The Conscientious Consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning

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ABSTRACT   *This article reports the initial findings of a 3-year research project investigating the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. Adopting aspects of a constructivist theory of learning, it is seen that formative assessment feedback is essential to encourage the kind of 'deep' learning desired by tutors. There are a number of barriers to the utility of feedback outside the sphere of control of individual students, including those relating to the quality, quantity and language of comments. But the students in the study seemed to read and value their tutors' comments. Their perceptions of feedback do not indicate that they are simply instrumental 'consumers' of education, driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark and as such desire feedback which simply provides them with 'correct answers'. Rather, the situation is more complex. While recognising the importance of grades, many of the students in the study adopt a more 'conscientious' approach. They are motivated intrinsically and seek feedback which will help them to engage with their subject in a 'deep' way. Implications of the findings for theory and practice are discussed.*

Introduction

The Importance of Formative Assessment

Black & Wiliam's (2000) developing theoretical framework of formative assessment emphasises the interactions between teachers, pupils and subjects within 'communities of practice'. They adopt aspects of a constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1986, 1990) by implying that students are not simply receptacles for transmitted information, but active makers and mediators of meaning within particular learning contexts.

This is a view reflected in the work of Biggs (1999). He argues that meaning is *constructed* through learning activities and, therefore, teaching and learning must be about conceptual change. Furthermore, he asserts that the ways students are assessed influence the quality of their learning (see also Sadler, 1983; Brown, 1999; Gibbs, 1999; Hyland, 2000). He therefore argues that curricula, assessment procedures and teaching methods should be *aligned* so that curriculum objectives relate to higher order cognitive thinking. Formative assessment is an essential part of this alignment since it provides feedback to both tutor and

student (Biggs, 1999). It provides tutors with a way of checking on students' constructions (Biggs, 1999), and students with a means by which they can learn through information on their progress (Brown & Knight, 1994; Ding, 1998). Feedback from formative assessment 'has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument for the further development of each student's learning' (Hyland, 2000; p. 234). There is plenty of evidence of the benefits of formative assessment. For example, Black & Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis of 250 research studies relevant to the subject of classroom formative assessment concluded that formative assessment *does* make a positive difference to student learning. So, by understanding teaching, assessment and learning as social practices, which involve the active construction of meaning, we can see that formative assessment is vital for the kind of learning valued so highly in higher education.

Feedback from formative assessment may take different forms (Hyland, 2000). However, this article focuses on written tutor comments on written assignments. MacKenzie (1974) commented on the process of tutoring by written correspondence at the Open University, and suggested that, in this context, written feedback comments were often the only source of feedback for students. This is becoming the case in all institutions as the landscape of higher education continues to be transformed. The workload of tutors is growing alongside an expansion in the number of students. At the same time, the use of distance learning and new technologies is becoming more extensive. As a result, face-to-face student–tutor contact time is diminishing, leading to a greater reliance on written correspondence (whether paper-based or electronic). For example, in Hyland's (2000) study of university history students, 40% of those questioned claimed to have never had a face-to-face tutorial on their assessment work.

There is growing research interest in the use of formative assessment feedback (Ecclestone, 1998). Yet, despite the significant position that written feedback comments occupy in students' experiences, and that, today, an important purpose of assessment is considered to be the improvement of student learning (Gipps, 1994), this area, surprisingly, remains relatively underresearched—particularly from students' perspectives.

Can Assessment Feedback 'Work'?

In theory, formative assessment can, by providing feedback, help develop 'deep learning' among students (Biggs, 1999). For formative assessment to work in practice, feedback must 'connect' with students. But, at a time when student numbers are rising and competition for graduate jobs is growing, are students increasingly becoming instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark? If so, will they heed written feedback which encourages them to reflect on their learning? Or will they simply pay attention to the grade, and seek feedback only when it is perceived to provide 'correct answers' to commit to memory (and only then when their grade expectation has not been met)? This article tackles these questions by building on existing thinking through our own research.

