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Getting Feedback to Feed Forward: Incorporating revision into upper-year English papers

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Summary

Faculty and teaching assistants sometimes get the impression that students in upper-year courses believe that they already know how to write essays, and are more concerned with the grade than the written feedback they receive on their papers. Research suggests that students do in fact read and value comments on their written work, and yet it is not uncommon to see students make the same kinds of mistakes throughout an entire academic year with little evidence of development in their writing skills. This workshop uses studies of students' perception of written feedback to suggest new ways of approaching how we respond to student writing and structure writing assignments so that students treat essay writing as a process-driven endeavor.

Keywords

formative feedback, marking, essay, revision, english, assessment

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SUMMARY

Faculty and teaching assistants sometimes get the impression that students in upper-year courses believe that they already know how to write essays, and are more concerned with the grade than the written feedback they receive on their papers. Research suggests that students do in fact read and value comments on their written work, and yet it is not uncommon to see students make the same kinds of mistakes throughout an entire academic year with little evidence of development in their writing skills. This workshop uses studies of students' perception of written feedback to suggest new ways of approaching how we respond to student writing and structure writing assignments so that students treat essay writing as a process-driven endeavor.

Keywords: formative feedback, marking, essay, revision, English, assessment

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this workshop, participants will:
- Understand the gap between the formative assessment methods supported by pedagogical research and those traditionally employed in English department courses
- Become familiar with one potential model for alternative assignment design
- Apply research and guidelines about effective feedback by "practicing" writing evaluative comments on model papers
- Apply research about the importance of revision by suggesting ways that instructors can incorporate alternative assignment structures into their own classrooms

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Freestone, N. (2009). Drafting and acting on feedback supports student learning when writing essay assignments. *Advances in Physiology Education. 33.2,* 98-102. doi: 10.1152/advan.90127.2008

This UK-based study claims that, contrary to many instructors' assumptions, students value feedback and believe it will help them to get better marks in the future. However, students only benefit from feedback when they have the opportunity to apply it. Giving students the opportunity to revise and redraft written work therefore improves students' learning *and* future performance on written assignments. The study also emphasizes the importance of timeliness in delivering feedback and encourages the use of writing workshops and tutorial

sessions in which academic staff and students discuss and agree upon the criteria used for assessment. I use this paper in my lecture on students' perceptions of written feedback to support my claim that students do in fact value and read written feedback, and to support my claim on the importance of revision (and the basic premise of this teaching innovation) that students must use feedback in some way in order to learn from it.

Hillocks, G. Jr. (1982). The interaction of instruction: Teacher comment, and revision in teaching the composing process. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 16.3, 261-278. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170903

This study followed the writing skills development of grade 7 and 8 students in several classes. Some students participated in the study by completing the required writing assignments, while others wrote the assignments and also engaged in pre-writing activities or revised their papers. Within this same group, some students received extensive comments on their work while others received brief comments or no comments at all. The study found that students who received comments improved more than those who did not, and that students who received comments *and* participated in pre-writing or revision activities improved even more than students who only received comments, and concluded that "practice in revising [. . .] can affect writing skills as displayed in subsequent new pieces of writing" (p. 276). Revision helps students to produce better future first drafts. Hillocks also reviews a variety of previous studies, including Buxton's (1958) study of college composition students, which suggests that revision and intensive marking, or a combination of the two, results in significant gains in student performance. The conclusions of this study support the basic assumptions of this innovation: written feedback combined with a revision process is an effective way to help students to develop better writing skills. More specifically, I discuss Hillocks' work in my overview of research to support the importance of revision, since the combined conclusions of the study support the claim that students must use feedback to learn from it.

Higgins, R. and Hartley, P. (2002). The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education, 27.1*, 53-64. doi: 10.1080/03075070120099368

This study focuses on U.K. tutors' written comments on written assignments and argues that, contrary to faculty assumptions, students care about grades but are also "*motivated intrinsically and seek feedback which will help them to engage with their subject in a 'deep' way*" (p. 53). The study revealed that 97% of students claim to "read" feedback, and 82% claim to "pay close attention" to feedback (p. 57), but argues that students rarely *use* this feedback in constructive ways. Higgins and Hartley argue that students do not use feedback in meaningful ways because they are unable to "fully comprehend the meaning of assessment feedback" and the academic discourse in which it is often based (p. 56). They suggest including "some element of peer assessment" to help students become familiar with the language of

assessment (p. 62), and, based on students' understanding and perception of feedback, argue that, in order to be successful feedback needs to :

