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Developing a Mutually Beneficial Approach to Providing University Students with Effective Feedback

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Developing a mutually beneficial approach to providing university students with effective feedback

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Our university

- The University of South Australia is a multi-campus university, established in 1991 by the amalgamation of the South Australian Institute of Technology and three campuses of the South Australian College of Advanced Education – some of its predecessor institutions have 19th Century roots.

- 2 CBD campuses; 2 in capital city suburbs; 2 regional locations – Whyalla Campus 400 km (250 miles) to the NW of Adelaide and Mount Gambier Regional Centre 460 km (about 300 miles) to the SE of Adelaide

- Centre for Regional Engagement offers programs in Business, Engineering, Social Work, Nursing, and Foundation Studies; also postgraduate studies (www.unisa.edu.au/cre/). (Metropolitan campuses offer many more program options.)

- Research centre based at Whyalla: Centre for Rural Health and Community Development (CRHaCD) (http://www.unisa.edu.au/crhacd/)
Introduction

• Current emphasis on enhancing student engagement with learning

• Important role of feedback

  ‘Feedback is one of the most important aspects of the learning process and serves the critical function of enabling students to make timely and informed judgements about their performance so that subsequent assessment can be undertaken with improved likelihood of success and enhancement.’

  (UniSA, 2012, Assessment policies and procedures manual, p. 12)

• Research project on feedback in an undergraduate social work program – an overview is given here.
Themes from the literature

What good or poor feedback looks like – Weaver, 2006; Carless, 2006; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006)

Guidelines for effective feedback? Effectiveness depends on more than measures related to quantity and quantity (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010).

Poor feedback – ambiguous, negative, late, uncertain about criteria and contexts (Huxham, 2007)

Impact of feedback on student learning includes a “relational dimension” (Price et al., 2010).

Effectiveness includes the lecturer’s credibility as well as delivery mode and timeliness (Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

Staff and students all need to understand the purpose of feedback (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005; Price et al., 2010).
Themes from the literature

Feedback involves all aspects of assessment, including examinations (Hounsell et al., 2008).

For engagement with feedback, it is crucial for students to hold a concept of quality similar to that of teachers (Sadler, 1989).

Good feedback helps students develop as self-regulated learners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

How students perceive their learning context and approach their learning is important in engagement (Entwistle, 1991; Gijbels & Dochy, 2006; Reid & Johnson, 1999; all cited in Rowe, Wood, & Petocz, 2008).

Research on students’ perceptions of feedback is thin (Poulos & Mahoney, 2008; Rowe & Wood, 2008), particularly with a specific disciplinary focus.

Research questions

• How effective are the current feedback strategies used in the Social Work program at the Centre for Regional Engagement?

• What are students’ perceptions and experiences of feedback and its impact upon their learning?

• Are there potential gaps between students’ and staff members’ perceptions of the role of feedback in enhancing learning, and how might these differences be resolved?

• What positive steps can be taken to improve feedback strategies used in the Social Work and Rural Practice unit at the CRE?
Project overview

• Literature review  ✔
• Institutional Human Research Ethics Committee approval gained  ✔
• Online student survey  ✔
• Student focus groups  ✔
• Staff interviews  ✔
• Analysis of data from the above  ✔
• Staff workshop  ✔
• Determination and application of strategies  (ongoing)
• Further survey of students  (still to happen)
• Comparison of student performance before and after the intervention  (still to happen)
Data collection and analysis

• Online survey automatically collated data, presenting quantitative data as graphs.
• Qualitative survey data and focus group data were analysed for recurrent themes.
• From these, a unified understanding of students’ experiences and perceptions of feedback was obtained.
Participant profile: online survey

41 out of 126 students enrolled – 32.5% response rate
Whyalla: 70 plus 2 Honours students
Mount Gambier: 54 students

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<td>35%</td>
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Online survey

The online survey, conducted in 2010, included two questions on current enrolment type (FT or PT, internal, external or mixed mode etc.) and year level. The remaining 14 questions focused on feedback.

They were asked:

• for their understanding of the term “feedback”
• how, where, how often and how promptly they received feedback
• how it influenced their learning
• the relative importance for them of grade and comments
• the extent to which they valued teachers’ comments
Online survey

They were also asked

• whether these comments were helpful and easily understood
• whether lecturers’ comments affected them positively or negatively
• whether they preferred to have the opportunity to talk to the lecturer about their feedback, and how they thought this would help their learning
• their general level of satisfaction with feedback, and
• reasons for any dissatisfaction.
Focus group questions

What is your experience with feedback that you receive on your course work and field practicum?  
(timeliness, usefulness, quality and quantity of feedback received, ways of providing)

What kind of feedback have you been receiving in the social work program?

