EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS’ MOTIVATION TO LEARN

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Abstract
This paper reports on a study of written feedback on students’ motivation to learn. The value of feedback as a motivator was explored by asking students and lecturers to complete a questionnaire which was followed by documentary analysis and interviews with a view to improving existing practice.

The study showed that generally students have a positive perception of their written feedback with students in post qualifying courses being more positive in their perception of the feedback. The content of feedback also influenced whether students perceived them as motivators or demotivators. Students who had a positive feedback experience also increased their efforts to learn.

This study has implications for practice. Lecturers should become aware of what motivates students to learn and to capitalise on this strategy and give feedback that is perceived as constructive and to avoid writing negative comments, which is unhelpful to students.

Introduction
Higher education has the potential to provide students with an environment with positive learning experiences. However, to engage in this process of learning, students must be motivated. Chan and Ahern (1999) suggest that when students are intrinsically motivated, they learn more and also have a positive experience. In education the term feedback is used in the context of formative and summative assessments with the main purpose being the provision of guidance on the quality of a student’s work and on their understanding of the subject matter. It is a form of written communication between lecturers and students which can lead to a process of discovery and engagement in critical thinking. Thus, it is presumed that students will learn faster and more efficiently with a clearer sense of direction when provided with feedback that is comprehensible, timely and acted upon (Carless, 2006).

Several research studies and meta-analyses have confirmed that feedback is key to students’ learning (Carless, 2006; Black and William, 1998; Hattie and Jaeger, 1998) and furthermore, there is general agreement within Higher Education that feedback is central in the teaching, learning and assessment of students. Feedback given to students can have multiple purposes such as strengths of the assignment, advice on areas for improvement and the justification of the grade.

Norton (1990) reported that students’ motivation in essay writing is linked directly to feedback quality but did not explore further what constituted quality feedback. However, the quantity and quality of the feedback are significant variables that may influence the students’ perception, motivation and subsequent action to improve their learning. It can be argued that the feedback given to students needs to be carefully considered as positive feedback can improve the student’s confidence and motivation to learn whilst negative feedback can have a devastating effect resulting in loss of confidence (Pitts,
dejection, shame, and disappointment (Trope et al., 2007). Hull and Du Boulay (2009) suggest that negative feedback can influence students’ motivational state and metacognitive processes. Boud (1995) suggests that the assessment process is considered a deeply emotional one and students tend to expect some return on the emotional investment that they make in completing the assignment. The impact of grades can also have a negative impact on the student’s engagement with the feedback. Assignments are also considered to be a personal and individual activity and if feedback is negative it can be threatening to a student’s self perception. Higgins et al., (2002) argue that feedback is generally delivered in academic discourse which the student often does not understand and the academic discourse can be perceived as exerting power. Thus, feedback can be considered as a social process in which discourse, power and emotion impact on how feedback is interpreted.

As facilitators of learning, lecturers engage in various activities which include giving positive and constructive feedback that will motivate learning. In a student centred higher education system, monitoring learning processes and giving feedback can function as a very powerful tool to motivate students to learn (Kwong, 2001).

**Theoretical Framework**

Theories of motivation have evolved over the last few decades starting with the initial work of Frederick Herzberg. He developed the theory of motivation as a result of his studies in industries. He used the term *motivators* to indicate factors which gave positive satisfaction from conditions of the job such as recognition and promotion, and *hygiene factors* which did not give positive satisfaction but their absence caused dissatisfaction such as working conditions. The concept of motivation thus heralded a new approach in understanding what factors satisfied and motivated people and those factors that were considered as hygiene factors. Based on his seminal work, it can be argued that Herzberg was attempting to bring more humanity and caring in the workplace and that his theory was not solely for the purpose of improving organisational performance. Thus, in essence, the application of Herzberg’s theory applied to education could result in a more humanistic approach in higher education. Motivational theory is also useful in allowing teachers to think how to create a learning environment that is motivating for students.

In higher education, student motivation is characterised by long term quality involvement in learning and the commitment to the process of learning. Schunk et al., (2007) have shown that motivated students enjoy higher levels of success and display better self regulatory control with the outcomes influencing future motivation. Providing written feedback that is motivating is challenging for lecturers because all students are different with unique emotional, cognitive, biological and social forces that direct behaviour. Thus for written feedback to become the motivator for learning, it must be unique to the student.

