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'Additional Comments': The Final Word in Assessment for Humanities Undergraduates

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Abstract

A key component to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) is reflection on teaching methodology and, in particular, assessment practices and how they impact on undergraduate students. The aim of this article is to explore how one particular technique—the written expression of 'additional comments' in a generic assessment criteria-based form—can be utilised effectively as a means of clear, constructive feedback and simultaneously as a means of engagement in dialogue with students. Dialogue is, in fact, postulated as one of the most important pedagogical tools underpinning and informing deep learning. Understanding how our words leave an impact on our students may open up other avenues of research into the whole human dynamic at the heart of all education.

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The Final Word in Assessment for Humanities Undergraduates

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Abstract

A key component to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) is reflection on teaching methodology and, in particular, assessment practices and how they impact on undergraduate students. The aim of this article is to explore how one particular technique—the written expression of 'additional comments' in a generic assessment criteria-based form—can be utilised effectively as a means of clear, constructive feedback and simultaneously as a means of engagement in dialogue with students. Dialogue is, in fact, postulated as one of the most important pedagogical tools underpinning and informing deep learning. Understanding how our words leave an impact on our students may open up other avenues of research into the whole human dynamic at the heart of all education.

Keywords: Assessment, Feedback, Additional Comments, Constructive Criticism, Dialogue.

'The relation in education is one of pure dialogue'
_ Martin Buber, 1926[i]

Introduction

One of the most important concerns of SOTL is and should be the *close* study of good teaching practice and what constitutes it. This does not refer to personality or individual styles of teaching (although they, too, deserve a sustained, scientific exploration and analysis) but rather to fundamental generic skills accessible to all educators should they choose to use them. As Pecorino and Kincaid (2007) point out, we are all professional educators as well as professional scholars. The same kind of analysis and thought that we put into our scholarly research needs to be applied to our educational endeavours.

It is true that the paradigm for Higher Education is changing rapidly and it is perfectly understandable that many academics feel resentful and/or fearful about a process that they have hitherto been told is, at best, ancillary to their primary function as scholar/researchers. At the same time Australian tertiary institutions have witnessed a discernible shift of 'power' in the relationship between academics and their students. Inevitably, this has involved the greater empowerment of students in terms of their ability to vocalise their needs, concerns and directions of their education. If students have gained power it does not necessarily follow that academics have lost power, although more than a few of my colleagues see it this way. Rather, the new situation which has gradually been emerging is one where our teaching practices have had to become more transparent and accessible to our students. As a result, these same practices have become clearer to us. Nowhere is this more apparent (and perhaps more needed) than in assessment. It is true that a subject's success can be judged on how the assessment is designed to relate to content, process and skills embedded in the subject.

How that assessment is delivered is just as important as the delivery of the content (Biggs 1999).

Feedback

About a year ago a tutor approached me asking for my opinion about her 'marking technique'. She was wading through over 50 essays written by first year European Studies undergraduates and she wanted to make sure she was on the right track. As part of the assessment procedure in most Humanities subjects at La Trobe University there is a standard Assessment Form with a number of criteria listed (see Appendix 1)[ii]. These Assessment Forms vary slightly depending on the Program/Department[iii] and also on the specific needs/aims of a particular piece of work. Fundamentally, however, they are very similar and most of our undergraduate students have become accustomed to their use. Naturally, variations of these forms exist in most higher education institutions throughout the world.

The Assessment Forms in use in the European Studies program at La Trobe are simple enough to use and just require a tick in the appropriate box next to each assessment criterion. The 'grading' aspect is reflected in how well the student did in each category. For example, the category 'analytical skills' can be graded as 'excellent', 'very good', 'good', 'pass' and 'unsatisfactory'. As can be seen, just after the assessment criteria, a space has been left at the bottom of the page for "Additional Comments". There is enough room in that space for at least a paragraph, about five or six sentences, either hand-written or typed. Again, this is nothing new for higher education institutions.

In this instance, looking at the first essay the tutor handed me, one sentence had been written: 'Your paper lacked a coherent thread and was not focussed.' That was all. That was the final word for that particular piece of work for that particular student. A vague, generalised comment about coherence and focus. I looked at some other comments. 'Make sure you structure your essay more effectively.' 'Your argument is muddled and your sentence structure is, at times, confusing.'

