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Citation: McDowell, Liz (2006) How feedback works for some of the people some of the time. In: Challenging Perspectives on Assessment, 2006, Open University.

URL:

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START

Hello, I'm Liz McDowell, and I work at Northumbria University in Newcastle. And I'm going to talk today about tutor feedback on assignments. It's something that's been going on in universities for many years, and it occupies a lot of time and effort, but it isn't working, or at least not all the time and not as well as it could. What I'm going to suggest is that students have a very personal response to feedback on their assessed work, and that this is something we need to pay attention to.

When students submit written assignments as part of their course work they expect them to be returned with a mark and some comments. One of the most common requests from students is for more, better, speedier feedback. And lecturers think that giving individual comment is important as well. Feedback is supposed to help students learn. It tells them, in a student phrase that I often hear, where they've gone wrong. But hopefully it does more than that, and tells them things they have done well, things they should work on, and gives them some insight into how their work is judged – why is it that they got 59 or 68 or 42?

Now there are a lot of recommendations about feedback, and here are some of them. Feedback should be prompt. It should be written in a way that students can understand it. It should be precise. It should include some positive comments. It should be linked to the assessment criteria. It should be forward looking, to suggest what the student might need to do. It should explain the mark, and maybe what the student needs to do to get a higher mark. Now these are all good things, and departments are trying to set up systems so that these can happen, procedures to get assignments back quickly, check lists to ensure a link to assessment criteria, and so on. But even when these kind of processes work, it's not enough.

We need to be aware that giving and receiving feedback is not at all a simple activity. For students, receiving feedback goes to the heart, and I'm not using that phrase lightly. Feedback impinges on the emotions, identities, feelings of self-worth of our students. And I know about it from my own first hand research with undergraduate students, and from the many hours I've spent talking to them I can assure you that responses to feedback are often heart felt. The students are a very varied group of people, they don't all respond in the same way. So a comment that to one student is a devastating blow that it's going to take them months to recover from, to another student that's a

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really good point and suggestion that they are going to follow up on, and they're quite pleased to have received it.

So what's the lecturer to do if students are all different? Well fortunately, I can tell you about some typical responses to feedback which might help you to be more aware of what individual students might need. And I can also suggest some important points about writing feedback comment that will be helpful most of the time.

Now my research looked at how students approached academic assignments in two contrasting subjects, biological sciences and social science. And it's the whole process of learning, and doing assignments, that helps us make sense of how students respond to feedback. And my research builds on a large body of other research on student learning, and it enabled me to identify four main approaches to assignments and feedback. So I'm going to tell you about four students who illustrate these four approaches, Gordon, Carla, Martin and Pia.

Now when Gordon gets an assignment he immediately starts gathering as much information as he can about the subject. He enjoys finding out, he enjoys reading, but he has a hard time starting writing and presenting the assignment. He worries that it won't be good enough, even though he usually gets good grades, he's never sure actually what lecturers are really after. Now to Gordon, feedback is a judgement, he's never sure that he's done OK, and feedback appears very threatening to him.

Now if we think about Carla. When Carla starts an assignment she thinks about what she already knows, what she's interested in, and how she can link this assignment into that. So Carla starts by making connections. Then she starts writing straight away, with an outline, and then she builds up the assignment as she goes along, following up interesting points, things that are not clear. She says it's like a treasure hunt. And she likes to talk to her friends about it, and sometimes that gives her some really useful ideas. So she's making connections there as well. And when Carla finishes her assignment she's pretty proud of it, because it's saying what she wants it to say, and she hopes that the lecturer will find it interesting. Now for Carla, feedback is about learning, it's for learning, it helps her to develop, and it's a response to her own ideas.

So don't all students start off thinking about the topic of the assignment, and set about trying to learn more about it, like Gordon and Carla in their different ways? Well Martin doesn't.

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Martin looks first at what he's got to do – the word length, how many references might be needed, how many examples, will just one be enough? Martin hopes that there is a reading list so that he can go straight to it, get enough references to show that he's done some work, decide how he's going to set out his introduction, and then just write the assignment. What's important for him is to get the assignment out of the way. We can see why Martin might be called a minimalist. For him, feedback is a checkpoint, enabling him to check that he's done enough - he might have to start putting a bit more effort in, or he might have got away with it.

Now Pia, another student, might seem a little bit like Martin, she's also concerned to know what she has to do, but she looks at different things – what kind of assignment title is this, is it asking for compare and contrast, is it asking for explanation, is it the kind of assignment that I should narrow down to focus on a specific example or put forward a particular argument? Pia plans her work very carefully, she hunts for relevant resources, she writes, she re-writes, she checks that she's meeting the assignment criteria, she fills gaps. And when she hands her assignment in she's satisfied with a job well done, and hopes for a good mark. Now Pia is fairly confident, but whether she's done brilliantly or not, she's eager to see feedback. For her, feedback is guidance so she can improve the next time.

