Postgraduate perspectives on E-feedback

Justine Bold
Senior Lecturer Institute of Health & Society, University of Worcester
(j.bold@worc.ac.uk)

Keywords: Electronic feedback, E-feedback, postgraduate, blended learning, grounded theory.

Abstract

This research project examined the assessment feedback method used for summative coursework on a postgraduate, blended learning programme within the Institute of Health and Society. The aim was to determine if and how the introduction of electronic feedback changes the way students interact and learn from feedback. This study was undertaken with the participants from four student cohorts from the same Master's degree programme. An electronic survey questionnaire with primarily open-ended questions was utilised to collect qualitative data about their learning experience and the proposed changes. Data was analysed for thematic content using the principles of grounded theory. Responses were analysed manually for key words or sentences, phrases and themes. Codes were applied and then sorted into category schemes. Responses were received from 28 students. Data analysis of the questionnaire responses identified 22 codes.The codes were further analysed to identify simple category schemes, these were identified as relating to convenience, timing, the student's processing of feedback, contact with the tutor or about the actual comments given in the feedback. 10 of the responders had received electronic feedback via the student online learning environment (SOLE) system via one of the trial modules. 17 responders had not received electronic feedback via the SOLE system. Results highlight the importance of timely feedback within modular postgraduate study and the importance of regular access to face-to-face tutorial contact with academic staff. Electronic feedback has the potential to allow students more time to review and engage with feedback and to deliver many benefits that are perceived as convenient and timely, however it is still perceived by some as impersonal and offering no added benefits when compared to handwritten feedback. The main recommendations are to use e-feedback on all modules within the postgraduate programme whilst formalising the offer of face to face or telephone feedback tutorials to maintain personal contact. Formative feedback sessions within modules should continue to be developed, building reflective skills of learners encouraging both self and peer assessment.

Introduction

The area to be addressed in this research is the assessment feedback method used for summative coursework on a health Master's degree programme, where a large number of students study on a part-time basis and do not live near the University campus. Modules within the programme are generally assessed by a single summative assessment, which is completed after the module block (usually a period of 8-10 weeks is given for completion of the assessment). Formative feedback is given within modules and classroom exercises involve both tutor and peer feedback sessions. Feedback on summative assignments is typically given after completion of the module with marks confirmed after the examination board. This research subject was chosen because on joining the course team, students were found to often be expressing the view that they were waiting too long for feedback on summative work and consequently it was arriving too late to be applied effectively, hence compromising the learning experience. This is consistent with much of the current literature which suggests that feedback is a common reason for student dissatisfaction (Hounsell et al., 2008, Rowe & Wood, n.d.).These findings are consistent with data from the National Student Survey in the UK (Surridge, 2006). With these particular student cohorts, systems were established to monitor the turnaround time and plan marking and a four-week turnaround was achieved. Despite this, some students continued to express negative views about receipt of feedback. Analysis of module evaluation and course committee comments revealed this to be largely related to feedback still not being received in a way that facilitated learning. This seemed to be because scripts were not available for return until after external moderation and the examination board, which could, on occasion, be several months from the conclusion of the module in question; or, because they experienced problems collecting marked scripts as the administration office was usually closed when these postgraduate students attended.

Background

A literature review was undertaken to inform the development of the research proposal and methodology, it also provides a context within which the results and evaluation can be considered. Assessment is the most dominant area that affects learning and meta-analysis of eighty-seven papers has demonstrated assessment feedback is most powerful single influence (Hattie,1987). Effective feedback can also foster deep learning (Higgins et al., 2001). However, Bridge and Appleyard (2005) outline that in respect of assessment and feedback students can have issues especially if living off-campus,

so it is perhaps not surprising that this cohort of postgraduate students (many of whom were living and studying remotely) expressed concerns relating to this area of their learning experience.