The Research Project

Our research focuses on students' understandings of feedback. We conducted interviews with students and administered a questionnaire. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing for flexibility in the subjects' responses. They also enabled us to capture students' own accounts of their experiences and understandings of assessment feedback (Patton, 1990), while at the same time keeping respondents focused on the topic at hand (Kvale, 1996). We were, therefore, able to examine students' reactions to feedback in an exploratory

manner. Nineteen students from two different subject units (level 1 Business and level 1 Humanities) across two institutions (a pre- and post-92 university in the North of England) took part in the interviews. The interviews were conducted towards the end of semester two, when the students already had some initial (albeit limited) experience of feedback. The students in our study are diverse in terms of age, gender and background, in addition to studying different units at different institutions.

The questionnaire allowed us to generate quantifiable data (Bryman, 1988) and to identify general trends in light of the themes emerging from the interviews. The value of using both qualitative and quantitative methods has been recognised by many social researchers (for example, see Bryman, 1988; Layder, 1998), as have, the particular advantages of methodological triangulation in educational research (for example, see Parlett & Hamilton, 1972; Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Hartley & Chesworth, 2000). The questionnaires were handed out to students during lectures (again towards the end of semester two). We collected completed questionnaires before the end of each lecture in order to maximise the response rate. We were able to gain 94 responses (a 77% response rate).

The Context of Assessment

Before addressing what is perhaps the most important question—how do students respond to their tutors' comments?—it is necessary to first 'set the scene'. Formative assessment feedback may be vital for learning, but in today's institutions, the conditions may not be in place for feedback to 'work' as we would want it to.

Firstly, students enrolled on modular degree programmes may experience heavy workloads, affording them little time to reflect on feedback (Hounsell, 1984), partly a result of the increased use of coursework assessment. They may find themselves studying a diverse range of short units. If the feedback they receive does not help them to improve generic skills, but is instead focused solely on subject-specific aspects of assignments, then feedback may be irrelevant for subsequent work on other units (Ding, 1998). Secondly, within modular degree programmes, it is not uncommon for units to have come to an end long before assignments are marked and returned. If feedback is not timely, students might not make the effort to go back to the assignment, which may seem distant and remote (especially if a pass mark has been gained) (MacKenzie, 1976).

There are also issues relating to the type of feedback students are given. A number of authors have noted the variability of tutors' comments in terms of both quantity and quality (MacKenzie, 1974; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Creme & Lea, 1997; Higgins *et al.*, 2000; Ivanič *et al.*, 2000). For example, while some comments can be very authoritarian, judgemental and detached, others may be very personal and empathetic. The students interviewed in our research seemed all too aware how feedback comments can vary, depending on the marker. But more often than not, our student interviews revealed negative experiences of assessment feedback:

> but some of it was like 'this line is immature' which wasn't particularly useful in any way … and the worst of it, the problem was that she didn't specify what was wrong with it, she just said 'this line isn't right', 'this is wrong', 'this is very good', 'this introduction is unstructured', but she didn't say how it had become unstructured.

> I've got things like 'your essay is good as far as it goes' and things like that and it's not particularly helpful because you don't, it doesn't tell you how far you could have gone if you know what I mean. It just says 'your essay is good as far as it goes, well done', and it's, like, a comment that's not particularly useful.

As well as lacking specificity, comments can also be impersonal:

> I think they should be more personal really 'cause quite a lot of the comments are similar to what other people got, you know, just reproduce them. So in a way, if they were more personal and direct then it would be more helpful.

These comments suggest that students in our study perceive feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful, if it is too impersonal, and if it is too general and vague to be of any formative use. Handwriting also seems to be a common problem. For example, 40% of our questionnaire respondents often find feedback comments difficult to read.

