Focusing Feedback to Better Engage First Year Students

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Abstract

It is well recognised, as reflected in recent literature that the complexity of first year transition into university has increased for most student groups. In particular, the literature acknowledges the dramatic pace of change in the higher education landscape which impacts on the first year experience as well as on teaching staff. When commencing students struggle to understand expectations then risks of students failing or withdrawing prematurely may also increase. Consequently, traditional approaches to assessment and feedback within universities are often ineffective in supporting tutors to help student to attain their best work. This paper reports on two small studies focused on first year students' perceptions about grades and sources of feedback. Based on these outcomes, the literature and my own reflections about all of these, I suggest how more targeted feedback can help tutors to better support students to become more engaged in their learning.

Focusing Feedback to Better Engage First Year Students

Introduction

The paper is informed primarily by my background as a university teacher where over the years, I have become increasingly concerned that we need to create new and different forms of learning to better focus feedback and to be more transparent in our assessment practices. As well, it seems harder to engage our students in all these processes. This paper explores some strategies for achieving consistent and transparent standards in assessment and more effective application of feedback, especially when there are multiple tutors involved in assessing students' work. To clarify some terminology and processes before moving on, in my university a course is what some others term a subject, or a module, usually about 13 weeks duration and these usually comprise a weekly lecture of the whole student enrolment and several smaller group tutorials of around 20 to 30 students in each. In terms of assessment, in my university we have around three points where this occurs, the first needing to be in the fourth or fifth week of a course with considerable emphasis placed on the provision of early feedback to all students.

Assessment and feedback practices vary across Australian universities but in recent times additional pressures towards conformity and economy, combined with a heightened concern about flexibility and creativity in our students' learning experiences, have stretched the imagination of most university teachers. Both Australian and USA university students' backgrounds of preparation for tertiary study have changed (Dobson, Sharma & Haydon1997; Cameron 1999; James, McInnis & Devlin 2002; Oblinger 2003; Porter & Swing 2006; Mason Webber, Singleton & Hughes 2006). Consequently, as academics we frequently struggle to achieve learning conditions that are accessible, relevant and able catch and maintain our students' interest and engagement in their own learning. Increasingly too, students arrive with unclear expectations about university life and struggle to meet the demands they encounter in their first year of study. Ramsden (2003, p.4) notes the range of pressures in academia to perform against principles of competition and accountability, along with expectations to deal creatively and responsively 'with an unprecedentedly broad spectrum of student ability and background'. As well, it is necessary to 'inspire students with zero tolerance for delay whose minds are probably on their next part-time job rather than on the pleasures of learning (Ramsden 2003, and Oblinger 2003, p.6). Eight years ago, McInnis, James & Hartley (2000) also noted a trend of lower attachment, engagement and commitment by students, both to study and to the more general aspects of university life. Many students work longer hours in paid employment, or are mature people with a range of responsibilities for caring for families. These trends have developed further in recent years (Oblinger 2003; Porter & Swing 2006; Mason Webber, Singleton & Hughes 2006).

Whilst acknowledging this diverse range of pressures on today's students and academics, Ramsden recommends however that we see these demands as reasons to teach more effectively and that we do this best 'by studying our students' learning' (2003, pp.5-6) and by finding ways to engage them in their experiences. As Gittens (2007, p.3) states '…when students are pedagogically engaged in how they best learn, their interest in and enthusiasm for learning is greatly heightened'. Lawrence (2002, p.9) makes the point, in agreement with Ramsden (2003) that flexibility in the philosophies and policies of tertiary learning institutions is especially important now given the greater diversity of student background, but that this is no justification for ineffective teaching and learning practices. Accepting our key roles in nurturing student engagement as self-aware learners is preferable to regretting times past or blaming the system and our students. McInnis and Krause (2002) agree that student identity is now, more than ever, a negotiated one so that that students' engagement with their learning needs to be much more carefully and deliberately cultured than in the past.

Several writers conceptualise strategies for supporting students' entry to university from the point of view of additional support services. Suggested strategies for building commitment, identity and engagement among first year students include the use of extra study groups (Calder, 2002) and setting up learning communities and mentoring programs with both staff and senior students as mentors (O'Shea, 2002; Grove, 2002). Mackie (2001) suggests that in engaging students we need to recognise four forces - social, organisational, external and individual - as determining students' levels of commitment to university study. Institutional responses to students entering university through diverse pathways must incorporate the provision of accurate initial information about conditions of study, including arrangements for students with prior credit for example as part of these students' induction experiences (Cameron, 1999). Dissemination of accurate information about university support services is vital too, for as Beder (1997) notes, many new students admit to not knowing how to use the library on starting university and are unaware of essential requirements in reference to IT/ online processes and the

availability of support services, with over 70% saying they have never used those services offered. A study in 2002 of first year students in our university (Cameron & Tesoriero 2003) and the one conducted in 2007 and which is discussed in this paper, indicate low usage of available support services, including the considerable online resources and face-to-face services of the university library. A first year survey which I ran this year, continued to emphasise the key importance of tutors in the early university experiences of the students.