- be timely
- focus on generic skills that students can work on in another unit
- be specific and informative enough to be of formative use
- be motivational as well as critical
- be personal and tailored to the individual student
- be legible

This study debunks the myth that students do not read or do not care about feedback, and supports all three parts of my lecture on students' perceptions of written feedback: that students (1) value and read written feedback, (2) often misunderstand or do not understand written feedback, and (3) see feedback as an issue of fairness—they deserve feedback because they completed the assignment. I also incorporate the characteristics of good feedback that Higgins and Hartley outline into my lecture and discussion of the principles of effective feedback.

Holmes, K. and Papageorgiou, G. (2009). Good, bad and insufficient: Students' expectations, perceptions and uses of feedback. *Journal of Hospitality,Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education, 8.1*, 85-96.

In addition to collecting qualitative information from students about their perceptions of feedback, Holmes and Papageorgiou analyze the results of several primary studies. Based on the synthesized results of these studies, the authors outline three conditions for effective feedback:

- "students need to understand the standards required"
- students "need to compare their work with these standards"
- students "need to take action to close the gap" (n.p.)

I incorporate a discussion of these conditions into my lecture on the principles of effective feedback. The third condition, taking action to close the gap between students' work and the required standard, will support my suggestion to incorporate a formal revision process into writing assignments. The authors suggest a few ways that feedback can "feed forward, encouraging further learning," including: five-minute in-person dialogues between instructor and student to ensure that the student understands the feedback and to give him/her a chance to ask questions; and making revising submitted work part of the learning process. I have integrated both suggestions into the Alternative Assignment Models Handout (Appendix A), in which students are required to both participate in an in-person revision consultation and submit a revised version of the research essay.

Charnock, Kate (2000). Comments on essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education, 5.1*, 95-105. doi: 10.1080/135625100114984

This study reveals a possible explanation for students' failure to use feedback in productive ways on future writing assignments: they don't understand their instructors' comments. When asked to explain a common marking comment, Charnock found that "*[a]lmost half of the students who responded did not interpret this comment in the way their tutors intended it* (p. 95)." Charnock highlights the importance of using concrete rather than theoretical explanations alone because words such as "analysis" have various, incompatible meanings in the different disciplines a student may be studying. I incorporate Charnock's findings into my lecture on students' perceptions of written feedback to support my claim that students often misunderstand or do not understand written feedback. The results of Charnock's study also provide a justification for my inclusion of an in-person revision consultation in my Alternative Assignment Models Handout (Appendix A); it allows both student and instructor the opportunity to confirm that they understand terms such as "analyze" in the same way, and to identify *mis*understandings in the interpretation of written feedback on the part of students who believe that they understand an instructor's comments.

Higgins, R., Hartley, P. and Skelton, A. (2001). Getting the message across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education, 6.2*, 269-274. doi: 10.1080/13562510120045230

This paper comes to similar conclusions to those made in Charnock (2000) and Higgins and Hartley's (2002) papers: that students do little with instructors' comments and may not understand them. This paper, however, focuses on a previously unexplored aspect of assessment feedback: the "*issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships*" that are a part of the assessment process as a form of communication (p. 269). In order to overcome some of the issues of power involved in the feedback process -- for example: the tutor's "dual role" as "authority" and assistant in the learning process (p. 273), and students' "emotional investment" (p. 272) in assignments and their expectations regarding feedback that result -- the authors suggest a "dialogical and ongoing" approach to feedback that focuses on "discussion, clarification and negotiation" in a manner the "feed[s] forward" while work is being produced rather than feeding back (i.e. giving terminal feedback) after an assignment has been completed (p. 274). Higgins, Hartley and Skelton's suggestions inform the structure of my Alternative Assignment Models Handout (Appendix A). In this assignment model, students submit a graded research proposal, giving the instructor an opportunity to conduct formative assessment, and students the opportunity to receive comments and suggestions that will feed forward into their formal research essay. Higgins *et al.*'s focus on "discussion, clarification and negotiation" also provides further support for an assignment model that includes an in-person consultation, a format that allows more dialogic communication than written comments do.

Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2004). Rethinking formative assessment in HE: A theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from

http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/assessment/web0015_reth inking_formative_assessment_in_he.pdf

The authors synthesize the findings of previous research in order to develop a list of the characteristics of effective feedback and offer strategies that "increase the quality of feedback," the most innovative of which focus prioritizing and limiting feedback so as not to overwhelm students (n.p.). These strategies, and the authors' suggestion to aim to offer, on average, only three comments per assignment, will likely come as a (welcome) surprise to English faculty and graduate students. Their strategies are:

- "making sure that feedback is provided in relation to pre-defined criteria but paying particular attention to the number of criteria
- providing feedback soon after a submission;
- providing corrective advice not just information on strengths and weaknesses;
- limiting the amount of feedback so that it is used;
- prioritizing areas for improvement."
-

I incorporate these strategies into my lecture on the principles of effective feedback and, in my lecture on strategies for time management, emphasize the fact that limiting feedback to a reasonable amount is not only less time-consuming for instructors, it is also more effective in ensuring that students will make use of instructors' comments. The paper argues for the importance of engaging students in the development of self-assessment skills so that they do not become dependent on an external authority (the instructor). With this emphasis on autonomy and discouraging dependence in mind, in my Alternative Assignment Models Handout (Appendix A) I have required that students develop an informal revision plan on their own to bring with them to their one-on-one revision consultation. The authors also suggest using exemplars that help in "clarifying goals and standards." My Alternative Assignment Models Handout functions as an exemplar for participants in this teaching innovation seminar. The handout itself outlines a series of assignments which culminates in the potential publication of students' research essays in an online journal designed for the course. These published essays will serve as examples of successful assignments for future students.

Maclellan, Effie (2001). Assessment for learning: The differing perceptions of tutors and students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *26.4*, 307-318. doi: 10.1080/0260293012006346 6

This study reveals a "*significant difference of perception*" between students and instructors about the role of feedback (p. 307). While instructors in the study claimed to be committed to "*the formative purposes of assessment,*" students saw assessment as a means of judging their achievement rather than helping them to learn (p. 307). As a result of these findings, the author argues that high quality information about the quality of a student's work does not necessarily result in

improved work on its own, and that "assessment tasks should reflect the ways in which knowledge and skills are used in real world contexts" (p. 308). Only by involving learners in the assessment process does it "have a formative influence" (p. 316). The series of assignments that build upon one another in my Alternative Assignment Models Handout (Appendix A) are designed to reflect this emphasis on a real-world, process-driven approach to drafting, revision, and potential publication that students might encounter in careers in business, government or academia. The connections between these individual assignments will also make the formative aim of feedback clearer to students by encouraging them to alter their approach to the next assignment based on the feedback that they receive.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Duration	Subject	Activity	Purpose
5 minutes	Introductions	Have participants introduce themselves and indicate what they hope to learn about assessing written assignments	Establishes that this is not a conventional "sit and listen" style colloquium, and that participants are expected to contribute to the discussion.
5 minutes	Workshop Outline	Introduce the topics on the agenda and the order in which they will be discussed	To keep participants on topic by reassuring them that other issues and questions will be addressed at some point
5 minutes	Beliefs About Written Feedback	Ask the question: What are instructors' beliefs about comments on essays? What are students' beliefs?	Voicing assumptions at the beginning of the workshop will help participants to see the gap between common beliefs and practices and the evidence and teaching techniques supported by research
10 minutes	Students' Perceptions of Written Feedback	Lecture: Overview of Research: *Students value and read written feedback *Students often misunderstand or don't understand written feedback *Students see feedback as an issue of	This research provides the scaffolding for later discussions about what instructors can do to support student learning; it suggests that the issue is not merely one of students not paying attention to or incorporating written feedback

		fairness	
15 minutes	Principles of Effective Feedback	Informal brainstorm session with all participants Lecture: Overview of Research *Principles outlined in Nicol and McFarlane-Dick; Holmes and Papageorgiou; and Jackson School Writing Center document (Appendix B)	Brainstorming first makes it clear that participants' previous experiences are valued in this workshop, and helps the workshop leader to assess what participants already know and believe about effective feedback
15 minutes	Applying the Principles of Effective Feedback	Participants will form groups, and each group will offer written feedback on a different "student" essay. They will present what they agree are the most effective comments to another group, which will discuss the comments' strengths and weaknesses	This activity allows room for participants to use their expertise to teach and learn from each other. A hands-on activity will help participants to internalize the principles of effective feedback, as will the practice of giving feedback on others' feedback.
10 minutes	The Importance of Revision	Lecture: Overview of Research *Students must use feedback in some way in order to learn from it *Arguments for adopting a "real world," process-driven approach to writing	To support my suggestions for alternative assignment models and suggest (again) that there are strategies instructors can adopt do to increase the chance of their feedback having the desired result
10 minutes	Alternative Assignment Models	Review handout for a hypothetical assignment that incorporates revision and formative	The research highlights the necessity of exemplars for students (hence the inclusion of an online publication component to the model

