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"Reconnecting assessment feedback and learning: a case study"

Written assessment feedback has a long accepted tradition within higher education. It is commonly used as the process by which students receive comments on their work in order to inform future learning; grading is classified in order to establish academic standards, and feedback is recorded in order that institutions have an audit trial to support their case in the event of any future appeals against their academic judgments. The model of written feedback has a considerable history and a wealth of evidence available to support good assessment practice, however much of this literature was generated prior to the enormous rise in undergraduate student numbers in the UK during the first decade of this century.

It is commonly understood that assessment feedback is an integral part of teaching and learning within higher education, and that "generating feedback information is of benefit to students and to teachers" (Nicol & Macfarlene-Dick 2006). Despite this however, the National Student Survey (NSS) has consistently cited 'Assessment and Feedback' as the area with the lowest satisfaction rates for students across all institutions, regardless of programme or context. Of particular concern, students frequently highlight the usefulness of any feedback in the context of future learning performance.

This paper reports on the findings of trial project at the University of Wales Newport using recorded verbal assessment feedback as a way of improving the assessment experience for all stakeholders by reconnecting the relationship between feedback and learning.

As an alternative to using the standardised university assessment and feedback template, assessors provided students with verbal recordings of their assignment feedback produced using simple voice recording software. This digital recording equipment is now available as part of the additional applications within most mobile phone or mp3 players. The technology is simple to use for the tutor, and can be transferred quickly to university intranet systems and subsequently to students.

Following a very successful initial trial, the project was expanded to include students from a variety of different areas and levels within the University. Over one hundred students participated by agreeing to receive recorded verbal feedback rather than the traditional written format. These students included groups of learners from levels 4, 5 and 6; full and part-time students, individuals from the schools of Art & Design; Health and Social Science; the Business school, and students studying for foundation degree, first degree and professional qualifications.

Following a written assignment submission, 50% of each student cohort received written feedback using the established format of the standard school assessment sheet. The average time taken to complete the feedback process was recorded, and then used as the benchmark for the recorded verbal feedback for the remaining students in the group. Once the assessment was completed, and feedback returned to students, individuals from each group were interviewed to explore the common strengths and weaknesses of each assignment feedback system.

Feedback from both students and staff about this project proved extremely encouraging. Of the 100 students receiving recorded verbal feedback, just three individuals expressed concerns, and a preference for the traditional method. More importantly however, the interviews with students provided evidence to suggest that the verbal feedback provided a much richer learning experience. Discussions regarding the quality of information provided were far more extended and elaborate from students receiving recorded verbal feedback

than from the sample group, with individuals frequently commenting on how the assessor clarified and explained their grading decisions.

A comparative analysis of assessment feedback from the trial suggested that students experiencing the traditional written feedback process, received on average just 120 words of feedback, based on an essay of approximately 2500 words. Students from the 'verbal assessment feedback' group, received close to 500 words of comment. Whilst closer analysis suggests the vocabulary of the written feedback is more formal, and directed closely at the assessment criteria, the verbal feedback comments are clearly more personalised, and pitched closer to the level of vocabulary frequently used within the classroom environment.

Nicol & Macfarlene-dick (2006) highlight the need that "more recognition should be given to the role of feedback on learners motivational beliefs and self-esteem". In using the verbal feedback all staff commented on their ability to use intonation in order to praise or chastise individuals who deserved some rewarded for effort, or context; or for others who were capable of a higher level of critical engagement than the assessment criteria provided. The necessary pace of written assessment feedback however often negates this subtlety, or provides little opportunity for staff to engage in a dialogue with learners that is of benefit to both parties.

One common observation made by staff upon reflection was the lower numbers of requests made by students for further tutorials or discussion about the assessment feedback in comparison to their usual experience. This observation would suggest that this method of assessment feedback provides an improved experience for students who were not only more satisfied with the quantity of feedback received, but also were able to better see the relationship between the comments and assignment grades, such that comments were appropriately justified and explained.

All academic staff commented on how rewarding the project had been for their own morale, not only in that the quantity of assessment had been completed far more efficiently, but that staff had confidence in that they had successfully explained their assessment decisions, and felt 'less guilty' about the quantity of feedback they had been able to offer.

In conclusion, based on this project, recorded verbal assessment feedback clearly provides an opportunity to improve the student experience of learning, and to reconnect the process of assessment feedback. Further research is now required to develop models of good practice appropriate to the new method of delivery and increasing pressure of current and future assignment workloads.

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