Many first year students appear to see the university as an alienating and rejecting space and efforts to help student make initial connections and to engage in their learning are clearly important. As found by White (2006, p. 235) many students 'feel they don't matter' especially when their first study experiences include lectures with large numbers, where no one knows their name and where 'they are part of an anonymous mass' (White 2006, p.236). Tutorial groups, which are almost entirely staffed by sessional tutors 'who are rarely contactable outside class hours' (White 2006, p.236), have been demonstrated through out own results as one essential personal space for many students. It is in this location where, in the best instances, students can be known as individuals and where they can discuss their academic work and gain feedback on it from a trusted professional.

The surveys and some results from them
I conducted two surveys in 2007 involving around 100 first year students in the first half of 2007. In *2008*, a similar process was involved to survey the first year student cohort of around 100 students in week 6 about their experiences of university study. Surveys are all anonymous and conducted through an on-line Tell-Us process. All questions were based on either single or multiple choice answers, with some free text options in the 2008 survey, and samples were all obtained through core first year courses.

The *first survey* in 2007 was in week four and a second comparative one was in week ten. In the first survey, an important result was that 70% declared their tutors were their primary source of support in preparing academic work. Around 15% saw other students in their courses and their family as important secondary supports. Other university services, such as through course coordinators, student support services (Learning Connection) and the Library gained lower recognition, in keeping with a former survey (Cameron & Tesoriero 2003). In the second survey in 2007, students were asked again to estimate from whom they gained the most useful feedback. The vast majority (70%) continued to see tutors as the best source of written feedback and for discussion based on this feedback. Family members were seen as a good support by 20%, other students by 15% and all other university forms of support were included by only around 5%.

When they were asked in 2007, '*What helped you to keep going with your study when it seemed too hard?*' near the end of the study period, students' own families were seen as very important by 45%, friends outside and inside university by 30%, tutors by 20% and other university staff by around 5%. Of some concern however, is that for students without a secure family or friendship base, support may be harder to locate when things get tough. A low usage pattern persisted for Learning Connection and Library staff in reference to academic and other types of support. These results are also in keeping with those found by McInnis, James & Hartley (2000) and Cameron & Tesoriero (2004) who note that modern pressures on students' time prevent many from accessing both formal and informal support services at university.

Students' confidence in their own study success was higher in week four than in week ten. Lack of confidence scores were recorded by 23% of students surveyed in week 4 but in the second survey, 40% expressed lack of confidence. This may reflect the intrusion of reality, as towards

the close of the semester they had all experienced mounting study pressure and the return of several marked papers. When we asked them to estimate their grade level on academic work in week 4, 7% thought they would gain distinctions or above and this does not shift much in the week 10 results on a question about what grades they *had* received. This could reflect that *high-performing students* can more accurately predict their grades or maybe it reflects their more effective study habits. In terms of the majority, in week four, over 80% estimated they expected to achieve high passes or credits but in week 10, only 57% were actually performing within this grade range – a slippage of 23% in terms of accurate prediction. Only 1% predicted they might gain fails but in fact 17% did so. Thus, many would have experienced some disappointment in their grades and this may account, at least in part, for the drop in confidence over the semester as demonstrated in the results.

The gap between academic expectation and reality appears to widen for those middle-of-the-road students who achieved pass level grades when the expected to achieve much better. These results underline the importance of providing early form of accurate and useful feedback to assist students to achieve at levels more in keeping with their hopes and expectations. Around 60% thought marking was unfair and too hard in some courses. Survey results in 2007 indicate that while students do seem to have a reasonably accurate view of what level of performance is needed to gain the various grades *at a theoretical level*, for many students this understanding does not seem to translate into clear expectations about their own personal attainment levels.

A 2008 survey of first year students targeting sources of support in first year, continued to underline how important sessional tutors are in the life of students. Tutors were seen as friendly and helpful tutors by 90% and over 85% saw knowing how to contact their tutor as really important, suggesting the problem noted by White (2006) about hard-to-contact tutors has been addressed. One student wrote, '*I was really scared about starting university as I've been out of school for five years, but you guys have helped to ease us all into uni life and academic work very smoothly. Thanks for putting my fears at ease!*' Another wrote '*I feel very comfortable and confident in my tutorials because my tutor is approachable and supportive*' and another said , '*My tutor has been a really good as he is really helpful and easy to talk to*'. Many other expressed similar thoughts about the helpful and supportive nature of tutorials and their enjoyment of these experiences.