What do you do with feedback that you receive, or how do you act on feedback?

What kind of feedback do you value for your learning and why?  
(any particular form of feedback, e.g. verbal, written, formative only)

What would you suggest should happen to assist you in your learning?  
(strategies suggested on quality, quantity, form or process)
Participant profile: focus groups

14 participants altogether, including one e-mail response from a student unable to attend any of the groups (early 2011)

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Online responses

Different ways of receiving feedback

- Lectures
- Tutorials
- E-mail/Telephone
- Written Assignments
- Peer Group
- Family & Friends

Online responses
Different ways in which feedback is provided

- Written – mark sheet and in text (electronically)
- Verbal immediately after presentations, interviews and role play
- Peer feedback in some courses
- Discussion board comments
- Generalised class feedback
- Directing to other resources
- On placement (practicum)
**Value of feedback in learning – valued feedback**

**Feedback that is valued**

- Detailed (and so detailed marking sheets)
- Constructive – with indications of how to improve
- Specific (rather than overall comments)
- Explanatory
- Provision of exemplars
- Extending engagement with the topic area
- Written – so that it could be referred to later

**Value in learning and motivation**

- Important or very important (95%)
- Moderately important (5%)
- Unimportant (0%)
Influence of feedback on learning

- Corrects errors 70.7%
- Identifies gaps in knowledge 80.5%
- Explains ways to improve academic writing 58.5%
- Suggests ways to structure my writing 53.7%
- Shows my level of achievement against the marking criteria 73.2%
- Identifies strengths and encourages me to do better on future assignments 68.3%
- Feedback does not influence my learning 4.8%
General level of satisfaction

From the online survey:

90% satisfaction reported
90% satisfied with quality
90% agreement on comprehensibility of feedback

A limitation must be acknowledged: students who were keen to be involved in the voluntary survey may have acted upon and benefited from their feedback more than those who did not participate.
Main reasons for dissatisfaction of minority:

- Limited feedback on assessed work
- Lack of clarity, elaboration
- Lack of discussion on assignments in tutorials
Quality and quantity

• **Quality**
  – 90%: easy to understand and helpful
  – 10%: difficult to understand and therefore unhelpful

• **Quantity** – sometimes inadequate, not sufficiently detailed to be helpful

• **Form**
  – 49%: written only
  – 46.5%: written and verbal

• **Feedback v grade**
  – Very few (20%) considered only feedback important
  – **78% felt both feedback and grade were important**
  – 2% felt grade was sufficient

• **Timing of feedback**
  – Generally timely (within 15 working days)
  – Late return (32%)
  – Only occasional (59%)
  – Not as frequently as expected (41%)
Quality and quantity

Specific attributes for year level and achievement level
- “In depth, detail feedback for 1st years”
- “an area to focus more” for high achievers

Comment:
“the better the marks you get, the less comments you get”
Preference for dialogue with tutor

• Approximately 50 per cent preferred to have conversations.
• The rest either preferred not to, or had not considered this.
• It helps in various ways:
  • Clarifies misunderstandings
  • Builds a relationship with the tutor
  • Verbal feedback suits some students’ preferred learning styles
Barriers to effective feedback

• Differences and inconsistencies between staff → confusion
• Limited, or no suggestions for improvement
• Negative comments without clearly indicating errors and corrections
• Discouraging effect
• Lateness, limiting usefulness for the next assignment
The affective domain

- Effect of negative feedback $\rightarrow$ stress, fear
- Lack of positive feedback $\rightarrow$ frustration, even when the grade was good
- Late return of assignments $\rightarrow$ anxiety
- Positive feedback $\rightarrow$ increased self-esteem and confidence $\rightarrow$ motivation to perform better

Survey response –
Positive feedback – provides motivation to perform better (82.5%)
Negative feedback – impacts negatively (17.5%)
Acting on feedback

• Seeking clarification from lecturer (in person or by e-mail)
  – Then following up directions to improve things, consult Course Information Booklet, academic learning adviser, other resources etc.

• Using it as “another learning resource”
  “so I know that there are particular things I need to improve on. I mark them off as I’m doing my assignment so I have improved on those, and keep going on with that”.

• Devising strategies for approaching subsequent assignments
  – Use an assignment planner with previous feedback included for reference
  – Avoid doing things that had been identified previously as inappropriate

  “OK. Don’t forget to do these things, because they are the things that you’re missing.”

