

What feedback do students want?

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Abstract

Effective and high quality feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching, and such arguments are well supported by the findings of meta-analyses studies. Despite this, feedback has been largely neglected in research to date, particularly from the students' point of view. For example, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) has only two questions which relate directly to feedback, and these CEQ results show feedback continues to be a common source of student dissatisfaction. An increasing reliance on written correspondence, brought on by increasing student/staff ratios, and a growth in online/distance education, means that for many students, tutor comments on assignments and exams provide the only source of feedback on their performance.

This paper explores student perceptions of feedback. Undergraduate economic and finance students enrolled at Macquarie University were invited to attend focus groups and individual interviews. A questionnaire will be developed from themes identified in the focus groups and will be administered to a large group of undergraduate students in the second part of this study. This paper reports on the focus groups and the themes that emerged from the data.

Introduction

Feedback constitutes a central aspect of learning, yet has been largely neglected in research to date, particularly from the student's point of view. As argued by Ramsden (2003) and others (see Astin, 1991; Black & William, 1998), effective and high quality feedback is a key element of quality teaching. Hounsell (2003, p.67) notes:

It has long been recognised, by researchers and practitioners alike, that feedback plays a decisive role in learning and development, within and beyond formal educational settings. We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve.

Such arguments are well supported by the findings of meta-analyses studies. In a review of 87 meta-analyses, Hattie (1987) found that feedback was the most powerful influencer of student achievement. Black and William (1998) also emphasised the widespread and consistent positive effects of feedback on learning, when compared to other aspects of teaching.

Feedback serves a variety of purposes including the grading of achievements, the development of students' understanding and skills, and in motivating students (Hyland, 2000). Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05) recently proposed a set of conditions under which assessment supports learning, suggesting that these conditions directly influence the volume, focus and quality of studying. Seven out of the ten conditions are related to feedback.

Despite its obvious importance, considerable debate continues over the extent to which students value feedback. One point of view proposes that the adoption of a 'customer service' model by a growing number of universities affects students' expectations of the institution in which they are enrolled (Emanuel & Adams, 2006). Within this context students are seen as "instrumental consumers of education, driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark and as such desire feedback which simply provides them with 'correct answers'" (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002, p.53). Two studies in particular have influenced this viewpoint. According to Wojtas (1998) students are only interested in their grade or mark and pay little attention to feedback. Fritz, Morris and Bjork (2000) added that feedback does not

improve learning even when provided. One explanation for this might be that students do not understand the feedback provided to them, as found by Chanock (2000).

Other findings suggest that the relationship between feedback and student expectations is more complex, with recent studies by Higgins et al. (2002) and Weaver (2006) finding that feedback is valued and that students want helpful comments from their tutors. Higgins et al. (2002) conducted semi-structured interviews with business and humanities students, following up with a questionnaire. Students were asked a series of questions on feedback including, how much time they spent reading assessment feedback, how much notice they took of feedback, and the reasons why they considered feedback important. Higgins et al. (2002, p.53) concluded that students adopt a “conscientious approach,” seeking feedback which assists them to engage with their subject matter in a “deeper way.”

Also using qualitative and quantitative data, Weaver (2006) surveyed business and design students on their understanding and perceptions of feedback, its use and helpfulness. Several themes emerged with students identifying unhelpful comments as those which were too vague, lacked guidance, focused on the negative or were unrelated to the assessment criteria. Weaver (2006) recommended that tutors focus on the messages conveyed in their comments, provide feedback in the context of the assessment criteria and learning outcomes and ensure it is always timely. Chanock (2000) similarly found that students often interpreted comments in a different way from how the tutor had intended them, and that comments needed to be carefully explained.

A decline in face to face contact due to decreasing student/staff ratios, and a growth in online/distance education is thought to have contributed to an increasing reliance on written correspondence (both paper based and electronic) (Higgins et al., 2002). Thus for many students written comments provide the only source of feedback on their performance. It is thought that individual feedback to students in class has also declined with this increase in class sizes, although there is no evidence to support this (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05).