With earlier assessment points the norm in most undergraduate courses, there is an even stronger imperative for students to get up to speed quickly, in using university resources such as the library databases for example and in understanding the expectations and requirements of assessment. In 2008, one student wrote of their struggle to get up to speed, '*I have never owned a computer, and I am also learning how to use one as well as research and complete assignments by due dates*' Another wrote, '*I have found using the Databases through the library difficult. The staff in the library are a fantastic help though*'. In 2008, to target lack of familiarity with these IT and other resources, Library and Learning Connection staff gave two lectures to first year students as part of the lecture program in my course and this helped students to know about and use these forms of educational support. In the *2008 survey*, between 80% and 90% of students mentioned the course lectures by library and Learning Connection staff as really helping them to find literature and to write their first paper. This is a very different result than gained in earlier surveys of our students about educational support services and indicates the success of this tactic.

Whilst recognising the increased importance of targeted student services, results from the surveys in both 2007 and 2008, show that for most students the *tutorial setting* remains *the primary location* for their support and learning. In both surveys tutors came up tops in all questions about support for and feedback on students' academic work. These results underline

the importance of targeted tutor induction and the provision of key teaching resources and support for tutors who are sessionally or casually employed.

A primary task for sessional tutors, as well as assessing students' work, is to creatively build students' individual commitment and to nurture their engagement in learning. However, there may be up to fifteen tutorials in many first year courses, often with as many tutors. Tutorial sizes run between 20 and 30 students in each, depending on the nature of the material taught. Individual attention to students' learning needs, the provision of *consequential feedback* and the issue of *assessment transparency and consistency* thus all require mindful prioritising in the tutorial setting, as these underline student academic success.

Consequential Feedback in Assessment and Learning
Focusing feedback well and presenting it at key stages in students' learning experiences is important in engaging students in their learning. Feedback is only considered to be *consequential* when it can be used by students to improve their performance. Well timed feedback on early assignments, with clear descriptors of different levels of students' work in reference to grade standards, is consequential in that it provides students with opportunities and encouragement to review their work and to build on the feedback to produce better work in the next assignment. For some students however, grades seem like unnegotiable sentences and feedback is a litany of what they have done wrong and may be painful to take in. Orrell adds that 'This is not a problem of student motivation but an omission in educational design because of a failure to construe assessment and feedback as pivotal to teaching and learning' (Orrell 2006, p.443).

In some universities, "sudden death" assessment still happens where students are left in the dark about what to expect on a large final exam for example, or other final forms of academic assessment. For feedback to be considered *consequential*, it needs to matter to students and be used as a basis for improving their further work. Feedback on papers or exams *after the course has finished* is not consequential then, for the vast majority of students. In our school about 20% of students do not bother to collect final assignments, suggesting the mark or grade is valued above feedback or that feedback at this point no longer matters. When this occurs, as Orrell suggests happens in such situations, 'Student response to feedback is largely optional' (2006, p.443). It is accepted that some form of final assessment may need to occur towards the end of many courses but detailed feedback at this point is often unrelated to students' learning. It may also form an unnecessary marking burden for tutors that bring few results in terms of students' further learning. The place for detailed feedback is at earlier points in students' experience – throughout the first half of the study period or the course – where it is used to build cognitive connections for students, with alignment between assessment, grading, feedback and learning. As Orrell states, 'without this alignment, assessment becomes merely a postscript for learning and teaching' (2006, p. 441).

To be useful and *consequential*, feedback has to focus on *what has been done well* in assessed work, what *needs improving* and *how to go about this* within a time frame to permit application of the feedback to further efforts. In other words, feedback is *contextualised* as part of an ongoing teaching and learning journey over the study period and is not reserved just for pieces of formal writing and especially not primarily for large "sudden-death" final assessment pieces. Opportunities for students to improve their standard of work on early pieces of assessment - such as on a written test or a paper – allows them to work on the feedback points *before* submitting more final work. This is all about producing *consequential learning moments*. Feedback used thus becomes a central and continuous motif in an engaged learning journey.