Literature also shows feedback is often not read (Hounsell, 1987) or not understood (Lea & Street, 1998; Chanock 2000). Communication failures may be part of the problem with feedback being poorly understood (Higgins et al., 2001), for example the feedback may be generalised and not aid the students' leaning or handwriting may be poor and affect legibility. Feedback needs to be specific to aid learning. Some research has found that students expressed the view that written feedback is given to complete files and to justify the mark or grade awarded (Pitts, 2005). Hence, feedback is not always viewed as enhancing learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) state that low grades or disappointing grades may affect a student's self-efficacy, hence poor grade performance may negatively affect motivation to study. Potter and Lynch (no date) report that even high achieving students can be demoralised by poor feedback.

Juwah et al., (2004) writing for The Higher Education Academy, highlight many of the characteristics of positive tutor feedback. They state that it should clarify the nature of good performance (including the goals, criteria and expected standards and guidance on how struggling students can close the gap between expected standards and current performance); as well as encouraging dialogue and fostering the development of self-assessment and reflection. They also state that it should encourage motivation and self-esteem (Juwah et al., 2004). Gibbs and Simpson (2002) identify many similar characteristics of positive feedback and other studies show that feedback can be viewed positively and valued (Weaver, 2006). However, if students do not read feedback, because it is perceived as being late or not relevant to a current module it is failing in these areas.

A short turnaround time in terms of feedback provision is often cited as being essential for students to learn (Hounsell, 1997). Literature shows the use of one assignment with provision of 'very late in the course' feedback appearing as typical of many modular programmes at conventional Universities (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002: 16), they also state that 'if the feedback is not received fast enough then they will have moved onto new content and feedback is irrelevant to their ongoing studies'. The authors attribute this to resource constraints and acknowledge that staff often work under significant pressure (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002). It is also recognised that a modular structure and semesterisation hampers opportunities to 'feed-forward' (Price & O'Donovan, 2008; Race, no date) as has been an issue on this particular course. I would suggest that if it is received 'late in the course', when the students believe they have moved onto the next module (as is common on the particular Master's course) problems with students not reading feedback are likely to be compounded.

Other research shows feedback needs to be regular (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002). Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2004) state that for feedback to be effective and understood it needs to be internalised by the student, clearly time is required for this and timing has to be appropriate. The Osney Grange Group (no date) advocate that feedback should be a two way process involving the student rather than a single event, meaning it takes place over time. Other current literature shows online feedback can enhance student engagement with feedback (Hepplestone et al., 2009; Denton, 2003). This might be interpreted as the student being better able to act upon the feedback so it affects future learning positively. Thus the literature provides evidence to support the view that a change in the delivery to feedback on this course may well change a student's learning experience for the better, however there was no research specifically on postgraduate cohorts. This research was therefore undertaken to understand more about the postgraduate student experience and views of e-feedback.

Intervention

The aim of the research is to establish if the introduction of electronic feedback to these postgraduate cohorts via the SOLE will improve student views on feedback and enhance learning. The research proposal was amended after formative presentation and formalised, then an ethics checklist was completed. The research was then undertaken in 2011/12 with the participants from four student cohorts on this particular Master's course. These cohorts were selected as the student cohorts had established email groups (Google groups), this facilitated ease of contact. There were sixty students registered at the time the research was undertaken. The majority of the students were female and in the 25-54 age group. Typically only around 10% of students on this course are male. Many of these students are part-time students and do not attend campus frequently, so email messages about the research were sent to the email groups and also to the students' University email addresses. Students were told about the research and given information about how data would be collected anonymously via an electronic questionnaire on Survey Monkey and students were asked to consent and participate by following a link to the Survey Monkey website. No incentives were offered. Those students that did respond did so voluntarily after receiving information about the project. Participants were offered the chance to ask more about the research prior to participation, but none contacted the researcher to ask for additional information.