Now let's look in a bit more detail at the different experiences of feedback. What does feedback really mean to these different types of students, and how do they feel about it?

Well feedback tells Gordon, not only whether he's got it right, which is something he is anxious to know, but if he's up to scratch, is he a person who is really capable of doing OK at university? Every mark and piece of feedback is quite threatening to him, because it might suggest he isn't capable. His marks are OK this time, but who knows about next time? Is it any wonder he might not use feedback effectively, or even be unwilling to look at it?

Now Carla likes to get feedback, especially if the tutor has acknowledged some of Carla's own ideas, suggested how she might develop them further, or mentioned new angles that Carla hadn't thought of. But really Carla likes to get feedback as she's thinking about her assignment, talking to her friends or to the lecturer, not so much after it's been handed in. But all this feedback reinforces for her the significance of her academic work through this connection with other people. And if the tutor just

makes some generic comments, and doesn't seem to have engaged with what Carla has written, well Carla can't really see the point of it.

Martin finds feedback useful so he can manage his work. Mainly he just looks at the mark though. It's always a relief if he's done OK. He doesn't worry too much about what's said about his academic work, he's got more important things to think about.

Pia, at the bottom there, is an avid consumer of feedback. She wants to do as well as she can, and she considers any advice carefully. If she's not sure about anything, she'll try to go and see the lecturer. Usually she does well, and so she feels confident. But on the odd occasion when she doesn't get the marks that she expects, it just makes her determined to find out why and make sure she doesn't make the same mistakes again. She keeps on developing, and her confidence grows.

Now it might not seem obvious how we can give all of these different students the kinds of feedback that they seem to want – and is that what they need? But if we accept how personal and heartfelt the experience of receiving feedback can be, what can we do? Well there are some golden rules emerging which we can add to the basic conditions for effective feedback that I talked about earlier. Yes of course, it should be received in good time, it should include positive and negative, and that sort of thing, but what about these additional suggestions? I suggest the following three golden rules:

In your comments on student assignments, try to praise the work in specific ways, not just 'good effort', or 'this demonstrates that you have a good understanding of'. Gordon doesn't need to be told that he's capable, we might think it will boost his self-confidence, but research shows this is not the case. It will only have a short-term positive effect, and leave Gordon back in a state of anxiety when the next assignment comes along. We need to point out to Gordon the good strategies and approaches he's already using, and suggest how he could develop them further, maybe challenge himself a bit more, because Gordon does nothing if not play safe. And the focus on strategies and approaches, challenges and development, is going to help other students too, and maybe even Martin if he reads the comments.

Secondly I suggest that we should think about commenting in our responses to student work, as a subject expert, to the ideas expressed in the assignment, and engaging in some dialogue about them – 'I wonder if this could also apply to' – 'it was a good

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idea of yours to link this and this'. Now my suggestion about engaging with the content of the assignment is a little bit controversial, because we're often advised to concentrate on the generic, the transferable points, rather than engaging with the content. But engagement with content is just what Carla's looking for. And it's also what Gordon and Pia need to hear, even though they're not looking for it. Gordon, because he lacks confidence in what he's saying, he just tends to re-organise and re-present what he's read. And Pia, because she doesn't think that what she says has any relevance at all, it's only how you say things and how you put your assignment together that matters, following the right formula to get a good grade. And if we think about it, don't we sometimes encourage that when we tell students, with the best intentions, "Oh it doesn't really matter what you argue, you can't really get it wrong as long as you make a good case." But that can make some students think it doesn't matter at all what they say, just how they say it.

And finally I think we could be using feedback to explain what I've called here the rules and conventions of academic writing. Pia is eager to know about this, and although she might be doing OK there is a danger that she could become too rigid and formulaic in what she does, and she might not be sufficiently aware of the rules change moving to a different subject area within the course, or taking on a new kind of assignment such as a dissertation. So she does need to know. Gordon needs to know too, but he probably won't notice some of this generic advice unless it's written large, and referenced to specific examples rooted in the content of his assignment. Carla needs to know too, though she might not think so. The danger with the Carlas amongst our students is that they see academic norms and conventions as rather arbitrary irrelevant hindrances. Carla needs to know why, for example, it's important to use evidence from earlier research, why she should relate her ideas to those of previous authors, and to buy into that kind of way of doing things.

Now if we follow these golden rules, Gordon might become a more confident and adventurous student in his academic work, and get a better return on his conscientious efforts. Carla might continue to enjoy learning, rather than rejecting the academic approach. Pia may get engaged in the subject she's studying to a greater extent, rather than focusing solely on the marks she's accumulating. And Martin, well Martin, maybe you can't win them all, but if you're there with the kind of feedback, at least you can offer him something that'll help him to catch up when he does come back to you. END

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