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Title Improving the Student Learning Experience through Dialogic Feed-Forward Assessment
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Abstract

Assessment feedback gains consistently low satisfaction scores in national surveys of student satisfaction, with most concern surrounding its timeliness, quality and effectiveness. We present the results of a two year qualitative study, thematically analysing semi-structured interviews with students who have undertaken dialogic feed-forward coursework on a second year undergraduate geography module in a British university. The assessment consists of submitting a considered draft of a coursework essay, which is discussed and evaluated face-to-face with the course tutor before a self-reflective piece is written about the assessment process and a final essay is submitted for formal grading. We present evidence that this process asserts a positive influence on the student learning experience in a number of inter-related cognitive and affective ways, impacting upon learning behaviour, supporting student achievement, and raising NSS scores related to feedback. We espouse an ipsative, cyclical approach to dialogic feed-forward, focusing on learners' longitudinal development.

Introduction

Assessment feedback should be an invaluable part of learning, helping students to understand their current performance and how to close the 'performance gap', increasing belief that they have control over their success, and maintaining motivation for their studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In reality, however, students can find feedback problematic, leading to little improvement in subsequent work (Sadler, 2010). Perhaps because of these difficulties, assessment and feedback receive consistently low scores in national surveys of student satisfaction (Yang & Carless, 2013).

We base our research on two premises, which should theoretically overcome many difficulties relating to feedback. The first premise is that feedback should occupy a central position within a dialogic approach to learning and teaching (Nicol, 2010). Dialogic feedback, part of a social constructivist approach to assessment, is the creation of understanding via spoken discourse between lecturer and student, or student to student (Rust et al., 2005). The second premise is that feedback should be future-oriented (Carless, 2007). Feed-forward impacts upon an upcoming assignment, or is given post-assignment with specific direction on how this can be applied in future.

Aims

We implemented an assessment approach to optimally support students' use of feedback, aiming to:

1. Explore student perceptions of dialogic feed-forward and whether it asserted a positive influence on learning;
2. Identify how task-specific behaviour of students was altered;
3. Identify the extent to which students believed their self-efficacy and self-regulation skills were improved;
4. Examine whether the approach enhanced student performance and raised NSS scores related to feedback.

Assessment approach

We implemented our dialogic assessment approach in a second year undergraduate geography module delivered at a British university (Figure 1). The students wrote a considered draft of their selected essay, which was discussed in an individual face-to-face meeting with the tutor. These feed-forward meetings started with open questions asking students to summarise the strengths/weaknesses of their essay draft, to explain their overall approach, and to grade their draft. The tutor and student discussed how to discern key aspects of the question, apply appropriate knowledge and skills to analyse it and how to develop an effective answer. Where key weaknesses were identified, exemplar paragraphs of previous student work were used to demonstrate good practice (Handley & Williams, 2011). The meetings were audio-recorded for students to listen to at their leisure.

Methods

Following standard ethical procedures, we adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews undertaken across two cohorts (2015-2017). Approximately 50 interviews were conducted with a response rate of just under 70%. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically through an interpretivist lens. We adopted a largely grounded approach, searching for themes inductively across transcripts. We then used NVivo to explore themes in more detail, developing sub-themes where appropriate with reference to deductive coding. Finally, we used evidence from tutor summative essay comments and employed inferential statistics to compare final essay grades for the two cohorts pre- and post-intervention.

Selected results

The conversations compelled students to engage critically with their work. They gained greater understanding of the written feedback through verbal clarification and use of exemplars:

*'When I've had drafts handed back to me **written over**, I don't understand what they're trying to say. I can ask you questions **if we're talking to each other about it**, it's easier to see things'*

Gaining feed-forward before formal grading allowed students to discover if they were tackling the essay appropriately, averting bad practice. The process motivated students as they could act on feedback with immediacy:

*'I didn't really know what direction I was going in. Then, **after speaking and having the feedback**, I spent more time on it because **I knew where I needed to go with it**'*

The students commented that they altered their behaviour after the meeting, both within-task and with respect to post-assignment self-regulation:

*'It helped me to **realise how to critique my own essays** because I was able to go through the essay with you and know exactly why you were commenting on something ... **It allows me to see in other essays the same things I'm doing**'*

The students self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to accomplish assignments in future:

*'I **understand what it means to be critical now**; before I would read my work and think I am sure I have done that and then the tutor would say I hadn't!'*

Student performance improved significantly post-intervention (Figure 2). The mean module mark increased from 56% to 62%. Students wrote less descriptively and built stronger arguments, offering more critical depth based on evidence from literature. The module scored 100% across all National Student Survey questions post-intervention. All students rated the module as giving them quality feedback, saying that it was detailed, conversational, personalised, timely and multi-faceted.