Data Collection

An electronic survey questionnaire with primarily open-ended questions was utilised to collect in-depth feedback about their learning experience and the proposed

changes. Creswell (2009) recommends the collection and interpretation of qualitative data for in-depth data regarding reactions to change. The questionnaire was drafted and circulated to team members prior to use and course tutor to pilot it, as a result a few minor amendments were then made to clarify wording. This approach was used to check the questions were easily understandable, as an interviewer is not able to explain the questions when a questionnaire is used in contrast to a face to face interview (Kumar, 2011). Leading questions were avoided in favour of open formats in all questions apart from the first question, which was closed using a yes/no format, to ascertain if participants had already received feedback electronically. Six questions were included in an attempt to keep the questionnaire brief and maximise responses. Once the questionnaire was finalised, the student cohorts were emailed via their respective Google groups and University email accounts. Reminder emails were sent to the cohorts during the two subsequent weeks, at weekly intervals to try to encourage participation. After a period of two weeks, qualitative data was collected for analysis.

Findings

Data was analysed qualitatively for thematic content using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), allowing themes to emerge from the data. This approach was selected as no prior research had been undertaken in this area with these student cohorts, so a list of themes was not readily available prior to the research being undertaken. Hence there was no pre-coding of the data. The data was systematically analysed and coded and frequency of coding was calculated. The responses were analysed for key words or sentences, phrases, themes, metaphors (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and categories were assigned as recommended by Dey (1993). The data was analysed manually for the following reasons, a relatively small amount of data was generated (two pages of A4), and this made manual analysis possible. There were also time constraints imposing practical difficulties on accessing new software. Some of the literature supports the view that it is a lengthy process to learn to use new software, indeed Basit (2003) reports it can take many weeks to learn to use software packages to effectively be able to code qualitative data electronically. Software analysis may facilitate easier access of large amounts of qualitative data (as for example may be generated via interview transcripts), but interviews were not used to gather the data in this study so transcription was not necessary. Computer analysis can make it easier to repeat analysis but there is still a need for the researcher to analyse the data. Basit (2003) explains that the researcher still needs to create the categories, segments and codes. As researchers analysing qualitative data need to personally engage with the data, there may be a risk of bias (Tong et al., 2007). The researcher in this study is involved in delivery of the postgraduate programme and the marking of assessments and provision of feedback. However, other staff are involved as well and at the time of the research, electronic feedback had been trialled for some cohorts on three particular modules involving other members of academic staff. The research has been conducted anonymously in an attempt to eliminate any bias, and the data was also analysed systematically in a line-by-line manner.

Responses were received from twenty-eight students. The student number at the time of survey was sixty, so this represents a response from just under half of the students enrolled in the programme. Ten of the responders (37%) had received electronic feedback via the SOLE system via one of the trial modules. Seventeen responders (63 %) had not received electronic feedback via the SOLE system. Analysis of the questionnaire responses identified 22 codes (these are detailed in Table 1 in the Appendix).

The most recurrent theme related to the changes being perceived as ‘helpful’ or ‘a good idea’, this code appeared 15 times. In contrast, code 13 ‘nothing extra or no difference in the change from electronic feedback’ appeared five times, and ‘easy to read’ appeared five times, ‘no need to return copy’ also appeared five times. Code 2 ‘still need comments on script/disadvantage no comments on script’ appeared four times. Please see Figure 1 in the Appendix for an analysis of occurrences of codes.

The 22 codes were further analysed to identify simple category schemes. These were identified as relating to convenience, timing, the student’s processing of feedback, contact with the tutor or about the actual comments given in the feedback. Please see the summary of results below and Figure 2 in the Appendix for an overall summary of category schemes.

Convenience

Key themes and words in the convenience category included the following perceived benefits: ‘save it’, ‘easy to read’ and ‘easy to access’. Responses also included ‘no need to return or copy’, ‘can refer back to it’ and ‘don’t need to go to college to receive it’.