As I leafed through a few more I came across comments of the same order. They were highly critical, for the most part, short (succinct might be another way to describe them) and impersonal (objective might be another way to describe them). The possible and probable impact they would have on the students had not been considered by the tutor although I suspect the fact that she approached me indicated she felt slightly uneasy about the process. Since, more than likely, these were the kind of assessment models she had been subjected to herself and having not been trained in the appropriate educational methodology and philosophy, she was simply re-iterating a well-known, prevalent behaviour in most phases of traditional Western world education.

My first comment to her was that she had told the student what they had not done well, but had not spent any time re-affirming what they had done well. This was as simple as positive reinforcement, indicating to the student that certain skills had been mastered and certain chunks of knowledge had been absorbed. Why was that so important? Because as educators we can not assume that students *do* know exactly what skills/knowledge they have mastered particularly in relation to the specific (and often slightly different) demands of each subject or indeed each assessment task. Especially in first year undergraduates, having come directly from a comparatively cushioned, pedantic and narrow[iv] secondary school environment, their ability to navigate the new tertiary terrain which demands principally analytical skills (rather than regurgitative skills) is a daunting experience.

A recent survey of the first-year experience of students at La Trobe University confirms that over 44% of students found that 'the standard of work required at university was higher than they had expected', nearly 33% complained that they didn't get 'helpful feedback' on their progress and about 40% found it hard to adjust to the [university] 'style of teaching' (Bexley 2007: 13, 24, 27). Clearly these are all indications of student transition and adjustment difficulties that academics are mostly ignorant of.

Ironically, the tutor who had asked *me* for feedback on *her* work (her assessment skills) could not as yet see the point of this type of positive re-affirmation to students. From her perspective, the student simply had to know already. My next suggestion to her was that she needed to phrase her actual comments more specifically, be more precise about what the student had not performed well in. Her noncommittal response was not an unusual one and it was interesting that as a future scholar and educator, she already seemed unwilling to apply her superior, academic, analytical skills to her own behaviour as an educator. She was unaware of the fact that there had to be a logic, a reason behind how she chose to structure both her classes *and* her feedback to students. Her closing response was a response I have heard for years in both secondary and tertiary institutions: 'I don't have time to do that'.

At the tertiary level, time is increasingly the challenge for academic staff who need to focus on both research and teaching. It is a unique educational environment for precisely this reason and the tutor's comments were obviously valid, but only up to a point. Despite our compelling obligations to research, we are still educators and we still have a responsibility to our students. That extra time can be found, indeed must be found. According to Chanock (2000: 95-97) for example, many students find feedback unclear and therefore have no way of 'improving'. Many studies have borne this out (Holmes & Smith 2003; Poulos & Mahony 2007; Lizzio & Wilson 2008), indicating the urgent, fundamental need to provide clear and detailed feedback to students. As Smith (2008: 327) states: "The more specific the comments are, the better they are." For an environment that is as obsessed with precision as tertiary education is, we are often strangely remiss about being precise when we are assessing our students' work.

All of us are guilty of this, of course. It is not just the aforementioned tutor. We opt for general statements about 'analysis', 'research', 'structure' and 'argument' and tend not to treat the individual student *as an individual*. That approach means that the student's written work needs to be marked throughout indicating *where* exactly and *why* analysis or structure or argument has not been so successful. Ticking boxes on a generic Assessment form is not enough nor are the Additional Comments unless the student can see precisely where in his/her work this has failed to happen. Again, it is a matter of being conscious of the possible ramifications of appropriate feedback (Värlander 2007; Boud 1995).

What I didn't say to the tutor is that the extra time taken in activities such as constructive, lucid and precise feedback actually saves us time in the long run. Well-constructed feedback tends to help students improve so that towards the end of the semester, many of them no longer need the same kind of extensive detailed feedback. This does not mean, however, that they don't want the dialogue to continue.

Relationship

Feedback serves at least two purposes, as already indicated. Ostensibly it is a criteria-based response to a student's performance in a given task. But it is also an important part of the dialogue between teacher and student. When the wrong words are used or if very few words are used, often that dialogue grinds to an abrupt halt.