Discussion

Our assessment approach worked to overcome the barriers preventing students from using feedback effectively (Winstone et al., 2016). Students were given the opportunity to revise their work using individualised, task-specific commentary, clarified through dialogue (Pask, 1976). The students perceived the feedback as highly useable as they could apply their understanding with immediacy (O'Donovan et al., 2016). They highlighted an improved ability to decode feedback through questioning and consequent tutor explanation, allowing them to understand better the tutor's intentions (Orsmond & Merry, 2011). The dialogic meetings increased student confidence and motivation as they prepared their final submissions because they had a clearer idea of task expectations (Carless et al., 2011).

Students liked the personalised approach to feedback and commented positively on the tutor 'caring' about their studies (Blair & McGinty, 2013). The educational alliance is clearly an important influence on student perceptions of feedback quality (Telio et al., 2015).

Implications for practice

To rise to the challenges for assessment and feedback in future, we could:

1. Deliver all feedback before formal grading, meeting with students or establishing peer feedback (Nicol, 2010);
2. Offer students mastery experiences (Ritchie 2016), completing phased tasks, and receiving verbal feedback and encouragement to improve their capabilities;
3. Deliver curricula that adopt coherent assessment objectives and standardised grading schemes in order to facilitate developmental feed-forward (O'Donovan et al., 2016);
4. Offer enhanced resource at critical feedback moments when students find learning particularly challenging (O'Donovan et al., 2016).

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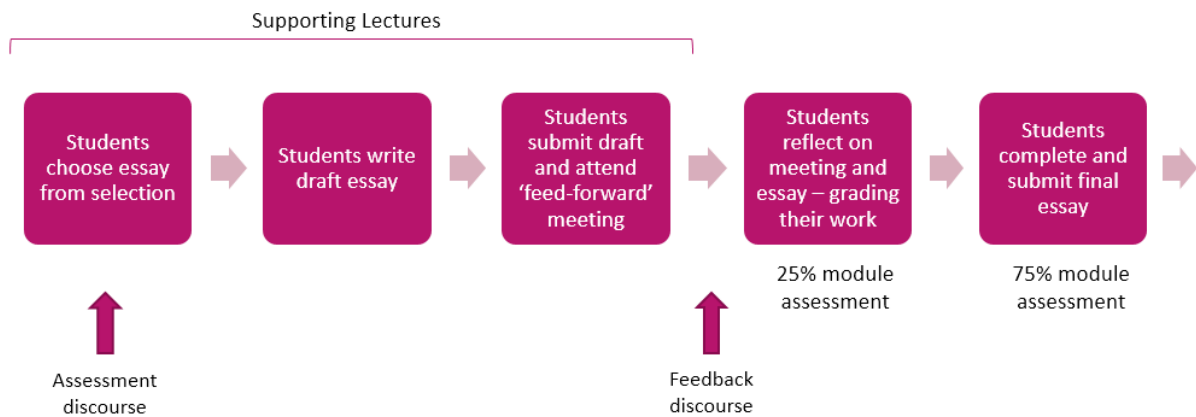


Figure 1: The dialogic feed-forward assessment approach used in this research

Enhanced student performance

Significantly higher marks 2015-17 v 2011-13
($p < 0.0001$)

Band (%)	2011-2012 (%)	2012-2013 (%)	2015-2016 (%)	2016-2017 (%)
0-39 (inc. NS)	16	5	0	5.5*
40-49	9	14	3*	5.5*
50-59	34	38	28	17
60-69	41	38	58	58
70-100	0	5	11	14
Number (n)	32	37	36	36

Dialogic assessment

* Did not have a meeting

Figure 2: Student performance is significantly improved after introducing dialogic feed-forward assessment into a module