Timing

Key themes or words in the timing category included, ‘more timely’, ‘helpful’, ‘more efficient’ and ‘extra work for markers’.

Student processing

Key themes or words in the student processing category included, ‘take more time’, ‘read at own pace’, ‘thorough’, ‘the same/no difference’, ‘retaining the information’, ‘reliance on SOLE/problem if unavailable’ and ‘more/extra feedback.’

Comments

Key themes or words in the comments category scheme include ‘more concise’, ‘still need comments on script’ and ‘disadvantage if no comments on script’.

Contact

Key themes or words in the contact category section include ‘face to face is still best/still need opportunity to talk through’, ‘impersonal could make students feel more remote’, ‘handwritten feels more personal’ and disadvantage if done less well’.

Discussion

These findings will now be briefly discussed in relation to the evidence. Overall the results of this research demonstrate that electronic feedback has the potential to improve timely delivery of feedback and to allow students more time to review (and re-review) and engage with feedback at their convenience and without travel to a University campus, which is particularly important for these postgraduate students, who were mostly not living on campus. However, some students indicated a preference for handwritten feedback, which was perceived by some as more personal. This preference for non-electronic feedback from some students who participated in this study is consistent with findings from another study (Budge, 2011). In the latter study researchers were surprised by their findings as a preference for handwritten feedback was discovered amongst a group of young technologically capable students and Budge (2011) reports e-feedback was viewed as tolerable as a back-up form of feedback. Higgins et al., (2001) reported on communication issues (i.e. legibility) having potential to affect the way handwritten feedback is utilised. However in this project at the University of Worcester the participating postgraduate students did not directly mention legibility, as a problem with handwritten feedback, instead highlighting the personal nature of handwritten feedback implying the view that e-feedback might be more generalised. The analysis showed comments or annotations on the script in handwritten feedback were seen as very important. In relation to legibility, some students did mention a benefit of e-feedback being the ease of reading typed notes.

These results therefore also highlight the importance of the annotations on the script in e-feedback so it does not appear generalised and regular access to personal tutorial contact with academic staff as part of the overall learning experience. Social constructivist approaches to feedback have been used to improve active student engagement with feedback by other researchers (ASKe, n.d.) and these strategies could offer courses using e-feedback with routes to enhance engagement. This may in turn address potential issues that students may have around the impersonal nature of the medium.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research study successfully collected views on e-feedback from a sample of postgraduate students and obtained data on how the students thought it might impact on their learning experience. The main recommendations are to use e-feedback on all modules within the postgraduate programme and to formalise the offer of feedback tutorials (either face-to-face or on the telephone) to maintain contact with staff whilst utilising social constructivist approaches to develop active engagement with feedback. There is definitely an on-going need to develop student engagement with feedback and to develop formative feedback sessions within modules, building reflective skills of learners encouraging both self and peer assessment and greater self-reflection in learning activities and assessment. Even though the students in this study were all enrolled on the same Master’s degree course, findings are of particular relevance to other postgraduate courses or courses where a high proportion of students live off campus.

References

ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange) (no date) *Adopting a Social Constructivist Approach to Assessment in Three Easy Steps*! Available from: https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/SocialConst.pdf [Accessed 30th April 2015].

Basit, T. N. (2003) Manual or Electronic? The role of coding in qualitative data analysis. *Educational Research.* Vol. 45 (2), pp. 143–154.

Bridge, P. and Appleyard, R. (2005) System Failure: A comparison of electronic and paper-based assignment submission, marking, and feedback. *British Journal of Educational Technology*. Vol. 36 (4), pp. 669–671.

Budge, K. (2011) A Desire for the Personal: Student Perceptions of Electronic Feedback. *International Journal on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Vol. 23 (3), pp. 342–349.

Chanock, K. (2000) Comments on Essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education.* Vol. 5 (1), pp. 95-105.