There may be numerous reasons for inconsistency and 'poor quality'. The ways tutors perceive both the role of feedback and their students are likely to influence what they provide. For example (and while recognising that this is an oversimplification of the situation), some tutors may wish to supply advice, while others will simply provide evaluative information as a way of justifying the grade. Furthermore, some tutors may not see the point in attending to the quality of their feedback comments if they are sceptical and cynical about whether feedback is read at all (Ding, 1997). This latter perception may be compounded by tutors on short units lacking the opportunity to see students' future work, and to ascertain whether the feedback they provided had any impact. But it may also stem from a belief that when, for example, students do not take the opportunity given to them (by way of tutors' office hours) to seek further feedback, help and support, it is due to a lack of motivation or commitment. In addition, tutors may not feel a need to produce detailed formative feedback for students whose grades are satisfactory or of a high standard.

A further barrier to the use of formative feedback may be that some students increasingly fail to understand the taken-for-granted academic discourses which underpin assessment criteria and the language of feedback (Hounsell, 1987). According to Entwistle (1984, p. 1), 'effective communication depends on shared assumptions, definitions, and understanding'. But a study at Lancaster University found that 50% of the third-year students in one academic department were unclear what the assessment criteria were (Baldwin, 1993, cited in Brown & Knight, 1994). As one of our students noted: '*I haven't got a clue what I'm assessed on*'.

This is perhaps not surprising if tutors' assessments of work require qualitative judgements in a learning environment where there are rarely either correct or incorrect answers (Sadler, 1989). For Sadler, qualitative judgements usually involve multiple criteria, and at least some of these criteria will be 'fuzzy'. In other words, they will be abstract constructs which have no absolute meaning independent of particular contexts. Consequently, teachers may recognise a good performance, yet struggle to articulate exactly what they are looking for because conceptions of quality usually take the form of tacit knowledge. So, the very language of assessment criteria, and consequently of feedback comments, can be difficult for students to grasp (Creme & Lea, 1997). The results of studies by Hounsell (1987), Orsmond *et al.* (1996, 1997, 2000), Lillis (1997), Street & Lea, (1997), Ivanič (1998), Chanock, (2000), Hartley & Chesworth (2000), echo the view that students often experience problems interpreting the academic language underpinning assessment.

Our own research supports this suggestion. A concern for many of the students interviewed was that comments are frequently either vague or too general. Often, feedback comments employ the academic language used to express assessment criteria, but only 33% of our respondents claimed to understand these criteria. An inability to fully comprehend the meaning of assessment feedback may not necessarily prevent students from paying attention

TABLE I. Reading assessment feedback

Students indicating time spent reading comments (%)					
5 minutes or less	10–15 minutes	15–30 minutes	More than 30 minutes	I do not read the feedback	No response
39	42	13	3	0	3

to tutors' comments, since they may unknowingly interpret them incorrectly yet still attempt to utilise them. Nevertheless, this will almost certainly present an obstacle for many.

In light of the potential barriers to the efficacy of formative feedback—including the impact of modularisation, the inconsistency and sometimes poor quality of feedback, and the often tacit nature of the language underpinning comments—we might expect students to disregard tutors' written advice. But is this the case?

Do Students Take Notice of Feedback?

Formative feedback comments can only be effective if students read and make use of them. Most of the students involved in studies by Hyland (2000) and Ding (1998) seemed to read tutors' comments. Our questionnaire data reflect this (see Table I). The time spent reading comments varies, with the majority of students claiming to spend less than 15 minutes doing so (although, of course, our data do not tell us *when* this takes place or whether students return to look at their feedback on more than one occasion). But, overall, 97% of students indicated that they usually 'read' the written feedback they receive. Furthermore, we can see from Table II that 82% of the students claimed to 'pay close attention' to feedback. The interview data also support this:

> I always look forward to seeing what they had to say.

> Normally I get the grade and then look through the self-assessment and the tutor's assessment, read the comments and … see what comments he's made on the essay.

This finding is reinforced by Hyland's (2000) study. He noted that the majority of the students involved (from a range of institutions) seemed to try (even if only occasionally) to use comments for future assignments.

How Do Students Use Feedback?