Several factors have been shown to motivate students and these include classroom climate, a sense of belonging, students who feel valued and respected and the involvement of students in tasks that have relevance to their professional practice (Eraut, 2006). Furthermore, the belief that teachers have about teaching and learning and their expectations of students can exert a powerful influence (Raffini, 1993) that can motivate or demotivate students. All situations within a learning environment are not intrinsically motivating- but when lecturers can capitalise on existing intrinsic motivation, there are several potential benefits. Lecturers should consider themselves as active socialising agents capable of stimulating student motivation to learn.
Black & William (1998) have shown that feedback affects students’ motivation to learn. Certain factors have been shown to motivate such as the quality of the feedback when using a criterion bases feedback system, when feedback emphasises learning and when feedback points out strengths and areas for development. Motivation theory emphasises the nature of feedback and learning and defines learning as a process that can be influenced by motivators. Moreover, if a student believes that effort rather than good luck is responsible for their successes, they will be more willing to work hard and persist in the face of difficulties (Svinicki, 1999). Thus praise, positive feedback, giving choices, providing feedback on progress help develop appropriate attributions of what result in successes.

Methodology and Research Aims
The study reported here was carried out between April 2007 and March 2009 in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at De Montfort University (UK). The research aims were:

- To explore how feedback was perceived by students and its effect on their motivation for learning.
- To explore lecturers’ views on written feedback.
- To identify factors in written feedback which were perceived as motivators and demotivators.

Questionnaires, documentary analysis of written feedback sheets and interviews were used to collect data from students and lecturers. Questionnaire design was based on standard practice in educational research (Cohen and Manion, 1994) with a five point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) with additional spaces for qualitative comments.

A cross sectional survey was undertaken as it was not possible to include all the students in the project. In total 168 questionnaires were completed: 138 students on the initial pre-registration qualification programmes from different cohorts of students and 30 students from post qualification degree programmes. A stratified sampling strategy was used to ensure that students had received written feedback from previous assignments. All lecturers in the School of Nursing and Midwifery (n=90) were sent questionnaires and had a response rate of 50% which was sufficient for this study. 20 lecturers were interviewed using a semi structured schedule with the aim of gaining more in depth information on written feedback. All participants were interviewed on site by an independent researcher to allow for free expression of views on the feedback process.

Although the questionnaire and interview strategy employed in this project helped our understanding of lecturers and students perceptions of written assignment feedback, the researchers became aware of the limitations these methods. A prolonged period of field work consisting of analysing actual written feedback enabled the gathering of more evidence about what lecturers actually wrote which prompted more questions about quality of feedback.

Research Findings and Analysis
Students and lecturers in this study were asked about their perception of the current feedback practice. The mean responses for students and lecturers indicate that all groups perceived written feedback positively. Lecturers were more positive in their perception of feedback compared to pre-registration students as shown by the sum of mean scores for each group in Figure 1. The responses for groups 1 (Lecturers) and 3 (post registration) are not significantly different.
Figure 1 Boxplot of Mean responses on Perception of Feedback
(1-Lecturers, 2- pre-registration students, 3- post registration students)

The set of statements in Figure 2 relates to how students perceived the effectiveness of the feedback they had received and their impact on motivation to learn. Many of the items are affective in nature and their positive or negative perceptions are likely to affect the student’s motivation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find feedback useful</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the written assignment feedback</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The written assignment for feedback is fair</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is rewarding</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is as expected</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 Students Perception on Feedback
(Decimal points rounded up/down)

86% of students found feedback to be useful and over half (61%) indicated that they were satisfied with their feedback. 58% indicated that feedback was generally fair with a similar percentage suggesting that feedback is rewarding and half indicated that feedback was as expected. Those students who did not agree with the statements were mostly neutral rather than disagreeing with the statement.

A high percentage of students (76%) indicated that lower marks resulted in increased efforts to improve their performance. 87% of students also indicated that good quality feedback encouraged them to increase their efforts and learning.