Creswell J. W. (2009) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Denton, P. (2003) Returning Feedback to Students via Email using Electronic Feedback 9'. *Learning and Teaching in Action* 2 (1). Available from: http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue4/denton.shtml [Accessed 10 January 2011].

Dey, I. (1993) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Gibbs, G., and Simpson, C. (2002) *Does your Assessment Support your Students' Learning?* Centre for Higher Education Practice, Open University. Available from: https://isis.ku.dk/kurser/blob.aspx?feltid=157744 [Accessed 17 July 2015].

Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Hattie, J. A. (1987) Identifying the Salient Facets of a Model of Student Learning: A synthesis of meta-analyses. *International Journal of Educational Research*. Vol. 1 (1), pp. 187-212.

Hepplestone, S., Parkin, H., Holden, G., Irwin, B. and Thorpe, L. (2009) Technology, Feedback, Action!: The impact of learning technology upon students' engagement with their feedback. *Enhancing Learning Through Technology Research Project Report 08/09*. Available from: http://evidencenet.pbworks.com/f/TFA_Final_Report.pdf [Date accessed 9 January 2011].

Higgins, R., Hartley, P. and Skelton, A. (2001) Getting the Message Across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Vol. 6 (2), pp. 269-274.

Hounsell, D. (1997) Contrasting Conceptions of Essay-writing In F. Marton, D., Hounsell and N. Entwistle (eds.) *The Experience of Learning*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

Juwah, C., Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B., Nicol, D., Ross, D. and Smith, B. (2004) *Enhancing Student Learning through Effective Formative Feedback*. Generic Centre, UK: Higher Education Academy.

Kumar, R. (2011). *Research Methodology, a step-by-step guide for beginners. 3rd edition*. London: Sage.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach, *Studies in Higher Education.* Vol. 23 (2), pp. 157-172.

Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994*) Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook. 2nd edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Nicol, D., and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2004) *Rethinking Formative Assessment in HE: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice*. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assessment/ASS051D_SENLEF_model.doc [Date accessed 27 April 2015].

Osney Grange Group (No Date) *Feedback: An Agenda for Change*. Available from: https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/OGG.html [Date accessed 17 July 2015].

Pitts, S. (2005) *'Testing, Testing …' How Do Students Use Written Feedback? Active Learning in Higher Education*. Vol. 6 (3), pp. 218–229.

Potter, A. and Lynch, K. (No Date) *Quality Feedback on Assessment: Apple for the Teacher? How first year student perceptions of assessment feedback affect their engagement with study*. Faculty of Arts & Social Science & Teaching & Research Services University of the Sunshine Coast. Available from: http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/content/pdfs/3e.pdf [Date accessed 2 January 2012].

Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2008) *Feedback – All that effort, but what is the effect?* Paper presented at EARLI/Northumbria Assessment Conference, 27-29 August, Seminaris Seehotel, Potsdam, Germany.
Race, P. (no date) *Making Feedback Work.* Available from: http://phil-race.co.uk/downloads/ [Accessed 17 July 2015].

Rowe, A. D. and Wood L. N. (2008) *What Feedback do Students Want*. Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE). International Education Research Conference.

Surridge, P. (2006) *The National Student Survey, 2005: Summary Report.* Bristol, HEFCE. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2006/rd22_06 [Accessed 14 February 2011].

Tong, A., Sainsbury, P. and Craig, J. (2007) Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*. Vol. 19 (6), pp. 349-357.

Weaver, M. R. (2006) Do Students Value Feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. Vol. 31 (3), pp. 379-394.