But how might students 'use' assessment feedback? Ding (1998) claims that, in her study, a number of the students did not seem to have made 'good use' of tutors' comments. The

TABLE II. Responding to assessment feedback

Response	Students agree (%)	Students neither agree nor disagree (%)	Students disagree (%)
I pay close attention to the comments I get	82	14	4

responses of many of the students in our study indicate a tendency to 'bear comments in mind' for future work:

> Well, I just try to take in what they've said as best you can, like, um, that's obviously a pointer for doing things in the future properly.

> I probably would have read it [the feedback] so it would be in the back of my mind, but I wouldn't refer to it really closely or exactly or anything. I would probably be aware of what I had to do, but not really, it wouldn't be, like, in the forefront of my mind or anything.

However, the situation may be complex. Although the two students here do not seem to use feedback in the sense that they have it in front of them from a previous assignment when constructing a new piece of work, reading it closely and attending to every comment, their statements may imply a less 'rigorous' yet more 'intuitive' use of feedback. A more reflective approach may have considerable benefits if desirable learning involves the development of reflective skills. Clearly though, this area requires further research.

Why Do Students Use Feedback?

Putting to one side problems of defining and measuring the 'use' of feedback, our students appear to want feedback because they feel they deserve it and because they recognise its potential to be formative. Many of the students we questioned agreed that receiving feedback is a matter of 'fairness'. That is, if they make an effort to complete an assessment task, it is only fair that the tutor makes an effort to provide feedback:

> I mean it seems only fair really when you've spent the time writing the essay they should give you some feedback back really.

A large number of the students in our study recognise that feedback comments are useful for formative purposes: 80% *disagreed* with the statement 'Feedback comments are *not* that useful'. Many of those interviewed wanted tutors to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and also placed importance on comments that provide guidance for improvement:

> The minimum I think you should get is a grade and at least three or four comments on why you got that grade, how you can improve … you get little comments in the margin but I expect to get them more fully explained at the bottom so you can look down and see that you've done something that they don't agree with or they think isn't very good, then you can look at the back and see that they've explained it a bit more, and, like, the overall idea of where you're at really and how you can get better.

> I think it's good to get the pluses—the good points, but to me to just get a mark is not enough. I think one wants to know the weaknesses as well as the strengths and where they can mend the weaknesses.

This finding is reflected elsewhere. Most of the students in Ding's (1998) study, while attributing much importance to grades, desired formative comments to supplement grades. Some 90% of the students in Hyland's (2000) study believed that feedback could help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, engender a sense of achievement, and raise their marks in future work. Hyland goes on to comment that the students 'never seem to lose faith in its [feedback's] potential value' (2000; p. 243), despite the problems they may encounter when attempting to use it.

But what is it that is motivating them to seek improvement? Moreover, does the type of motivation matter? We argue that it does. As already stated, there may be different ways of reading and using feedback, and we anticipate that students' motives for paying attention to tutors' comments will mediate the kinds of feedback comments they desire, and how and under what circumstances they are likely to make use of them.

The Student as Consumer

In a study by Swann & Arthurs (1998), a large number of their students seemed to take an instrumental view of learning, conceiving assessment tasks as obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of grades. Formative feedback was viewed as a means to negotiate these obstacles. In an earlier study by Becker *et al.* (1968) of American college life, assessment demands were ubiquitous, and student behaviour reflected the instrumental and pragmatic strategies they adopted to cope with the particular teaching and assessment practices imposed on them. But is this true for today's student in the context of the UK?

A majority of the students in our study perceive higher education as a 'service', and felt that feedback constitutes part of that service. As one student noted:

> They way I see it is we're paying £1,000. It's more of a service now.

If higher education is viewed as a service, then students are arguably the consumers of that service. But what do they expect the service to consist of? Most students in our study link feedback to attaining better grades. These students perceive feedback comments as identifying what they are doing right and wrong and, therefore, helping them to improve their performance in subsequent assessed assignments and examinations in order to raise their marks:

> Part of writing the essay question in the exam is having the right technique, and whilst it would be useful to say that 'yeah, you're bringing in good parts outside the subject and it's good that you've brought in this', it would also be good to know 'well, don't ever use this language in the exam 'cause it's going to count against you'.

