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Title: Feedforward: helping students interpret written feedback

Year of publication: 2008

Citation: Hurford, D., Read, A. (2008) 'Feedforward: helping students interpret written feedback' *Assessment perspectives*. Oxford Brookes University Business School: Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe).

Link to published version:

http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/hurford_read.pdf

Link to ASKe Perspectives site:

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Feedforward: helping students interpret written feedback

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"Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners... "(Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p.2): for the Higher Education tutor, written feedback forms an integral part of this. The tutor annotates students' written submissions accompanied by a formal critique, focusing on the assessment criteria and identifying areas of strength and areas for development. Assignments are returned to students and there is an assumption, as evident in Locke and Latham (1990, cited in Alderman, 2004, p. 117), that feedback will necessarily inform future academic work. In our experience, however, students' engagement with such feedback can be limited: subsequent assignments can reflect the same weaknesses. Through discussion with students, it seems that there is a lack of awareness of how feedback from one assignment might be relevant to a different assignment. This is particularly acute where modularisation is a key factor, i.e. where modules stand alone and students are not encouraged to identify cross-modular links. Students may also be unfamiliar with the marker's tacit assumptions and academic register: for example, they may be challenged by the notion of criticality and discount the value of appropriate referencing. Opie argues that MA students should, "never be afraid to follow up on any points that are unclear or confusing" (2004, p.46). However this could be too great a challenge for some less confident students. We would also argue that students may perceive assessment as a process of jumping through hoops without a full understanding of its implications for more holistic learning.

One approach we have explored to challenge students' misconceptions about the purposes of assessment and feedback is to provide generic feedback, sometimes in advance of individual feedback (ASKe, 2008). This focuses on the patterns of strengths and weaknesses across the cohort, providing a depersonalised perspective. Session time is allocated for students to review this generic feedback: by making the range of response explicit, students have the opportunity to identify areas for their own academic development, leading to the possibility of improved marks in subsequent submissions, a process currently referred to as feedforward (ASKe, 2008). However, this notion is based on a number of assumptions: students will be able to accurately interpret the feedback although written in an academic register; they will be able to identify, with some objectivity, their own position in relation to the generic comments; by reading feedback relating to stronger assignments, less confident students will necessarily be able to identify what they need to do in order to write a stronger assignment.

In view of these assumptions we adapted a model based on Voluntary Service Overseas' participatory tool, "The Bridge" (VSO 2005, p.70). The Bridge is a visualisation of where one is now and where one wants to be, and invites the

user to identify potential strategies to scaffold progress across the Bridge. An example of this, relating to student engagement with wider reading, is provided in Figure 1, which shows generic feedback on weaker and stronger assignments to the left and right respectively, with space between for students to enter their own ideas about strategies.

Weaker assignments tended to provide	How could you get from the weaker to the stronger? Identify some effective strategies.			Stronger assignments tended to provide
limited evaluation without clear reference to wider reading				evidence of analysis and reflection with clear reference to wider reading

Fig. 1

We felt that, whilst this model has clear constructivist benefits, it encourages the learner to focus on strategies for improvement without focusing on what the learner perceives will be achieved from engaging in such a strategy. For example, this model might encourage the learner to identify the need for “further tutor support”. Whilst such a response might provide some evidence of learner autonomy, it continues to focus the learner’s thinking on “What do I need?” rather than reflecting on “How will I know that I have made progress and how will I demonstrate this?” We would argue that if learners are encouraged to articulate how they would demonstrate progress in their learning, they would be engaged in a process of identifying their own *success criteria* and, as the Assessment Reform Group states, “Understanding and commitment follows when learners have some part in ... identifying criteria for assessing progress” (2002, page 2).

After thinking about this, we further adapted the Bridge model, putting the emphasis on learners’ thinking about how their own behaviour as learners might change. Taking again the example of learner engagement with wider reading, learners were asked to identify a series of success criteria demonstrating stages in their learning progress: to further personalize this approach, success criteria were to be expressed as “I can” statements. Clearly our expectations of how learners might respond to this model were still couched in *our* assumptions of what it means to be a learner in Higher Education. However, when given the opportunity to engage with this model, learners, working collaboratively, were able to identify their own outcomes using their own language (see Fig.2).

Weaker assignments tended to provide	How will I know that I have made progress and how will I demonstrate this?			Stronger assignments tended to provide
limited evaluation without clear reference to wider reading	I can back up my own viewpoints with relevant readings.	I can read more critically... ask, “Is this viewpoint backed up with evidence?”	I can reflect on my own experience; I can analyse this in the light of reading and other people’s experience.	evidence of analysis and reflection with clear reference to wider reading

Fig.2

We now have the opportunity to further develop this model with a new cohort. We plan to give learners the opportunity to translate tutor feedback into language which is more familiar; time will be allocated within sessions for dialogue between tutors and learners to ascertain whether shared understanding exists. In addition to this, learners will be given the opportunity to critique and develop subheadings for assessment criteria, informed by our institutional criteria, the module learning and assessment objectives and their own prior experience of assessment within the institution. We anticipate that these subheadings might include: use of wider reading, academic writing skills, critical engagement in discussion, and reflection on their own development. However, these are informed by what we currently use; learner perceptions might differ. We plan to use these subheadings as a foundation for learners, in collaboration with tutors, to develop module assessment criteria.

By thinking and acting in a more learner-centred way, and by acknowledging and being seen to acknowledge our own openness to critique, we hope that a more effective engagement with feedback and the assessment process will be fostered.

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