Some literature points to poor individual practice and lecturers not caring, due to time constraints. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate this (or quality of feedback as a predictor of student performance) some points are worth noting. Mutch (2003) found that despite some evidence of individual poor practice, the majority of teachers in his study tried their best to give helpful feedback to their students, often in difficult circumstances. Mutch (2003, p.37) stressed the importance of placing feedback in the context of course design, warning:

It is crucial that feedback is seen as a developmental activity, but to just focus on individual practice might be to miss out on the full range of conditions which make for the effective use of feedback. Above all, this relates to the capacity of students to make sense of and apply feedback in order to further their learning.

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), used throughout Australia to measure graduate perceptions of their university study experience, has two questions which specifically relate to feedback. For degree programs in our faculty at Macquarie University, the CEQ and the local teacher evaluation questionnaires place feedback as the worst performing variable.

Building on previous research, this paper aims to further explore student perceptions of feedback on formative assessment. Specifically the following questions will be addressed (some of these are similar to questions explored by Weaver, 2006); what are student perceptions of feedback, do students value and use feedback, do students understand the feedback they receive, is feedback appropriate to the assessment task and to the students understanding of what they are doing, what do students perceive as helpful vs. unhelpful feedback, how can the value of feedback be increased?

Method

Participants were undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at Macquarie University in the following discipline areas: business, accounting and finance, actuarial studies, economics and statistics. This part of the study involved running a combination of individual interviews and focus groups to explore student perceptions of feedback. Focus group interviews have been found to be a

highly efficient technique for qualitative data collection since the amount and range of data are increased by collecting from several people at the same time (Robson, 2002, p. 284).

The study was advertised in the faculty student centre, in large lectures and in the online learning management system (WebCT). Focus groups were held in weeks nine to eleven of the first semester 2007. Participants consisted of 29 students (nine males and 20 females). Of these, 22 were undergraduate and seven postgraduate, and 18 domestic and 11 international. The focus groups lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Due to problems of scheduling to fit into students' timetables, groups ranged in size from one to five depending on who was available in the timeslots. Altogether there

were nine groups.

The interviewer asked a series of open ended questions. Probes were used if initial questions did not lead to developed responses (the list of questions and probes is available in Appendix A). Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The students had a wide range of backgrounds in terms of age, ethnic and language background and experience, so we believe that the opinions expressed reflect the range of opinions of the student population. Indeed the last two groups did not add anything new to the data. The second part of the study will involve administering a closed-form questionnaire developed from themes identified in these interviews and focus groups.

The grammar in the following quotes has not been corrected; however some artefacts of speech, such as 'um', 'like', 'you know', have been removed for ease of reading. For the longer quotes we have given student characteristics such as gender, undergraduate or postgraduate and domestic or international.

Results

What do you think feedback is?

Responses to this question reveal differences in students' perceptions of the role and purpose of feedback. The responses can be split into two groups: external and internal. An example of the external role is when students talk about feedback giving them information about lecturers' expectations and a justification of why they scored a particular mark. Those who considered the role to be internal talked about feedback helping their own learning, giving them guidance and letting them know whether they had mastered the topic.

Some common responses included:

it shows that you're not just a random number, that someone cares about you, that they read your work and make a comment

a way of the lecturer letting me know what they expect

justification for why you have scored that rank or mark, so you know that the process is fair and marking is objective

information that gives me an idea of what I have to do for the next assignment or exam, or when I should come across that question again. It's useful at some point...it tells me if I know the topics well or not

evaluation of what you did right and what you did wrong, to give you some guidance into what you should do in the future.

Feedback's most important function according to many students, was in its ability to assist in preparation for the final exam, and for applying skills from one area of study to another. Students also emphasised its role as a motivator, and some perceived it as a measure of their worth as a person. By identifying their strengths and weaknesses, it enabled them to strive for higher marks.