The Student as a 'Conscientious Consumer'

But if students are preoccupied with the grade, then the kind of feedback they would most likely want (when their grade expectation has not been met) would surely be feedback telling them specifically what to do to improve their mark, rather then feedback which encourages them to reflect on their learning. However, our data suggests that students are not as instrumental and mechanistic as this (see also Higgins *et al.*, 1999). Table III (based on our questionnaire data) indicates that, although most of the students claim to be at university to gain qualifications, a large majority also claim to be at university because they enjoy learning. This is reflected in many interview responses:

> There is an enjoyment part of it—to get into it [the subject].

> When you're learning you're not learning for someone else, you're learning for yourself. So it just comes down to your personal enjoyment.

> Well, that's what the point of it is for me.

The questionnaire also asked students to identify features of a 'good assignment' (see Table IV). One of the most important features was considered to be 'critical analysis'. In addition,

TABLE III. Why study in higher education?

Reasons for studying	% students *agreeing*
The main reason I came to university was to gain qualifications	92
I am at university because I enjoy learning	71

TABLE IV. What makes a good assignment?

Features of assignments rated as important by over 75% of students	% of students rating each feature as important
Demonstration of knowledge	97
Well structured	89
Critical analysis	89
Good style of writing	79

Note: figures are based on responses to a 5-point Likert scale (1–5, with 1 representing 'very important' and 5 representing 'not at all important'). Responses of 1 and 2 were judged to represent 'important'.

TABLE V. What feedback is important?

Types of feedback comment rated as important by over 75% of students	% of students rating each type as important
Comments that tell you what you could do to improve	92
Comments that explain your mistakes	91
Comments that focus on the level of critical analysis	90
Comments that focus on your argument	89
Comments that focus on the tutor's overall impressions	87
Comments that tell you what you have done badly	86
Comments that focus on the subject matter	82
Comments that correct your mistakes	80
Feedback that tells you the grade	79
Comments that focus on your use of supporting evidence	79

Note: see note to Table IV.

students were asked to rate different types of feedback comment (see Table V). Comments rated as important by over 75% of respondents include those that indicate the grade, correct mistakes and advise how the student can improve. However, comments that *explain* mistakes, focusing on the level of *argument* and of *critical analysis* are also rated as important.

The importance of feedback focusing on argument is reflected in many of our interview responses:

I would like them [feedback comments] to be more general about the entirety of the essay—how it's laid out and how the argument has been formed and how to make it more clear, things like that.

The argument you're making—they should make a comment on it.

So it seems that, while the students in our study want feedback to provide them with a grade, they also desire feedback which focuses on generic, 'deep' skills. It is possible that this is

because they perceive skills such as 'critical analysis' and 'argument' to be valued by their tutors and rewarded with high marks. But here we offer an alternative explanation. If students are concerned simply with obtaining the grades they desire with minimum effort, then we would expect them to adopt a 'surface' approach to learning (as outlined by Entwistle, 1987). This is because a surface approach is most strongly correlated with 'extrinsic motivation and narrowly vocational concerns' (Entwistle, 1987, p. 19), while intrinsic motivation (such as interest in a subject area) is most strongly (and positively) correlated with a deep approach. Our data suggest that the majority of students in our study are, at least to some extent, intrinsically motivated and, as such, value feedback comments which focus on skills relating to a deep approach to learning.

Discussion and Suggestions for Practice

At the beginning of this article, we outlined an argument for the importance of formative assessment for supporting learning. We also argued that in the context of higher education today, perhaps the most common opportunity for providing such feedback comes in the form of written tutor comments at the end of students' coursework assignments. But this raises a fundamental question—even if formative assessment takes place and students receive feedback, does it make a difference? In theory it should (and Black & Wiliam's [1998] meta-analysis suggests that generally in practice it does), but to what extent is this really the case in higher education today?