Students’ perception of their feedback was correlated with encouragement to learn and increasing efforts to learn as shown in Figure 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encourage</th>
<th>learn</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Rewarding</th>
<th>Expected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.444**</td>
<td>.256**</td>
<td>.227**</td>
<td>.259**</td>
<td>.284**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learn</td>
<td>.444**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.245**</td>
<td>.300**</td>
<td>.364**</td>
<td>.289**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>.256**</td>
<td>.245**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.481**</td>
<td>.390**</td>
<td>.615**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>.227**</td>
<td>.300**</td>
<td>.481**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.643**</td>
<td>.640**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>.259**</td>
<td>.364**</td>
<td>.390**</td>
<td>.643**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.643**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.289**</td>
<td>.615**</td>
<td>.640**</td>
<td>.643**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.269**</td>
<td>.480**</td>
<td>.552**</td>
<td>.575**</td>
<td>.623**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Figure 3** Correlation: Perception statements, encouragement and increasing efforts to learn

The results show varying degrees of correlation between the perception of feedback and their effects on encouragement to learn and increasing their efforts to learn. Feedback that is perceived as useful, have greater student satisfaction, considered fair and as expected, results in encouragement to learn and increased efforts by the students.

Students were also asked to indicate how important the structure and style of feedback was to enable them to benefit from the feedback. Many of the items in Figure 4 indicate that students prefer feedback to be detailed, constructive, contain praise, have clarity, ease of understanding and have explanation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback is detailed</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is detailed</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is applicable to future work</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is constructive</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback contains some praise</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is clear</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is easy to understand</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback should provide explanations</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4** Structure of feedback
(Decimal points rounded up/down)

In considering how feedback could have a positive outcome, both lecturers and students indicated that having feedback during the development of an assignment was the most beneficial.

**Comments from Students**
Students were asked to indicate what they liked and disliked about the feedback that they had received. Their comments were analysed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) and the raw data was coded to identify issues that were pertinent to students. 54% of pre-registration students (n=71) commented on what they liked in their feedback and some of these have been described below.

‘feedback was very clear and had explanations on how to improve mark, what else could have been included, strengths of assignment was also explained’.
‘the last piece of feedback was extremely useful as it praised the strengths of my assignment whilst explaining how I could improve one particular area in detail (referencing). I found this useful as it boosted my confidence whilst enabling to improve for next assignment’.

A further 56% (n= 77) of students made comments on aspects of their feedback that they disliked. One student indicated that ‘some feedback is hypercritical’ with another student commenting that ‘I have never felt feedback I have received has encouraged or supported me for critical analysis for future assignments, which is a shame as done correctly, feedback is important for development’.

A summary of the issues that students liked and disliked about their written feedback has been summarised in Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments for future assignments</td>
<td>Not enough information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Very critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>Brief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructiveness</td>
<td>Not clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive remarks</td>
<td>Minor issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marks</td>
<td>Not consistent across markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualised</td>
<td>No advice for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point weaknesses</td>
<td>Not encouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on module</td>
<td>Too late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No improvement in marks despite following feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5 Comments that students liked and disliked in their feedback

The comments made by students indicate that some lecturers are giving feedback which are positive and negative. In the main, participants confirmed that they liked feedback that was written in a positive and constructive manner. Students preferred their feedback to be individualised, identify weaknesses and how these could improved and general guidance on how future improvements could be made.

Students also indicated aspects of feedback which they disliked. Students did not like written feedback that was too critical, brief, unclear, highlighted minor issues and discouraging. Another aspect that students identified was the lack of consistency among markers. Pitts (2005) suggests that careless negative comments are seen by students as potentially threatening self confidence.

Documentary analysis of written feedback showed that lecturers in general wrote both positive and negative comments and justification for the mark given. However, in some cases, the justification of the marks appeared to be the raison d’être of the feedback. Written feedback must have a purpose beyond giving students a mark for their assignment and this was clearly demonstrated by the lecturers and the students in this project. Feedback should be utilised as a learning tool, form part of the learning process and motivate students to seek further learning rather than seeing the feedback as an end point.

**Discussion**

The main focus of this study has been the exploration of students and lecturers perception of written feedback in Higher Education and to explore whether written feedback motivated learning.
Students and lecturers’ perception of written feedback was explored using the quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis of the data suggests that students perceive their feedback in a positive way although the students in the post qualifying group were more positive. Lecturer’s perception of written feedback was positive. MacLellan (2001) suggests that improvements in learning can only occur when students perceive feedback as enabling learning and not just as a judgement on their level of achievement.