What is the difference between good and poor feedback?

For the majority of students, good feedback was when a lecturer provided information in addition to their mark or grade for a particular assessment item. This could be either individual written comments on an assessment task, or a verbal explanation to the group or class, or providing sample answers to each question (particularly those questions where students experienced problems). All students reported that the worst feedback was receiving no feedback at all as can be seen in the following comment;

I guess anything more than a cross would be really good feedback because it shows they [the tutors] are actually reading my answers properly and not just marking the final answer (Undergraduate International student – male).

and in another focus group;

I think poor feedback is where it just goes “good”, “good essay”, and then good feedback is where it goes “good essay because you did a, b, c, d but you could improve” (Undergraduate International Student - female).

Receiving late and minimal feedback during the semester was a common cause of student dissatisfaction. For the majority of students good feedback thus provided “details”, not “just a superficial comment”. Several students made positive comments about feedback that revealed that the lecturer had actually read and considered their work, and which was positive in tone.

Good feedback involved discussion from the lecturer or tutor. In describing feedback received from a unit, the following is a common response indicative of a positive situation:

He told us the highest score, what the average was, and how we did compared to the other classes and then he actually gave us a brief outline of each question. Because there were four questions in the assessment and [he] then told us for this question how you should have answered it and if you didn't have the points you are not going to get the marks. That was really good feedback (Undergraduate International Student – female).

Some students also indicated that they liked it when lecturers provided a breakdown of grades for the whole class, so they could see how well they performed in relation to others.

Is feedback important to you?

All students responded that feedback was important to them, and they all read the feedback provided on assessment items. Feedback was seen as mostly useful in revision for the final exam and for improved learning of the topic;

that's [feedback] the first thing I look at because I want to know what I got wrong and what I can learn so I don't make the same mistake again (Postgraduate International Student – male).

and

I don't like it when lecturers just mark and post [results] on WebCT. That doesn't mean anything, it does not help me know which part of the question I got right or wrong, it doesn't help my learning, it only gives me a mark for that assessment (Undergraduate Domestic Student – female).

Where students perceived the feedback to be irrelevant to future assessments or if the grade received was high, they did not consider the feedback as important, as illustrated by the following comment;

I think it depends on us psychologically. I know if I get a D or HD I normally just flip through the feedback, but if I get a pass, I'll try to figure where I lost my marks. So, in other words, I'm complacent if I did ok. (Postgraduate Domestic Student – male).

Students only indicated that they would not collect an assignment if it was returned late, that is after the semester had ended.

Do you receive enough feedback?

Responses were mixed to the question of whether enough feedback was being provided. Variation was attributed in most cases to the tutor and class size, with some tutors posting the results online without any comments at all. Where feedback was provided, it was generally reported as being relevant, and related to the purpose of the assignment. Several students commented that feedback was more comprehensive in third year and the honours year of their degrees but that little feedback was provided in first and second year. They attributed this to the large class sizes in their early undergraduate years, and to the lecturers not having enough time;

I would prefer them writing more on what I did because I spent quite a lot of time on it and I deserve something back, like more feedback on what I did.

There are too many students. In one tutorial there are at least 20 students

I read it sometimes. If the lecturers leave it in ERIC [the student resource centre] after the semester I don't bother picking it up. Lecturers provide feedback at end of discussion. Some feedback is relevant and others not, it depends on the subject. Sometimes all you get is a mark. Tutors just read the answers to tutorial questions, they don't explain it properly so we don't understand. When we ask they put it back on us to find out. They are not explaining it properly.

Not from lectures as they just teach and it depends on what tutor as some answer your questions and some just come into class and talk about the solutions [i.e. accounting units]. Most feedback received relates to whether the question was answered correctly or not, but does not explain why. Feedback is relevant but I would prefer more information on what I did.

