policies to ensure reliability in marking. The study described here picked up from Good’s work (1978), with the aim of investigating whether time spent in marking and writing feedback on a short essay might be better spent in a one to one meeting between the marker and the student. This immediately links marking and feedback, allows for very timely return of work, facilitates discussion about the student’s work and should help demonstrate the links made by assessors between their evaluative judgements and the feedback comments made. There is a need to find out whether or not this combining of marking and feedback can work in practice and to better understand the views of both markers and students in this process.

**Method**

*Process*

Eighty four students enrolled onto a first year biological sciences module in the academic year 2013/14, assessed by means of a 1000 word essay and an objective test, were given the choice of having their essay marked anonymously or face-to-face with a tutor. It was estimated that staff could mark, and give written feedback on, approximately 4 essays per hour, so face-to-face marking was given the same time, that is, 15 minutes per interview.

Since marking was a “live” activity, moderation had to take place prior to arranging face-to-face marking sessions. In order to ensure consistency amongst the markers, staff independently marked a selection of essays and then discussed their marks, and the feedback they would give to the student. If two markers were more than 5% apart in their marks, a third member of staff marked the same paper and further discussion took place until all staff were in agreement. Face-to-face marking involved students signing up for a session with a chosen tutor within two weeks of the hand in date for the essay. Tutors were given the relevant essays, and both tutors and students had access to a proforma feedback sheet which was used during the marking session. The proforma had been used and adapted over previous years and was available to the students at the start of the semester.

The marking proforma (see Table 1) shows how marks were awarded for the following five aspects, namely, scientific language/ grammar/spelling of scientific terms (20% of the marks available were awarded for this), content of essay (60% of the marks available were awarded for this), referencing (5% of the marks available were awarded for this), diagram (10% of the marks available were awarded for this), and presentation (5% of the marks available were awarded for this). In common with marking schemes in the UK, based on how degrees are classified at undergraduate level, marks were in five categories (excellent, good, acceptable, poor and less than a pass mark). As most of the marks (80%) come from the first two, that is, scientific language/ grammar/spelling of scientific terms and content of essay, these are re-produced here, to give insight into the kind of language/guidance used.

<<Insert Table 1 here>>

The marking model used is described by Crisp (2010) as “read and understand, with concurrent evaluation alongside; evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the response, decide on mark, epilogue,” but in this study, the student was present with the marker.

The student therefore received feedback, and the mark, using the proforma, and left the session with both. During the 15 minute session, they were encouraged to have a dialogue about the feedback, and were given the option of having an audio file of the session sent to them. Students were also encouraged to take notes during the session. All face-to-face marking was completed within two weeks of the hand-in date for the essay. Some students received their feedback 3 days after submitting their work.

*Sample*

Forty nine students chose face-to-face marking, the remaining thirty-five received the standard written feedback. Those receiving written feedback included students who were late in submitting work (three students) for which a maximum mark of 40% was given, in line with university policy.

*Design*

To explore the students’ understandings of and feelings about the face-to-face marking and feedback process an exploratory case study, using qualitative data collection and analysis, was adopted. Volunteers were invited to take part in focus groups, which were facilitated by an independent staff member experienced in working with students and in running focus groups. This staff member was not part of the teaching or assessment team and was not previously known to these students. Two focus groups were held with nine and eleven participants respectively. The volunteers represented the range of cultural backgrounds seen in the student cohort, and also a range of ability, as assessed by their essay marks (which were not known to the facilitator). The sessions were designed to offer a confidential and relaxed atmosphere for discussion and encourage contributions from all participants (Barbour 2007). Students were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers and that all views were welcome in order to help the researchers to gain an insight into their experience. The facilitator started off by asking why students had chosen a particular format of feedback. Following this, students were not guided by specific questions but were encouraged to talk freely about their experience. A separate focus group was held for all three members of the teaching team in order to provide a shared opportunity to reflect on their experiences of providing the face-to-face marking and feedback. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

*Analysis*

A qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken on the focus group transcripts (Bryman, 2012) by a third party who knew neither the tutors nor the students. The comments were categorised into the following themes: *Student motivations*; why the individual chose to have their essay marked face-to-face as opposed to receiving written feedback. *Pedagogic value*; what the students thought they could gain from the session with the tutor. *Feedback as dialogue*; the value of being able to enter into a discussion about the feedback given.