Successful teaching and learning depends on a number of factors, including the relationship between the student and teacher (Walvoord & Anderson 1998; Walker 2008; Värlander 2007; Scheff 1997). A successful relationship is about connection, mutual respect and creating a feeling of safety in the classroom context which is, generally speaking, highly conducive to learning. Rigorous, consistent and transparent assessment processes are an essential part in establishing that relationship. In turn, that relationship helps make the whole educational experience more worthwhile for all concerned. Since learning is (ideally) far from a passive process, a good relationship between teacher and student usually allows for a more successful receptivity and exchange of information/knowledge (Swanson & Davis 2000; Weiss 2000; Walker 2008; Krauser & Coates 2008). It helps build a student's self-esteem and paves the way to a student gradually (especially first year undergraduates) developing seemingly difficult techniques such as successful academic essay writing and learning how to self-assess. This is often called the 'deep approach to learning' where mistakes made are learned from and are then applied to the next piece of work (Covic & Jones 2008). Moreover, it is that deep learning that underpins lifelong learning (Boud 2000; Tan 2008). The implications of that 'extra time' taken with 'final words' are I hope becoming obvious in their weighty ramifications.

The ostensible aim of the 'Additional Comments' section on the aforementioned assessment form is to provide the student with additional feedback as a way of elaborating further on their work. It is a form of direct communication which is private and which recognises the individuality of the student and his/her needs. In lectures of more than 100 students and tutorials of up to 25 students this may be one of the few occasions when the student enters a private dialogue with his/her teacher. Moreover, in their whole undergraduate career, if the average Humanities student does approximately 20 subjects spread over three years, then s/he will end up gathering approximately 40-50 such comments or less for essays they present. Obviously this will vary, depending on the number of exams they do. But let's consider that figure as an average. Forty essays engendering commentary or feedback of about two to five sentences each time (about 50 words) will mean that the average Undergraduate Humanities student will walk away with between 2000-2,500 words in 'Additional Comments' in the course of three years. About two pages per year. This is precious little for such a long commitment and such a significant time in one's life.

The Devil is in the Details

Considering the number of undergraduate students so many of us now teach and considering the number of assessment pieces we have to assess during any given semester it is understandable that shortcuts have to be taken and there never seems to be enough time to spend on lengthy comments. One way I developed which, simplistic as it sounds, worked very well, was the Key to Assessment Code (see Appendix 2) which meant that rather than writing in full sentences over the students' work, I simply inserted the letter(s) of my code to alert the student to the specific area they needed to work on. We often find ourselves saying the same things over and over—to many students and this code shortened the time it took me to go through an individual essay. This is neither new nor original, as most teachers work out some kind of abbreviated code for themselves when they are assessing work. I simplify formalised my code by putting it into a set format and attaching a copy of it to students' work. I used it with first, second and third year undergraduates during the first half of 2008. It was supposed to be a temporary measure as I was recovering from a broken arm at the time and was therefore very restricted in how much I could write or type.

To my great surprise, by using the Key Code, the time taken to mechanically assess the whole essay was significantly reduced. Moreover, a greater clarity appeared to emerge for the students by my using a kind of neutral, consistent code which they could visibly see everyone had received. The time thus saved allowed more time for me to give a carefully worded and comprehensive response in the Additional Comments section of the Assessment Form.

What was most important to this process was going over the Code in class when the assessment tasks were initially handed out. This was still only at the theoretical level, however, and so only a short amount of time was spent on this initial explanation. On the day that the assessment pieces were handed back to the students nearly 30 minutes was devoted to a general discussion about the assessment task. Armed with the Assessment and the Key Code forms the students were now able to discuss the assessment feedback in relation to their own work.

Remarkably and completely unexpectedly, my first year students began to volunteer examples from their own work (verbally read out aloud to the whole class) showing where they may have made mistakes. For example, a student would read a sentence which had been identified by me in my assessment as an absolute statement. I had placed a capital 'A' (as per the Code) exactly next to the questionable statement. The student would read the example from their work precisely because they had understood where they had gone 'wrong'. The categories in the Code were clear enough for them to follow and derive learning from. Other students gave examples where no evidence has been cited to support one of their points, where two paragraphs didn't flow into each other (structure problem) and so on. They invariably did this with a smile and seemed completely unconcerned about any possible 'exposure' to the others. This was totally unsolicited by me as I usually make up examples when explaining key assessment problem areas. *Something* had occurred that was both heartening for me and empowering for the students and it was directly related to this new assessment model. One of the students smilingly called the new assessment tool the 'Da Vinci Code'. This was a joke, of course, but perhaps I had completely underestimated the power of such a simple tool. In effect, peer assessment and self-assessment in rudimentary forms had begun to appear as a consequence of the clarity and precision of the feedback they had received via the Assessment form (with Additional Comments) and the Key Code.

