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Feedback First - does it really work for International Students?

Lessons learned from the student
and lecturer perspective

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Our backgrounds

- Academic Skills International (Ask)
- The role of ASk within Newcastle Business School
- Accounting, previously subject driven classes
- The role of the NX315 module (30 credits)
- Joint interest in moving towards embedding academic literacy into core modules

The Professional Development Project

- Level 6 core module
- Part A: Who am I as a Learner?
- Part B: Literature Review
- Mainly international students
- Direct entry on top-up degrees
- Large cohort and large teaching team
- Regular contact in learning sets

Our previous research

- Students have relatively little experience of independent research and extended writing
- Students leave Part B until semester 2, and have difficulty developing research objectives
- More generally, students don't receive any feedback until semester 2
- If this is negative, it can have a significant impact on their grades and motivation

Theoretical framework

- Black and Wiliam (2000) take a constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner,1986;1990) seeing students not as receptacles for transmitted information, but active makers and mediators of meaning within particular learning contexts.
- This is supported by Biggs (1999) who argues that meaning is constructed through learning activities. Curricula, assessment procedures and teaching methods must be aligned so that learning outcomes relate to higher order cognitive thinking. Formative feedback is an essential part of this process; it provides essential information to both student and tutor... it checks student's progress, and provides a means by which they can learn.

(adapted from Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002)

Rationale for the FFF intervention

- To reduce the risk they perceive when they have their first semester assignments all at once: to use a common analogy, when all their eggs are placed in one basket.

To benefit from feedback

- *The learner has to:*
 - **possess** a concept of the standard (or goal, or relevance level) being aimed for
 - **compare** the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and
 - **engage** in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap

Sadler (1989:121)

Objectives:

- To improve the quality of Part B of the Professional project
- For teachers, to identify where earlier academic skills support is required.
- To promote earlier transfer of academic skills to other modules.
- To increase students' confidence

Timeline

- Week 8 hand in 600-800 word proposal
- Week 9-10, tutors give feedback via matrix
- A dialogue is held with students during workshop time to discuss the feedback and how the work can be improved
- Gibbs reflective cycle (1988) is used to assess students' understanding of the feedback and how it is acted upon
- Questionnaire to establish actions taken

FFF matrix - extract

Class	Knowledge and understanding	Theory and practice recognition	Use of resources and reference	Presentation, structure and language
Lower Second (50-59)	Sound comprehension of topic. Awareness of concepts and critical appreciation are apparent, but the ability to conceptualise, and/or apply theory is slightly limited.	Sound evidence of critical thinking as applied to theory /practice links.	Sound use of a range of academic resources, although some may be less relevant. Few referencing errors	Although it may be patchy in places, on the whole the structure and flow of work is appropriate. Some grammatical and spelling errors but do not adversely affect the meaning of the work. Adequate use of vocabulary and style.

Criticisms of earlier studies - use of grades?

- “Moreover, evidence from several studies that investigated the effect of differentiated feedback on learning suggests that using grades to improve learning is simply not effective.”

Lipnevich &
Smith(2009:349)
- It depends on how feedback is given: praising effort and strategic behaviours and focussing on learning goals can increase motivation. (Butler, 1988)
- Offering feedback on draft submissions is suggested by
- Nichol and MacFarlane Dick,

Findings from students perspective

- Responses for the students' **initial feelings (on the day) indicated most were happy:**
 - *“...upset and nervous...”*
 - *“...shocked my proposal was evaluated so low...”*
 - *“...quite good but not as good as expectations...”*
 - *“...glad, higher than expected...earlier worried...now relieved...”*

Findings from students perspective..

- Responses for the students' **evaluation after 2-3 days suggest that the feedback was helpful:**
- *“It was good... to remind me the mistakes in reference. I cannot correct myself without... feedback”*
- *“I need to improve my analysis deeper as well as my structure.”*
- *“It’s good in terms of point out the range of that my work is in and where to improve for higher marks.”*

Findings from students perspective...

- Responses for the students' **analysis beyond 2-3 days** :
 - *“I should enrich the theoretical framework.”*
 - *“What I put into, what I can get out”*
 - *“I have good referencing but it is not enough. I should get more journals related to topic.”*
 - *“As an overseas student, pay attention to the grammar.”*
 - *“I’ve learnt to use sound literature in order to support my arguments.”*

Findings from students perspective....

- Responses for the students' **actions beyond 2-3 days** :
- *“Finding more journals to support...my analysis.”*
- *...reference my work correctly and better...”*
- *“...practice in grammar and spelling...improve my reading and writing skill.”*
- *“...put more effort to research and evaluate the theories and models to find the best and most suitable.”*

Findings

The majority felt that ASk had prepared them well or very well for the proposal. But, most of the feedback focussed on developing academic skills rather than subject knowledge (see wordles)

- *Use of resources and references*
- *Presentation, structure and language*
- This highlights the importance of embedding ASk within this module.
- What was the average grade??

Findings on written & verbal comments

- written comments
 - 19 (38%) useful, 16 (32%), v.useful, 8(16%)
extremely useful
- verbal comments
 - 12 (24%) useful, 22 (44%), v.useful, 8(16%)
extremely useful
 - Confirms research suggesting international students prefer stronger relationship with the tutor

Conclusion: Does it work?

- According to Gibbs and Simpson's 10 conditions under which assessment supports learning:
- Yes: Our feedback is timely, appropriate to the assignment, appropriate to student conceptions of the task (and of learning)
- It is received and attended to, and (is likely to have been) acted upon.
- It provided useful information to students and teachers.

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