Biography

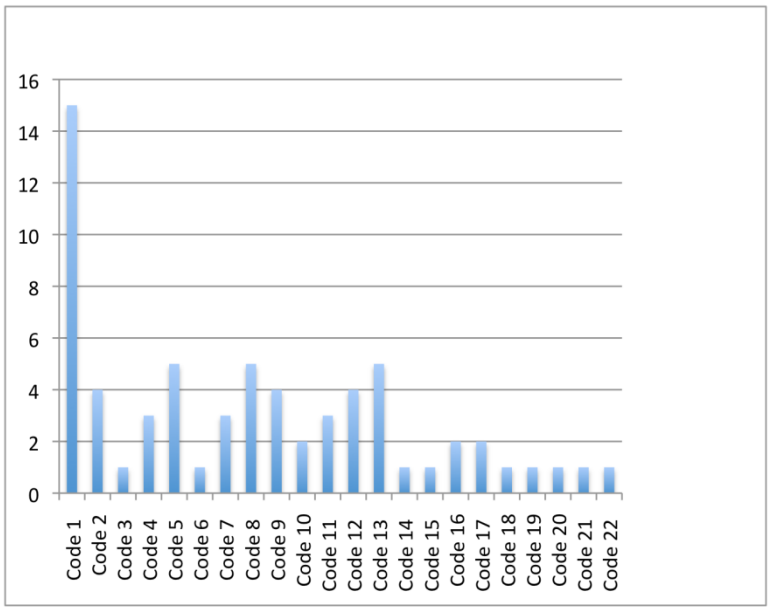
Justine Bold joined the University of Worcester in 2008 and works as a Senior Lecturer within the Health & Applied Social Sciences academic unit in the Institute of Health & Society. She has a broad interest in nutrition, health and well-being; is currently developing a book on recurrent pregnancy loss and infertility; works on nutrition postgraduate programmes and is currently studying for a PhD at the University of South Wales.

Appendix

Table 1: List of Codes Identified

Number of Code	Description of keyword/theme	Colour identification used in tables of raw data and analysis (appendix)
1.	Helpful/good idea	Helpful
2.	Still need comments on script/disadvantage no comments on script	Still need comments on script/ disadvantage no comments on script
3.	Thorough	Thorough
4.	Advantage to read feedback at own pace when convenient	Advantage to read feedback at own pace when convenient
5.	No need to return or copy	No need to return or copy
6.	Refer back to it	Referback to it
7.	Save it	Save it
8.	Easy to read	Easy to read –
9.	Easy to access	Easy to access
10.	Take more time	Take more time
11.	More timely	More timely
12.	Face to face is best/still need opportunity to talk through	Face to face is best/still need opportunity to talk through
13.	Nothing gained/ the same	Nothing gained/the same
14.	More efficient	More efficient
15.	More concise	
16.	Impersonal/could make students feel more remote	Impersonal/Could make students feel more remote
17.	Don't need to go to college to receive	Don't need to go to college to receive
18.	Retaining the information	Retaining the information
19.	More extra feedback	More, extra feedback
20.	Extra work for markers	Extra work for markers
21.	Reliance on SOLE system, problem if it becomes unavailable	Reliance on sole system , problem if becomes unavailable
22.	Handwritten feels very personal, this is a disadvantage when done less well	Handwritten feels very personal, disadvantage when done less well

Figure 1. Data Analysis Frequency of Codes



Key

Code 3	1	Thorough
Code 4	3	Advantage to read feedbackat own pace when convenient
Code 5	5	No need to return or copy
Code 6	1	Refer back to it
Code 7	3	Save it
Code 8	5	Easy to read
Code 9	4	Easy to access
Code 10	2	Take more time
Code 11	3	More timely
Code 12	4	Face to face is still best/still need opportunity to talk through
Code 13	5	Nothing gained/the same
Code 14	1	More efficient
Code 15	1	More concise
Code 16	2	Impersonal/could make students feel more remote
Code 17	2	Don't need togo to college to receive
Code 18	1	Retaining the information
Code 19	1	More eextra feedback
Code 20	1	Extra work for markers
Code 21	1	Reliance on SOLE system, problem if it becomes unavailable
Code 22	1	Handwritten feels very personal, this is a disadvanatge when done less well

Figure 2: Codes – Grouped by Main Category Schemes