(Students’ experience and perceptions of feedback have been described in Goel & Ellis, 2011.)
Seven interviews – 6 in May 2011 and 1 in July:

- 5 Whyalla-based staff
- 2 Mount Gambier-based staff (by telephone)
- Audio-recorded and transcribed
- Facilitated by a non-teaching staff member
Interview schedule

- What is feedback to you?
- What is your experience of receiving feedback as a student?
- What is your experience of giving feedback as a teacher?
- Does your experience of receiving it affect the way you give it?
- How do you see the value of providing feedback for engaging students in their learning?
- In what ways do you provide feedback to your students?
- Do you do anything to help students to learn from feedback?
- Do you refer them to other sources of help/guidance?
- How do you think feedback could be improved to engage students in their learning?
- Any specific professional development needs?
Teachers’ definitions of feedback

- Finding out levels of understanding, knowledge or skill gaps, areas for improvement, strengths
- “Constructive criticism”
- Responding to what has been communicated
- Giving an idea of students’ performance
- Inspiring further reflection
- Assisting professional development
Students’ conceptualisation of feedback

• Written or verbal comments on assessed work
• Information about assessment provided by lecturer/tutor
• Information on current performance level:
  – Constructive criticism
  – Critical assessment
• Help for “future learning”;
  “guide for improvement”

They were “conscientious consumers” (Higgins et al., 2002, p. 59), and thought up some creative strategies to make effective use of feedback.
How does experience affect practice?

- Desire to replicate the good feedback that they themselves had received, remembering its importance to them
- Determination not to repeat for their students their own experiences of poor feedback
- Need for constant reminders, while grading assignments, to highlight the positives.
Students and teachers – commonalities

• Frustration at receiving only a grade with no comments – no opportunity to develop/improve
• Appreciation of positive feedback indicating areas to work on
• Advantage of the small campus situation for clarifying feedback etc.
• Consistency valued, but recognition of time pressures etc. working against this
• Awareness of emotional aspects of feedback and influence of outside events on academic performance
• Expectation of congruence between grade and feedback
• Appreciation of being able to talk to teachers about feedback
• Valuing feedback that extended their thinking
Examining these gaps can help us to see where the emphasis should be put to improve things.

- What teachers see as constructive may be seen as negative and demoralising by students.
- Differing ideas of the quantity and quality of feedback wanted by students
- Differing expectations on acceptable standards of work
- What teachers and students regard as common sense! (e.g. teachers assuming that students will read feedback)
- Teacher and student beliefs about the transferability of feedback to assist with later work
- Students’ desire for exemplars not accommodated by all teachers
- Teacher and student views of the importance/necessity for feedback on final assignments/examinations
Students’ suggestions

Written Feedback
• Comprehensive
• Clear
• Explanatory
• Detailed
• Constructive
• Comments on all mark sheet criteria
• More examples

Lecturer Focus
• Recognition of different learning style
• Available and offer for personal appointment
• Individual debrief
• End of semester interview
• Sandwich approach (both positive and negative feedback)

Institutional Focus
• More helpful resources
• Definite standardised feedback format
• Generalised exam feedback
• Timely feedback
• Staged assessments
Suggestions for improvement involved:

- Consistency – but would this mean less feedback?
- Time constraints – guides to help tutors with marking
- Improvement in timeliness of feedback
- Accessible workshops on giving effective feedback
- Sharing helpful articles
- Efficient ways of professional development (e.g. “In a Nutshell” – http://breeze.unisa.edu.au/learn)
- Models of papers of different standards to guide tutors in their marking
- Exemplars for students (not all agree)
Strategies

Strategies to be adopted are in the areas of:

• Preparing ourselves to give good feedback
  – Learn from others (colleagues, literature) – good practice, others’ innovations
  – Learn from the students – their feedback and evaluations

• Preparing students to learn from feedback
  – Teach students explicitly how to prepare for getting good feedback
    (by examining assignment requirements and marking sheet criteria)
  – Aim to enhance overall student engagement – engaged students will be more responsive to feedback and learn from it

• Giving feedback
  – Use staged assessments and multi-stage tasks
  – Accentuate the positive in the feedback provided
  – Use questions as part of feedback to stimulate thought
  – Moderate assignment marking to ensure consistency among all teachers
Conclusion

• Effective feedback – positive implications for student engagement with their learning
• Advantages of the regional learning and teaching context → smaller classes → easier to get to see lecturers for one-to-one discussions
• Consistency in marking and feedback desired
• More emphasis needed on positive feedback, with recognition of marker’s power to have an impact on the student
• Gaps to be addressed between students’ and academics’ perceptions, despite many commonalities.
Implications

• While the findings represent the experiences of students studying social work at a regional campus, they provide lessons for other situations.
• Insights gained will guide measures to be implemented that are inclusive of all ages, year levels and achievement levels.
• Institutional resources are needed for staff development in effective feedback practices.
• Awareness-raising concerning the types of feedback most valued by students can help academics to tailor their feedback so that it is more likely to be read and acted upon.
References