Criticism Has to be Constructive

Carefully worded is the operative term in all forms of feedback. Words have a great deal of power, especially when the person delivering them appears to have most of the power in the given situation (Perrine & King 2004; Poulos & Mahony 2007; Smith 2008). Unfortunately, criticism and other negative forms of feedback are intrinsic to our educational system as a whole[v] and even though since the early 1980s concerted attempts were made at the primary and secondary level to change this, these changes have not yet filtered through to the tertiary sector in a substantial way. The implicit assumption has always been that adult learners can somehow 'take it' and if they can't, they should, because they are adults. I have always found that to be extraordinary reasoning or an extraordinary lack of reasoning. Up until the end of their secondary education (usually the year before they commenced University) our students were still considered children. How is it possible that in the passage of one year they are expected to have metamorphosed into mature adults? Furthermore, once engaged in the learning process, the learner (of any age) is immediately placed in the vulnerable position. Whether in the learning of a chunk of knowledge or a new skill, the student is initially very susceptible to the judgement of his/her teacher. Highly critical responses from that teacher serve very little purpose, other than cementing an unequal power relationship,

alienating some students, frightening others and, more importantly, eroding self-esteem (Knight & Yorke 2003; Fritz et al. 2000; Smith 2008).

Looking at how the comments made by the tutor at the beginning of this paper might have been re-written is probably a very good example of how constructive criticism works. 'Your paper lacked a coherent thread and was not focussed.' In other words, there is no real argument and the points being made are probably unconnected. This might have been phrased thus: 'You would have benefited from reflecting on what your opinion on this matter is first and then writing a plan listing the reasons why. Evidence could then be extracted from the primary sources to support each point of your argument. That would then give the essay a more coherent structure and make your argument more focussed.'

The first response is brief, using negative, judgemental, language (e.g. 'lacked' 'not focussed') which implicitly questions the student's intrinsic abilities and capabilities. The student is not given a way to move forward. In contrast, the alternative response implicitly affirms the student's intrinsic abilities while at the same time acknowledging that the student did not do the 'right' thing. Most importantly, the alternative response gives the student a starting point in how to move forward in their individual learning and at the same time acknowledges the student's capability in doing this (See Walker 2008 on the importance of human capability in higher education). The point I am trying to make here is that if we express the feedback in positive and constructive terms there is a greater chance that the student will take action or at the very least seek further clarification through dialogue with the teacher. Lizzio and Wilson (2008: 271) in their study of student perceptions of feedback describe how "poorly constructed feedback can be seen to convey the message that a student is not sufficiently important to warrant taking the time or making the effort to respond." Similar conclusions about the importance of carefully constructed feedback, balancing the 'positive' with the 'negative' have been made in many studies (Young 2000; Lizzio et al. 2003; Hyland & Hyland 2001).

Another Kind of 'Da Vinci Code'

Combining both the Assessment Form and Key Code led to a drastic reduction in (time-consuming) student queries about my assessment of their work. Moreover, I found that the students became more comfortable with self-assessment; this allied with some form of peer-group assessment in a class setting became cornerstones of their own empowerment in the whole assessment process. Most interestingly, subsequent assessment tasks did not usually have to be so thoroughly assessed in terms of written commentary. This does not mean that every student improved in the short term, but most did. The Key Code and Assessment criteria working together had established in the students' minds the terminology describing in essence what was required of them. The earlier time-consuming efforts made to give a comprehensive assessment of their work had established a clear guide that they could understand. Finally, the "Additional Comments" which re-affirmed what had been achieved and pointed constructively to what still needed to be achieved, had performed an invaluable service. These comments added that final note which drew together the information contained in the criteria boxes and the Key Code. They also *personalised* the process. In one carefully phrased paragraph, a student can be told:

1. their work matters (as do they)

2. they are perceived as individuals with individual needs

3. they are involved in a learning process in which mistakes are an inevitable component

4. assessment is based on set criteria and transparent principles

5. how they can go about improving their skills

6. the dialogue has been opened

Conclusions

This has been a short reflection on the importance of substantive and constructive feedback consciously delivered by enlightened educators at the tertiary level. Many of my conclusions are based on my own experiences in teaching over a 25-year period, in a variety of educational environments, from secondary to adult to tertiary. Clearly, I am not alone in such conclusions (Mory 2004; Lizzio & Wilson 2008; Smith 2008) and the value of continuing research in this area in the context of SoTL is inestimable for all of us. Clearly, too, I am still learning my craft as an educator as my recent experience with assessment indicates. This can not be emphasised enough: good teaching practice is an ongoing learning experience for the teacher (as well as the student), especially if the former is being self-reflective—and offering constructive feedback to self at the same time as s/he is offering it to students.

The importance of appropriate assessment tools, the need to give additional comments or feedback to students is not contentious. It is how we do it that still is. That empty space on the bottom of an assessment form needs to be honoured. It is a space that cries out when it is left empty or half empty. It is the space for our final word on a student's piece of work but it is also the space where we are taking part in an ongoing dialogue with our students. And it is that dialogue which helps transform the learning experience into a dynamic, formative and hopefully life-long process.

For those of us who are serious about SoTL and the implications of research on our own teaching, my own forays into the crucial issue of assessment may indicate how easily that first step into such research can be made. The fact of the matter is that we are engaged on a daily basis in a process from which we need to step back and examine if we are to grow as educators. The next step for this particular examination of two feedback tools (The Code and Assessment Form) is to canvass the students directly—something I intend to do in 2009 and then publish the results. If there are others doing similar research on their own assessment tools, I would happily collaborate/compare and share information. If there are human universals in operation in the assessment dynamic (as I suspect there are), in spite of the variables of time, place, and environment, it would be in the interests of SoTL researchers to work on wider cross-institutional and international projects in order to, firstly, identify those universals, and then determine what practical applications can be made to improve higher education learning outcomes.

Notes

[i] Martin Buber, 'Education' in M. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, New York, MacMillan Publishing, 1978, p. 98.
[ii] This is a copy of an assessment form that I modified and use myself in the Greek Studies Program and the European Studies Program. I therefore take full responsibility for its limitations.

iii   I wish to make clear that not all Programs/Departments in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences use this form of assessment. I am only commenting on the Programs that do.

iv   By narrow I don't mean intolerant or unintelligent. I mean that the secondary school system in Australia is essentially designed to culminate in two senior years (Years 11 and 12) whose main purpose is to prepare students for exams/assessment tasks created as a way of assessing their ability to enter Higher Education institutions. That is the ultimate (although to be fair, not the exclusive) goal. Everything else is subsumed by this process.

v   I am referring here to the Australian education system.

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Appendix 1   Student Essay Profile: Assessment Form

Student Essay Profile

Student's Name:

Subject:

Lecturer:

Assignment:

Due Date:

Mark:

Your essay has been evaluated on the basis of the following criteria:

Criteria	Excellent	V. Good	Good	Pass	Unsatisfactory
Structure of Essay					
Presentation of Argument					
Engaging with the question					
Analytical skills					
Definition of terms					
Use of sources/documentation					
Expression & Spelling					
Bibliography					

Additional comments:

Appendix 2: Possible short cuts: a new kind of 'Da Vinci Code'

KEY TO ASSESSMENT CODE

A   Avoid absolute statements

B   Be specific—give concrete examples, events, dates

C   Cause and effect unclear or not convincing

D   Define your terms

E   Provide more evidence

Ex   Explain

Ep   Expression needs attention

G   Grammar needs attention

I   Irrelevant to your argument

M   Meaning is not clear, need to rephrase

N   New Paragraph

P   Paraphrase, use your own words

R   Repetition, you've already mentioned this

RB   Relate this back to the essay question

S   Cite your source

Sp   Watch your spelling

St   Structure is weak

X   Expand your point or argument here