The study received ethical approval from the Faculty ethics committee.

**Results**

*Emerging themes*

*Student motivations*

Although not a strong theme (not all students commented on their motivation), we were interested in finding out why some students might choose one type of feedback over another hence the facilitator started by asking about motivation. There were three main reasons for students to choose the face-to-face marking and feedback. Firstly, with regard to the specific topics covered in the assessment, there was the expectation that face-to-face marking and feedback would lead to better understanding of the topics covered and of the feedback given (seven students). Secondly, five students were curious to understand more about the process of marking: ‘*I was just being a little bit nosey*.’ They appeared to have very little real knowledge about the process of marking; how criteria are applied, how marks might be awarded, how grading decisions are made. The unmasking of this process was an eye-opener for them, and many stated that it was useful to know how markers thought: ‘*the blindfold was taken off.’* Thirdly, two students thought there would be room to argue for higher marks if in a one-to-one discussion with the marker: ‘*you can beg* ... [for more marks].’ They also thought that staff would be more lenient when in a face-to-face situation, perhaps being less likely to be critical and ‘*mean*’. One student stated that ‘*written feedback is cold*’. This view was also raised by the markers as the ‘*warm body effect’* of the face-to-face sessions.

*Pedagogic value*

Students seemed to gain a greater appreciation for the rigorous nature of the markers’ decision-making and their academic integrity. Four students indicated that one consideration when signing up for the feedback sessions was who the marker would be; there was a sense that certain individuals would be more lenient than others, and some of them chose their markers on the basis of these perceptions. However, it became very clear to them that bargaining for marks was not part of the process, and, because of how staff approached the feedback sessions, there was no thought of even attempting to argue for more marks (despite the motivations for choosing face-to-face marking). Rather, students recalled seeking clarification for marks and comments given, not challenging them. Two students also stated that the feedback given face-to-face was somehow more trustworthy than written feedback alone. One student showed some surprise at how concerned staff were for them to succeed: ‘*they actually want us to do well*’. And they were appreciative of time and consideration that the markers gave to them as individuals: ‘*I personally appreciate the generosity of my lecturer. Not generosity in terms of marks, but that she shared a lot of knowledge with me*.’

*Feedback as dialogue*

This importance of the nature of the dialogue and discussion in the face-to-face sessions was raised by nearly all the students. Some of them commented that they had felt anxious before the sessions; they did not want to be told they (or their work) were ‘rubbish’. There was also an indication of what Blair and McGinty (2013) refer to as the “expert-novice” relationship, as exemplified by one of our focus group students: ‘*They told you what was wrong and they told you that they want you to work on and you’re dealing with someone who is an expert in like these kind of systems so you can take their word as gospel and stuff.’*

However, the overwhelming feeling after the sessions was one of positivity, and this is exemplified by this student:

‘*You can ask questions as well. It’s not just like when you get written feedback that’s all you’ve got. When you’re in there and you’re talking to the lecturer or marker, you can actually ask any specific problems you had with it, or with the marks, like if you don’t understand something you can get it answered there and then*.’

Not all feedback was positive, but even the negatives seemed better accepted in a face-to-face meeting, as one student put it:

‘*having another person in the room to sort of look at you and go, that was really dumb, kind of makes a difference than just seeing it written down on paper.’*

A quote from one student provides a conclusion which sums up the positive experience:

‘*I personally thought it was a really good way to get feedback and understand why you got what you got. I don’t think there’s anything bad about it. I thought it was all positive and good, and it gave you a real heads up on what to do next”.*

*Staff perspectives*

The three members of staff who took part in the face-to-face marking found it a positive experience and would continue the practice. An exchange from the focus group, between the three markers illustrates this:

*R1*: ‘*Yes, so it is a two way, isn’t it, whereas if you’re marking, it can get really boring. Everybody says this don’t they, about marking? You’re writing the same things.’*

*R2: ‘Yes and you get more and more irate’*

*R1: ‘Yes and actually to have somebody* [present with you]….*’*

*R3: ‘I think the feedback is also more constructive, more immediate and I’m quite sure they’ll retain that information, for example, diagrams. You can say, okay, now do you know what I mean?’*

*R1 ‘Absolutely and the number of times I’ll say, just read that sentence and they’ll do it and they say, oh, yes, it doesn’t make sense.* [if using written feedback] *you never get that closing of the circle, about, “oh yes, I see what you mean”.*

However, all staff did acknowledge that the system would not be appropriate for all types of work, particularly longer pieces.

**Discussion and conclusions**

*Student motivations*

It should not be a surprise that some students felt they would get a better mark if they chose a more lenient marker. Analysis of marks awarded by individual staff did not bear this out, but it does support the notion of students acting instrumentally to maximise their marks. Given that these students were in first year, it is unlikely that they will have had much evidence on which to base such judgements, but there is obviously a perception (for which there is evidence, see Brown, 2010) amongst students that marking is not a purely objective exercise, and that different staff will give different marks for the same piece of work. The use of a marking proforma (that is, marking criteria) can mitigate against concerns of reliability, and the process of moderation of marks is one which students may not be aware; this could be emphasised in order to allay perceptions of “fairness”. However, none of the students mentioned anonymity as an issue in introducing marking bias (NUS, 2008). The comment about written feedback being “cold” implies a barrier to learning from it because it is two-dimensional and static, rather than the anticipated dialogue in the face-to-face feedback session.

*Pedagogic value*

Timetabling all of the sessions at mutually acceptable times was not easy, but it did mean that students could start receiving feedback within a few days of handing in their work; immediacy of feedback is important (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). In addition, what appeared to be a time consuming exercise of 15 minute appointments for up to 40 students per marker, is actually just a different way of using the time it would take to mark the work. Students felt they left the face-to-face session with a better idea of how to get more marks in future, but also had learnt more about the intellectual priorities and approaches of higher education. Learning the language of assessment is important as students move from school to higher education, many students find their first year at university particularly challenging as they grapple with very different styles of teaching and assessment (Surgenor, 2013). By talking through the process of how, and why marks are awarded for a piece of work, the student begins to learn the language and expectation associated with assessment. The feeling expressed by one student of the “generosity” of staff and “wanting us to do well” is also identified by Crimmins et al. (2014) in which students who received face-to-face feedback (once the work had been marked) referred to “a reinforcement of caring”.

*Feedback as dialogue*

The view of the students and staff, that the feedback session was a two-way process, a conversation, a dialogue, not a one-way transfer of information, is seen in other studies of face-to-face feedback (Nicol, 2010; Blair and McGinty, 2013; Crimmins et al., 2014). Limitations to this process are identified by Blair and McGinty (2013), for example the power relationship which exists between the marker and the student (expert and novice), may limit the extent of the dialogue; open discussion requires a degree of maturity and confidence in the student (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010). This is to be expected, the students were undertaking their first assessment, the large cohort meant they didn’t know the tutors well, and few first year students are likely to feel confident about challenging their tutors. However, by linking marking and feedback, it is possible to address the issue of defining what Rust et al. (2003) refer to as the tutor’s tacit knowledge regarding assessment criteria. For example, in this study, marks were awarded for “correct use of scientific language”, a concept which was explained in the classroom, but in the face-to-face sessions tutors could identify exactly where students had not achieved this, and could re-structure sentences to demonstrate how to improve the essay.