		assessment (Appendix A)	assignment: to emphasize a real-world, process-driven approach, and to create exemplars for future classes). This handout gives participants tangible examples of how they might modify assignments to incorporate the principles discussed in the workshop without radically overhauling their teaching practice
10 minutes	Strategies for Time Management	Lecture: *Treating each part of the essay process as an assignment in order to meet course requirements *Overview of "more is more" myths in Jackson School "Responding to Student Writing" document (Appendix B) *Overview of suggestions in "CTE teaching Tips – Responding to Writing Assignments: Managing the Paper Load" Informal brainstorm session with all	To address fears that this approach will involve spending more time grading, and to emphasize that marking more densely and giving longer comments is not necessarily more effective. Experienced instructors have developed their own techniques re: managing grading, and should have the opportunity to share them

5 minutes	Workshop Assessment and Application	Minute Paper: Participants will respond to the prompt: How might you incorporate what you have learned today into your own class?	To assess what participants have learned and to encourage them to think about new ways to apply this knowledge
		participants	

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

Participants in the workshop will likely be most familiar and comfortable with a transmission method of teaching. I have therefore tried to incorporate conventional lecturing when it seems appropriate; it is the most efficient way of reviewing the research upon which this teaching innovation is based. In order to demonstrate the benefit of applying new knowledge in order to absorb it (as we expect students to do with the feedback we give them), I have tried to incorporate active learning strategies in which participants do the work of "practicing" offering feedback. I also want to give instructors with teaching experience the opportunity to share their insights, tips, and concerns about this innovation, and have therefore built a significant amount of informal discussion into the workshop.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Alternative Assignment Models Handout

Appendix B: "Responding to Student Writing" Handout
see:
http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/Handouts/ResspondingStudentWriting.pdf

Appendix C: "Evaluating and Responding to Student Writing and Speaking" Handout
See: http://www.sas.upenn.edu/ctl/newfaculty/documents/FH_ch7evaluating.pdf

Appendix A: Alternative Assignment Models Handout

Research Paper and Related Assignments:

Although you will only write one research paper for this class, you will complete a number of smaller assignments and tasks during the process of preparing this paper. In the academic world, in business, and in non-profit organizations, the preparation of a publishable document does not consist of a single step; it often involves consultation with peers, supervisors, and significant revision. This series of assignments is intended to guide you through this process and help you to manage your time so that, rather than producing and handing in a single draft of your paper, you consider your topic throughout the term and, by the end of the course, have produced a polished, publishable piece of work. Papers that meet this standard will published as part of the online journal created for this course.

This is an overview of what the assignments will be and how they fit together. Separate guidelines for each individual assignment will be provided.

Paper Proposal: Your paper proposal will explain the topic you have developed, indicate your working thesis, and outline your tentative main arguments. You should include an annotated bibliography of at least four sources that briefly summarizes each source and explains how you will use each source in the construction of your own argument.

Length: 300 words plus annotated bibliography

Value out of total research paper assignment: 10%

Research Paper: You will submit a polished, well-organized paper on a topic of your choosing, using evidence from the literary texts and secondary sources to support your claims. You will cite at least six sources, using MLA format. Although you will be asked to revise your work taking the feedback you receive into consideration, you should *not* submit a rough draft. This paper will be graded as if it were a final draft.

Length: 10 pages

Value out of total research paper assignment: 65%

Revision Consultation: After you have received comments and a grade on your paper, you will meet with the instructor for a short, in-person conference. This will provide you with the opportunity to ask questions about the feedback you have received and seek guidance on the revisions you intend to make. You should come to this meeting prepared with a tentative revision plan.

Value out of total research paper assignment: 5% (based on preparedness for consultation)

Revised Draft: After your in-person consultation, you will revise and resubmit the paper, along with the original paper and a brief (250 words max.) justification of your revision in which you explain what changes you have made and why. Excellent papers will be chosen for publication in an online journal created for this course, and used as models for next year's class.

Value out of total research paper assignment: 20%

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