There are clearly a number of potential barriers to the effective provision and utility of feedback comments which are, to some extent, outside of the student's sphere of influence. These may be 'structural' in nature—for example, a result of the impact of modular degree programmes. Or they may relate to the nature of feedback that students are provided with in terms of the quality, quantity and language used. But these factors become irrelevant if students' interests are confined solely to the grade, and feedback is either disregarded or sought only to provide a list of 'correct answers' for future assessment.

Our research suggests that, while the grade may be of paramount importance to students, many of those we questioned are eager to read feedback comments. They expect feedback because they believe they deserve it—if they have made an effort to produce the assignment, it is only fair that the tutor makes an effort to provide feedback. Furthermore, there is a perception that higher education is a service and, as such, it is also the tutor's 'duty' to offer feedback. This latter point links to the notion of the student as a 'consumer', but this does not necessarily square with a notion of the student as consumer driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark.

It may be difficult, in the light of increasing competitiveness for graduate jobs, for students not to have 'one eye on the grade'. But while there may well be an increasing level of consumerism within higher education, the argument that feedback will be ignored or only used if it provides 'correct answers' cannot be sustained. Rather, it is more likely that many of today's students have a 'consumerist awareness' reflected in a focus on achieving a grade *alongside* intrinsic motivations. As a result, they may recognise the central importance of formative feedback for their educational development.

How students use feedback is, however, another matter. Clearly, the notion of 'use' in this context is complex and needs to be understood as occurring in different ways, with some students perhaps adhering closely to every comment, while others reflect in a less conscious manner on a small selection of points which they have stored 'at the back of their mind'. At present, this issue requires further investigation.

Nevertheless, the good news may be that, despite barriers to its use, the potential for formative feedback to improve student learning remains. But, to make the most of students' enthusiasm for feedback and allow formative assessment to work, tutors need to take account of the following. Firstly, while recognising institutional constraints and difficult workloads, timely feedback is vital; comments should be returned to students as soon as possible after the assignment is submitted. Interim feedback on a first draft or an essay plan might also be productive. Secondly, it is not usually sufficient simply to tell a student where they have gone wrong—misconceptions need to be *explained* and improvements for future work suggested. Nor should comments focus solely on spelling and grammar. Fostering 'higher order' critical skills may have more long-term educational value. Moreover, students may not view comments on 'surface' aspects of their work as particularly relevant or useful. In addition, providers of feedback cannot assume that the language they use is inherently meaningful to students. As one of us has suggested elsewhere, frequently 'tutors base their feedback on implicit values and vocabulary that often mean nothing to the student' (Higgins, cited in Utley, 2000). Perhaps the introduction of some element of peer assessment may help students to become more familiar with the meanings of the criteria upon which their work is evaluated (although much care must be taken when designing peer assessment strategies if their potential is to be realised (see Reynolds & Trehan, 2000)). Discussion between tutors and students about tutors' expectations may also help as might more open dialogue between tutors themselves to prevent students receiving conflicting advice based on different meanings across disciplines (Higgins *et al.*, 2001).

Our findings should be treated tentatively. While this article provides a useful starting point for identifying and analysing the issues involved in the provision and utility of tutors' feedback comments, the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students is an area that still remains relatively underresearched, particularly from the students' perspective. As MacKenzie (1976, p. 58) stated 26 years ago, 'much remains to be known, in any detail, about the average student's use of his [*sic*] tutor's comments'. This apparently remains the case today, yet, as we have demonstrated, there is clearly room for improvement.

We need to develop a clearer picture of *how* exactly students use feedback. We must also investigate further students' abilities to understand the academic discourses upon which the language of feedback is often based. We need to develop a better understanding of the student–feedback and student–tutor relationships, whilst recognising that there are complex tensions between students' motivations, their approaches to assessment, the variable feedback they are presented with, and their attempts to utilise comments. Furthermore, we need to understand how tensions between being grade-sensitive, and being motivated by a desire to engage with higher education at a 'deep' level are played out in students' lives—or in other words, to understand what it means to be a conscientious consumer.

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