The opportunity for a dialogue allowed tutors to identify the kinds of expectations that these students had of staff and the educational process prior to this study, which potentially has implications for broader education policies and approaches. For example, students coming from school might be used to very specific criteria in assessment, with answers being either right or wrong’; the concept of “a well written essay” is extremely difficult to describe (relying on the tacit knowledge of the tutor), as evidenced by the many different models used in marking essays (Tomas, 2014). The nature of relationships between students and lecturers could be developed to support individual student learning, boost their confidence, and better engage them with the higher education environment (Chemers et al., 2001; Dowden et al., 2011). We would expect the relationship between tutor and student to change with the stage of study, but whatever the stage, we need to better understand the relationship between marker and student if we are to develop productive assessment practices.

*Staff perspectives*

Staff found the whole process of marking was more worthwhile, and time spent with the student was much more valuable than time spent in marking and writing written comments. By using a marking proforma but also having one-to-one time with the student, staff were able to share the explicit knowledge (the articulation of the assessment criteria) as well as tacit knowledge (that which is more personalised and hard to formalise) (Rust et al., 2003). The feeling of “closing the circle” is expressed, the staff could check that the feedback was understood. This is very much in line with other research into the development of a “dialogic” approach to feedback in which staff are able to clarify feedback and to check that comments have been understood by the student (Crimmins et al., 2014). One of the advantages of face-to-face marking and feedback is that it completely changes the relationship staff have to the whole process: it becomes about the individual students, rather than an anonymous pile of scripts.

Limitations of the study include the small sample size, that the students and staff were from only one discipline and that the students were only those in their first year and from one UK university, thus limiting the generalisation of the findings. In addition, the students self-selected which form of feedback they wanted to receive, whether or not to take part in the focus groups, and also that they were able to choose who marked their essay. Future work will, therefore, need to explore the experiences of students from different levels/years, as well as different disciplines and cultural/country contexts. In addition, it may be useful to explore the use of feedback with assessment types other than essays and also with other forms of marking schemes/proformas. The impact that the experience of face-to-face marking, as described here, has on how students deal with assessment and feedback in subsequent assessment tasks would be worth investigating. Finally, since feedback should influence performance, it would be worth exploring whether or not face-to-face marking impacts future performance in terms of marks/grades.

At a time when education is being market-driven, the relationships between academics and students risks becoming more alienating and transactional, particularly with increasing class sizes. Meanwhile, there is a move to shift the focus of the tutor-student relationship to one that views higher education not as a product but as a co-operative process, and knowledge as something that is co-produced, not simply transferred from one individual to another (McCulloch, 2009). This implies a two-way process- a dialogue forming ‘part of the complex and uncertain educational relationship’ which exists between tutor and student (McArthur and Huxham 2013). Likewise, feedback is increasingly seen as a process which should involve dialogue between tutor and student (Blair and McGinty, 2013), thus relationships between the two groups take on an increasing importance (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010). The process of face-to-face marking and feedback has the potential to realign these relationships and support not only the personalisation of education, but also the development of a more collegial setting within which both staff and students can function. As this study suggests, offering face-to-face marking and feedback early on in first year provides a well-timed opportunity for staff and students to gain insight into each other’s experience and understanding of assessment practice, as well as a means to help build staff-student relationships.

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Table 1. Example of categories and comments used in the marking proforma.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Excellent (70% and above) | Good (60-69%) | Acceptable (pass 50-59%) | Poor (40-49%) | Needs a lot of work to pass (< 40%) |
| Scientific language/ grammar/ spelling of scientific terms | Uses correct terms and own words. Correct use of scientific terms. Logical and clear. | Uses own words. Correct spelling or scientific terms but some ambiguity. | Some errors in spelling or terminology. Lacks clarity in structure of essay. | Poor use of scientific language. Reliance on websites and use of non-scientific terms. | Very poor paraphrasing, relies on quotes (may be referred for plagiarism). No logical progression in essay. |
| Content of essay | Evidence of reading around subject. No errors in content. In depth analysis of topic. Good examples used. | Understands topic and uses relevant examples. Evidence of further reading. Could be more in depth. | Reproduces lecture notes or makes little use of text books/ journals but understands topic. | Missing or incorrect information. Lacks understanding of topic. | Major misunderstandings/errors in content. Too much irrelevant information. |