Students commented that most lecturers were generally willing to provide additional feedback by request, either via email or during consultation hours. However, they noted that they (the students) had to be proactive about following this up. They indicated they wanted a more proactive approach from academic staff.

Is the feedback provided in a timely manner?

Most students indicated they were unhappy with the timeliness of feedback provided within the faculty. The majority of students reported that currently assignments were taking on average 3-4 weeks to be returned, and in some cases longer. This was of particular concern when assignments were not returned prior to the final exam. When asked what they thought was a reasonable turnaround time for feedback to be provided following the submission of an assignment, most students indicated a preference of one week for multiple choice and short answer questions and 2-3 weeks for essays and reports, provided this was before the next assignment. Students were also aware of tutor time restrictions in large classes; however, one month was the maximum time given for provision of feedback, and for some respondents, one week was the preferred turn-around time for all assessment items. The main reason given was that after several weeks had passed, the tutor had moved onto other parts of the course, and hence it was not an ideal time to reflect on previous work. Focus group responses of this type included;

You get them [feedback] weeks after and by then you have moved onto other parts of the course and not really thinking, ok let me go back and see why I wrote this answer and what I could have done...what's the point (Undergraduate International Student – female).

and

When you get it [the feedback] ages after you don't care anymore. You have forgotten about it (Postgraduate Domestic Student – female).

What sort of feedback do you prefer?

Responses to preferences for feedback were varied however common themes emerged, with particular preferences evident between domestic and international students. In both groups there was a strong preference for group feedback, where the tutor could address general issues or problems about a particular assessment item (this was particularly so for assessments where there was working out, such as accounting). Students reported that they liked it when tutors went through assignment questions, and provided them with an ideal sample answer. Verbal feedback was also preferred when generic and given to the group as a whole. Written feedback was preferred when provided as specific comments on an individual's assignment. International students appeared to prefer verbal feedback because of the ability to seek clarification. A dilemma for lecturers is that students' preferences are often contradictory, as the following quotes show.

Always [prefer] written comments as verbal are easily forgotten.

Prefer face to face where lecturer looks at assignment and provides specific individual feedback. It is difficult to understand tutors written comments sometimes. [Most international students said this.]

Prefer written feedback, that is specific to my assignment (understand time restrictions for tutors). Suggest to not just giving us the mark and when giving group feedback to use a standard template or standard answer that can be used for comparison. [This is not being done consistently.]

Verbal is better when you are confused or don't understand an assessment because it's easier to communicate and ask questions or clarify. Writing just gives you the answer.

I like written when they put answers up on WebCT...just in case you don't like the teaching style of the tutor. I think it's good to have everything just there on WebCT so that we can learn individually

How can we improve feedback?

Students provided a variety of suggestions to improve feedback the major one being to improve the turnaround time in returning work. Almost all students said this. Another common cry was "don't just give us the mark".

Students suggested that we introduce a feedback policy (or at least guidelines) which would ensure that:

lecturers have to follow a set of standards, that is have a policy on different kinds of assessment tasks.

[there are] more avenues for lodging complaints during the semester because no action is taken unless a lecturer or tutor does something really bad, and even then nothing is done until after the semester is over.

[there is] more communication between lecturers, particularly when setting due dates for assessment tasks [they tend to all be due at the same time].

Provide more clarity with assessment tasks, i.e. purpose of unit, indicate when feedback will be provided on assignments.

Feedback for not only assignments and exams but to all aspects of a unit...this would help with motivation.

Use a wider variety of feedback mediums, such as peer assessment and teacher assessment [as used in the Psychology Department].

One student who suggested that guidelines on the provision of feedback should be provided stated;

Provide more [feedback]...I think the main thing is that feedback I've gotten, when I've gotten it, is good...it's just a matter of making it across the board, that everyone is providing it. I mean, sometimes it can be hard, especially talking about bigger classes. I've been in those situation in bigger classes and you definitely get a lot less feedback...I think there should be some, at least fairly minimum standard that they can provide (Undergraduate Domestic Student – male).

