Does This Make Sense? Student Perceptions of Assessment Criteria

Abstract

This project set out to improve the effectiveness of the feedback received by students in Anglia Law School. The trigger for this was our annual period of reflection on the NSS results, specifically those relating to feedback. Despite considerable progress in this respect, resulting from focusing on the quality and accessibility of feedback, a doubt remained. Are we treating the symptoms rather than the cause of the evident lack of satisfaction with feedback? An examination of the relevant literature confirms that there is a perception gap between students’ understanding of assessment criteria and the intended meaning tutors intend to convey. The effectiveness of feedback rests not only on its quality and timeliness but also requires a common understanding between tutor and student concerning the assessment criteria relating to that assessment task: without this missing link, feedback cannot fulfil its intended purpose of feeding forward into subsequent work. The merits of a variety of formats for feedback sheets were examined and a prototype developed which takes the module learning outcomes as the starting point both for detailed assessment criteria and the format of written feedback, thereby aligning module learning outcomes, assessment design, marking criteria and feedback into a seamless process.

Keywords

assessment criteria, feedback

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Background
There has been much concern over the relatively low scores in the NSS relating to the questions on feedback (both within Anglia Ruskin and elsewhere) and considerable efforts have been made to improve the quality of feedback students receive on their work. Despite this, student satisfaction concerning feedback remains lower than for other aspects of the learning experience. Reflection on the results for Anglia Law School led to a questioning of whether the problem has deep roots. Are students finding feedback of limited use because of a lack of shared perception of how the feedback relates to the assessment task? Although, undoubtedly, a clearly articulated and shared understanding of the language of feedback itself (and how to use it) is essential, this may not be sufficient. Making sense of feedback requires students to make sense of the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for the assessment task in the first place and for these links to be explicit. The usefulness of initiatives to improve feedback is compromised where this link is weak.

My starting question therefore was to reflect on whether we are, in our attempts to address the usefulness of feedback to our students, looking at the symptoms not the root cause of the malady. Rather than making sometimes frenetic attempts to increase the volume, format, frequency and modes of feedback, would it be better to dig deeper and examine whether what we think we are saying aligns with what our students think we are saying? As course designers, we are initiates in the language of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. We cannot assume that our students arrive in higher education with familiarity with the nuanced and complex discourse involved. As Williams notes (2005, p. 157) ‘Gaining access to these discourse communities, however, requires a careful apprenticeship that is more problematic than many academics and students recognise’. This project therefore embarked on an attempt to rewrite assessment criteria and grade descriptors and embed these within feedback to students with the intention that this will shed some light on how to improve the effectiveness of feedback. Feedback, in order to be effective, needs to be part of the learning process rather than an external reflection on it and depends on the development of a common understanding between students and tutors.

Existing Research
A considerable body of research has looked at the extent to which students interpret feedback, and significant gaps in relative perceptions have been identified (see the bibliography below for a selection). The language used in the paper titles is telling and consistent: ‘Speaking the same language’; ‘Getting the message across’; ‘Know what I mean?’; ‘Mind the gap’. All point to the same conclusion: our attempts to improve student satisfaction with feedback will be in vain if we do not close this communication gap. There is a general recognition that feedback is ‘an essential component in the learning cycle’ (Weaver, 2006, p. 379), but the extent to which students understand, and are able to make use of, feedback to inform future work is limited. A greater emphasis on dialogue is required to rectify this (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010, p. 22). The misalignment between students’ and tutors’ understanding is probably generally underestimated by tutors. Maclellan (2001), in a very detailed study in the context of undergraduate education students, has identified a significant gap between students’ and tutors’ responses to a range of statements, including ‘Feedback is helpful’ and ‘Feedback improves learning’. For both of these statements, almost 50% of tutors felt that in both cases this was ‘Frequently’ true, while only 12-15% students agreed. Similarly, research in Australia (Channock, 2000) found that about half of a sample of students had not understood the specific comment that their work had too much description and not enough analysis (undoubtedly a comment very commonly used by tutors).

Ashcroft’s recent paper (2010) has provided a comprehensive overview of the research into law students’ understanding of feedback. With the title ‘Speaking the same language?’, he identifies a significant gap between the feedback given and the degree to which it is understood and acted upon. As he notes: ‘this raises serious issues about, for example, the extent to which feedback fulfils its general purpose in helping students learn.’

Developing a New Approach
This project coincided with a series of discussions and pilot studies at Faculty level concerning the provision of feedback. Some pilots were undertaken in other Departments as well as the Law School, with different formats, which would enable feedback to be produced electronically rather than in handwritten form, and to increase the level of detail (whilst also being efficient in the demands made on tutors’ time). Anglia Law School has already introduced a system of word-processed feedback for all modules with a
standard template which includes a number of headings such as ‘Content’, ‘Structure’ and ‘Points to improve future work’.

Following on from the examination of the existing literature which confirmed the original premise, the following points were central to the development of a revised approach to feedback sheets within the Law School:

- An acceptance that feedback is an integral part of the learning process, and should not be a detached summative moment, and therefore the mechanisms employed to deliver feedback needs to be integrated at the earliest stage of planning assessment tasks.
- The design of feedback sheets needs to be aligned with both the module learning outcomes and the assessment criteria for the individual task.
- There is a gap in understanding which is the result of the tacit meanings inherent in academic discourse, into which we cannot assume students have been absorbed. In order to become reflective practitioners, they need to acquire a sophisticated understanding of this discourse. Assessment criteria therefore need to be detailed, explicit and provide concrete indications of what is expected in order to enable students to develop this understanding.
- Feedback will only be useful to students if they can make a clear link between the feedback they receive and their understanding of what they should be demonstrating through the assessed task: in other words the student’s understanding of what is meant by a good piece of work must bear a close relationship to that of the tutor.

Possible ways to achieve this were discussed within the Law School at away days. It was decided to pilot revised module-specific feedback sheets which explicitly use the module learning outcomes for its underlying structure. Linked to and derived from the learning outcomes are a set of detailed assessment criteria. The result has the advantage of making a seamless set of links between the feedback, the assessment criteria, the assessment task and the module learning outcomes.

**Outcome and Evaluation**

For a number of reasons (including the desire to take into account the Anglia Ruskin Students’ Union report on assessment feedback, and the University’s Quality Enhancement Audit, both published early in 2011), the timeframe for introducing the new format has been put back a semester. Although this project related to the academic year 2010-11, it will be in the coming academic year that the outcomes will be fully evaluated through student focus groups and made available.

**Bibliography**


