Improving Student Writing with Effective Feedback

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Recommended Citation
Vardi, Iris, "Improving Student Writing with Effective Feedback" (2009). SoTL Commons Conference. 17.  
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Improving student writing with effective feedback

Dr Iris Vardi
2nd annual SoTL Commons Conference on
March 11-13, 2009
Your task:

As a teacher:
• What type of feedback do you give?
• What happens with it?
• What would you like to see happen with it?

Cast your mind back to when you were a student …
• What types of feedback did you get as a student?
• What did you find helpful?
• What did you do with it?
The literature about staff feedback …

• Often limited
• Vague, unclear, cryptic, ambiguous
• Sarcastic
• Contradictory
• Buck passing
• Lacking in praise or positive comments
• Lacks a sense of instruction
• Overemphasises certain aspects of the writing e.g. grammar
Literature about student perceptions....

- Don’t understand the feedback given
- The feedback given does not match the discussions in class
- Don’t know what to do with the feedback
- Disappointed with the lack of useful feedback given
- Have problems using the feedback
Literature on what students would like from feedback …

- Useful feedback
- Positive feedback
- Engagement with their ideas and feedback on the content and its organisation
- Direct instruction on how to improve
Literature on what works ….

• Providing an opportunity to respond to feedback
• Feedback specific to the text is better than general feedback
• Feedback on grammar and spelling improves the “surface” (but not the substance, and not the mark)
• Feedback on content and its organisation improves the substance
What actually happens to writing when certain types of feedback are given? My research ….

- Naturalistic Study: 3rd year IR class
- Large written assignment
- Provided with 2 opportunities to receive feedback on their writing and to resubmit
- Detailed written feedback and a mark
- First text allocated 15%
- Second text allocated 20%
- Third text allocated 10%
Tracked the writing of 4 students

**Improvement in student essays**

- TK
- AB
- CN
- JF

**Marks**
- Text 1
- Text 2
- Text 3
# Feedback codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics Addressed</th>
<th>Manner addressed</th>
<th>Scope of feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Prescription</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Direct edit</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic expression</td>
<td>General comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>Indication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No. of points of feedback by characteristic addressed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic addressed</th>
<th>Total Number in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic expression</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>379</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feedback strongly related to change:
Global feedback (1)

- Global prescriptive feedback on organisation of the text in conjunction with content (information / thinking / sources)

  e.g. “I appreciate your decision to concentrate on three countries, I think it would have been more consistent and preferable in terms of your thinking for the essay to have used the same topics/headings for all 3 countries”
Feedback strongly related to change: Global feedback (2)

• Global prescriptive feedback which addresses generalisable rules or conventions, (e.g. Grammar, referencing).

  e.g. “Don’t start paragraphs with a mouthful of authors. In-text referencing is best done in brackets at the end of the relevant sentence or paragraph”
Feedback strongly related to change: Local feedback (1)

- Local prescriptive feedback on organization which focuses on the thinking and information in introductions and conclusions at the whole of essay and section levels.

Eg – feedback given alongside the introduction

“..emphasize the principle themes – e.g. legislation, framework for centralized bargaining, role as employer etc.”
Feedback strongly related to change:
Local feedback (2 & 3)

• Direct editing of mechanics, referencing and citation

• Local prescriptive feedback which addresses either information or thinking

These resulted in changes. But effectiveness and learning ………?
Feedback poorly related to change (1)

- Global evaluation of all characteristics
e.g. rating sheets

Grammar:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Content:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Organisation:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

poor  excellent
Feedback poorly related to change (2)

- Prescriptive feedback on organization or thinking given in general writing terms

  e.g. “more analysis”

  “use topic sentences”
Relationship between points of feedback: impact on change

- Global feedback augmented and supported by local feedback
- Different points of feedback “send the same message”
- Feedback conflicted
- More feedback given in one area than another area

How do these impact on change?

- Significant Change
- Significant Change
- Less likely to change
- Change in area with the most feedback
The relationship between feedback and the grade allocated

- Low mark plus feedback results in significant change
- High mark plus feedback less likely to change
Role of the iterative process

• Assessment process plays a significant role in response to feedback

• Providing a mark for each iteration – high investment writing situation:
  – Develops a high level of compliance
  – Gets students writing early in the semester
  – Provides the instructional means to improve writing where appropriate feedback is given

• But can also restrict learning ….
  – Students reliant on the lecturer
  – Students following some instruction without thinking
Take-home messages ....

• Feedback in the classroom setting is an important way to help students improve
• Extensive feedback is not required to be effective
• Helpful feedback:
  – Is clear and direct as occurs in prescriptive feedback;
  – Links structuring of the text with content;
  – Encourages the students’ own meaning making through global feedback supported by local examples;
  – Does not emphasize surface feedback (e.g. grammar, spelling, referencing conventions) over feedback on deep aspects of the text such as the content, level of analysis and its structuring in the text; and
  – Is provided in a context in which the students invest highly in the writing, attend to the feedback and act on it.
To find out more about the study ….

• Publication being reviewed for International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education