Students did not only consider themselves. They realise that lecturers and tutors have large classes and often made suggestions that would reduce the workload of staff;

They [tutors] should focus on the students who do poorly, who need to have some feedback, rather than students who get good marks. If you get a good mark, you tend not to care what the comments are anyway (Undergraduate Domestic Student – female).

Another common suggestion was to utilise WebCT more;

They [tutors] can use WebCT as a feedback tool. There is group discussion sessions, and many use WebCT for the unit....some students don't have time to go to consultation hours. I was trying to use the consultation hours but I'm studying full-time and working part-time so I don't have much time to attend consultation hours (Undergraduate Domestic Student - male).

Conclusion

The present study has sought to explore student perceptions of feedback, a relatively under researched area. Qualitative results have been presented from focus groups, the themes of which will be used to develop a closed-form questionnaire.

Students reported that they collected their assignments, read the written feedback they received and in most cases used it for future assignments. This supports previous findings by Higgins et al. (2002), Hyland (2000) and Weaver (2006), who also found that students valued feedback. While they considered the grade important, many students expressed a need for additional feedback to enable them to prepare for other assessment tasks. It is interesting to note that some students felt it was respectful of lecturers to provide feedback in return for the hard work they had done, and wanted academics to be held accountable for marking assignments on time. Students felt that providing late feedback was particularly disrespectful, given that they were expected to meet deadlines when submitting an assignment. The value of feedback was highlighted also by several comments indicating that students wanted tutors to consider their feelings and point of view, as can be seen in the following comment by a female undergraduate domestic student;

You want your lecturer or tutor, whoever it is, to actually care about what they teach and what the students think.

The wide variety of responses received when students were asked what they thought feedback was, suggests that many are confused about what to expect from tutors. While some comments reflected the purposes of feedback as identified by Hyland (2000) and Gibbs & Simpson's assessment conditions (2004-05), the overall diversity of responses suggests a breakdown in communication between academics and students. This confusion may also relate to poor feedback ratings in the CEQ. It is anticipated that the development of assessment guidelines and policies will assist in clarifying these expectations, and improve overall communication between students and academics. Encouraging tutors to discuss their expectations may also help prevent students from receiving conflicting advice arising from multiple discourses across disciplines (Higgins et al., 2002). As noted by Careless (2006), a challenge to enhancing feedback is uniting the diverse academic and student perspectives on the feedback process. Careless (2006) proposes the introduction of "assessment dialogues" to reduce negative outcomes such as student dissatisfaction, underachievement or poor retention rates (see also Yorke, 2001). These could be as simple as getting tutors to be more explicit about assessment procedures and more open to student questions.

In line with the findings of Weaver (2006), our students recognised the value of feedback as central to improved learning. Feedback was considered unhelpful when vague, untimely, or when not enough information was provided to make it useful. Students want more engagement from their tutors, and while it is evident that some tutors try to provide helpful feedback, this practice is inconsistent across the faculty, probably because of time constraints due to large class sizes. As one postgraduate student noted, "undergraduate lecturers, they really don't engage too much." The fact that many students commented on "hit or miss" differences in tutor availability is a cause for concern. As noted by Weaver (2006) and Emmanuel and Adams (2006), universities are embracing a customer service model, with students increasingly perceiving themselves as consumers with certain service expectations. However, unlike the pessimistic findings of Fritz et al. (2000) and Wojtas (1998), the students in our faculty seemed to be at least partly motivated to seek feedback which would help them to engage with their subject in a "deep way" (Higgins et al., 2002, p.53).