Students recognised the value of feedback in improving their learning but their comments suggest that feedback is not as effective as it should be. Students (87%) indicated that good quality feedback encouraged them to increase their efforts and encouraged them to learn. Students identified feedback as shown in Figure 5, that were perceived as positive or negative. Lecturers should reflect upon their own practice and consider how much of their feedback is positive and constructive. Negative feedback can result in loss of confidence, (Pitts, 2005) disappointment (Trope et al., 2007) and reduction in their motivational state and meta-cognitive processes (Hull and Du Boulay, 2009). Attribution theory provides one explanation that lecturers should give feedback which makes an effort to help students attribute their learning to controllable and unstable construct of effort. With the belief that change is possible, students will engage in the learning process more effectively.

The analysis of written feedback indicated that positive descriptive comments were made which were brief with suggestions for improving the current piece of work. Since students and lecturers agree that feedback is for students to improve their future learning, it can be argued that feedback that is of a general nature has greater potential to motivate future learning. This has been termed ‘feed-forward’ by Carless (2006) which distinguishes between information being provided to improve future task and compared to feedback on completed assignments. Although ‘feed-forward’ is an innovative concept, feedback needs to include both information about the current performances so that students are aware where they have gone wrong and direction for future learning. This is more in line with Hirsch and Gabriel’s (1995) suggestion that students require both types: specific and general feedback.

It is important that students are involved in the feedback process and made explicitly aware how feedback fits in the overall programme of learning and assessment. Students need ongoing support in understanding the nature and purpose of feedback and how they can make use of the feedback to optimise their learning. Learning to use feedback effectively can be integrated in the study skills programme or managed via the personal tutor system. Engaging students with the feedback process should be given some consideration within the modules and the programme. When students enter higher education, the type of feedback they receive will play an important part in shaping their learning. Eraut (2006) suggests that we need to know more about how learning and their very sense of professional identity as a professional care worker is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive.

Lecturers involved in writing feedback should also have the knowledge, skills and confidence to do so. Currently, lecturers are expected to write feedback and their practice is based on what sort of feedback they had received as a student or model their feedback on what their peers are doing. Lecturers reported that 27% had no training and a further 37% had not attended any staff development programmes. Furthermore changing practice involves significant unlearning or deskilling as established routines and patterns of working must be deconstructed and rebuilt in a new context. The effect can be like that of becoming a novice but without the lower level of expectation that goes with that status. This change can be very stressful and requires psychological support as well as practical training. Fuller (1970) suggests that lecturers concern regress during times of change back to doubting
their basic competence, and that it takes time and experience to return to higher level of competence. Thus, development needs to be directed towards those concerns as part of an overall programme.

Offir et al., (2007) argue that students must be given feedback that reflects their achievements not only in terms of their knowledge but also in terms of their efforts and ability. They found that motivational feedback created higher motivation than content feedback only. Thus, if students’ are told that they have the ability to undertake the task and believe in their own coping strategies, they are likely to put more effort in the tasks and challenges.

An infrastructure within each module should be considered for engaging with students during the development of the assignment. The formative feedback should be recorded within the summative assignment form to give this process greater credibility. It is entirely for the curriculum team to decide if any part of the marks is allocated for this purpose.

The first principle of teaching should be to share with students from the outset how the feedback mechanisms function within higher education and how it should be used for developing learning. Students will need ongoing support in understanding the nature of feedback as they take control of their learning. The process of learning to use feedback should be given some priority by the module teams throughout the duration of the module. Students indicated a preference for having informal feedback during the development of their written work and this should be given some consideration when planning modules.

**Limitations**

The study was based on the use of questionnaires and documentary analysis of written feedback. One can assume that students completed the questionnaires in good faith and that their comments reflected what was going on in practice. The cross sectional survey resulted in only a significant sample of students taking part in the research. It is possible that the perception of students is not necessarily representative of the entire student population within the university. However, the findings are relevant and provide useful information on motivating and demotivating factors in written feedback. The study was conducted with students within an educational context and the recommendations are applicable to other higher education settings because of the similarities of assessments and feedback.

**Conclusion**

From these findings, it is clear that students value good quality feedback, which is sufficiently detailed, constructive and instructive, acknowledging, and rewarding learning achievement through praise, clear and explicit and easy to understand can encourage students to increase their efforts to learn.

The overarching assumption was that students are able to understand the feedback process. Students entering higher education may not have been exposed to using feedback as a tool for learning as most of their studies may have culminated in examinations. Therefore, it is vital that students are involved from the start so that they are informed on how the feedback process is an integral part of the learning and assessment process.

Staff development should be considered so that they develop the effective skills of communication alongside their role of teaching as ultimately, it is lecturers’ actions that determine whether students are motivated to learn or not.
References