The diversity of preferences for feedback suggests that a balanced approach would be most useful. There were clear preferences for verbal feedback when generic and provided to the group as a whole. Written feedback was preferred when offered as specific comments addressed to the individual on an assignment or exam. While many students remarked that they would like more opportunities for individual face-to-face feedback with their tutors, they acknowledged this was unlikely to happen because of resource constraints. A mixture of preferences for both individual and group feedback, and generic versus specific were also found, with international students clearly favouring verbal, generic, collective feedback. Given the high number of international enrolments in the faculty, academics would benefit by incorporating a variety of feedback styles in their teaching, particularly in extending the use of the online learning system in providing collective and generic feedback. Further examination of how students receive and respond to feedback, particularly web pages and electronic mail, would be an interesting avenue of research to explore.

The overall message from students was for tutors to "provide more" feedback. Several students commented that if you

have to ask for feedback, it's not feedback, that feedback by definition is volunteered by the lecturer. As noted by Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05), lecturers may need to take special steps to engage students with feedback, for example, by asking them to specify on their assignment what they would like feedback on, providing feedback with no marks so that they have to read the feedback to get an idea of how they are progressing, requiring assignments to be self-assessed/peer-assessed and providing a grade only after self-assessment and tutor feedback has been completed. It is thought that in the absence of marks students read feedback more carefully and use it to guide their learning (Black & William, 1998). This, and other recommendations, warrant further exploration. As noted by Hyland (2000, p.235);

To be effective developmental feedback therefore needs to encompass more than an appropriate explanation or justification of the assessment given. It needs to be perceived as timely and relevant to the student's future studies, focused on valued and attainable objectives, aware of student's own perceptions, and sensitive to the range of responses that various kinds of criticism and advice might prompt...feedback must also assist students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

While it was outside the scope of this paper to consider other issues which may influence the effective provision of feedback, the following findings are worth noting. The language skills and teaching ability of tutors, curriculum design, and the perceived commitment of tutors were also factors which students attributed to affecting the quality of the feedback they were receiving. Students appreciated being given the opportunity say what they thought, commenting that some lecturers left it up to them to seek out feedback, when they believed it was the responsibility of lecturers to provide it. While this may be a deliberate policy by lecturers to teach students self reliance, all these other variables warrant further investigation. It would also be interesting to consider whether preference for feedback from business students differs from preferences of students enrolled in other disciplines such as psychology.

Our study illustrates students' perceptions about the role of feedback. It also gave them an opportunity to reflect on its importance in their learning. From their responses it is clear that academic staff can make improvements to the way feedback is communicated to students and to practical considerations such as the timeliness and type of feedback. It also demonstrates that the quality of the student experience can be improved: even if staff believe that they are giving appropriate feedback, the student perceptions are different.

With resource constraints it may never be possible to find a perfect solution. Nevertheless as noted by Hyland (2000), exploring ways to improve the quality and effectiveness of feedback highlights the importance of developing a much deeper dialogue with students about their learning.

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Appendix A

Question 1. What do you think feedback is?

Question 2. What is the difference between good and poor feedback?

- think about your subjects from last semester. Without mentioning the name of the unit or lecturer, think about the subject that gave you the best feedback, what made it best and why is that form of feedback good/helpful/valuable, in your opinion?
- think about the subject that gave you the worst feedback? What made it the worst and why was this feedback unhelpful/less valuable than that provided in other units?

Question 3. Is feedback important to you?

- do you collect your assignments?
- do you read feedback about your assignments?
- do you use feedback to try and improve your results in future assignments?

Question 4. Do you receive enough feedback from lecturers/tutors?

- what type of feedback do you receive?
- is the feedback relevant?
- is it related to the purpose of the assignment?
- does the lecturer/tutor provide enough information to make it useful?

Question 5. Is feedback provided in a timely manner?

- what do you think is a reasonable turnaround time for feedback to be provided following submission of an assignment?

Question 6. What sort of feedback do you prefer?

- i.e. verbal/written, generic/specific, group/individual?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving feedback within the division?