Assessment Transparency and Clarity in Consequential Feedback

Students' concern about their grades and the fairness of these, as reflected in some of the 2007 results, indicates the importance of clear and transparent grade standards in university course processes. When there are multiple assessors/tutors, the challenge is that of providing an accountable, transparent, supportive and consistent set of processes in grading students' work, to counter lack of consistency. James, McInnis & Devlin (2002:19) recognise however that 'it is wise to be wary of excessive claims of objectivity in higher education assessment'. As well, there is the tension between a tutor supporting students in producing assessable work by offering encouraging feedback, and then assessing and grading the work of these same students. This is the old assess/assist dilemma, where a tutor's feelings (positive or negative) about students can interfere with consistency and impartiality in assessment and grading standards. To attempt to manage bias in assessment, some academics pool all papers, so tutors do not mark papers from their own tutorial groups. The point I made previously, about the importance of the learning relationship between student and tutor, suggests this is not a preferred option. Of course it is important to monitor tutors' marking standards and the grade spread within and between tutors and to do this without compromising clear feedback and grading.

In large courses assessment transparency and consistency may need to be supported through a range of strategies. McInnis & Devlin (2002:19) add that 'students who understand goals and standards and who are encouraged to study towards them are likely to have better learning outcomes'. Students and tutors need to understand the assessment criteria and the guidelines used in assessing students work. An example of an assessment form I use is included as an appendix to this paper. Complex marking criteria are best avoided partly to limit tutors' marking loads as supported by Brown et al (1997, p.53), but also to achieve greater clarity for tutors and students and to enable the monitoring of assessment tasks. Tutors who are more experienced may be asked to complete a sample assessment of a few papers for the teaching team to discuss, perhaps guided by model answers provided by the course coordinator. A norm-referenced process may be applied at this point to identify any grading issues needing further attention. If a lot of students in all tutorial groups are failing or gaining high distinctions for example, it may indicate course expectations are too high or too low, that student year cohorts have special characteristics or that there are other assessment problems. If all salient intervening variables have been considered and there are still issues with all or some tutors' grades, then a review of some tutors' grade standards and marks may be indicated. Ideally, all decisions related to marks and grades are fully worked through between tutors and the course coordinator before assignments are returned to students.

James et al (2002, p.31) agree with me that 'developing criteria, guides, exemplars and models; discussing and refining them and communicating them to students and other staff' is good practice. Although they admit this may have 'an initial impact on workload for staff with coordinating responsibilities', they say there are at least three clear gains in supporting overall assessment, teaching and learning. These are 'reduction in the time required for marking due to a higher quality of student submission'; 'a resolution of some of the potential issues likely when many staff are involved in marking and grading', and 'the availability of clear criteria and examples of work' (James et al 2002, p.31). When students' learning is underpinned by trusting relationships with their tutors, then this is further reinforced by open discussion about feedback, results from assessment tasks and the potential in student's work. Student engagement in their learning is impacted positively and deeply by supportive contexts and positive relationships.

Summary

This paper has suggested some directions for increasing student interest in their learning through imbedding educational support, consequential feedback and consistent assessment and grading processes in first year university courses. Some context of student opinion about these matters suggests the tutorial is a vital and central location for student learning and the role of the tutor is clearly paramount in engaging students in this process. A range of unique pressures within modern universities, combined with students' diverse needs, place demands on academic staff. Assessment practices within universities become over-formalised and may escape review that enables productive change to occur. Institutional change across the curriculum is worth the effort however, as building situations where feedback is supportive and consequential in reference to assessment helps nurture partnerships between academic staff and students, where engaged student learning becomes the central motif.

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Appendix: Example of Assessment/Feedback Form

University of South Australia			**Assessment feedback** **Communication for Human Service**			
			School of Social Work and Social Policy			
Assignment 1: Short Essay – 800 words 15% of final grade - Due: On AssignIT Sunday March 31st 2008						
The Graduate qualities being assessed by this assignment are: Demonstration and application of a body of knowledge (GQ1) that supports the development of an argument that addresses a problem (GQ3) in an ethical way (GQ5) clearly communicated in academic essay writing style (GQ6). Information literacy and referencing skills (GQ2). Your ability to work autonomously (GQ4) and to relate to international perspectives (GQ7) may also be demonstrated in this assignment.						

Quality	**Key components of this assignment**		**Mark, Grade & Rating of level of work on each parameter**				
Note: Remember to include this completed assessment with your final Essay due on May 18th			**HD/D level work** An exceptional or very good piece of work in every regard. Have met and/or exceeded all the expected requirements.	**Credit level** A sound attempt exhibiting good quality work in some areas. Have met most of the requirements.	**Pass level 1** A sound attempt. Have met some of the expected requirements.	**Pass level 2** Just passable. Have not met many of the expected requirements	**Fail 1 or 2 level** Not passable - some or most areas need much improvement. Have not met the expected requirements for tertiary level. Do not appear to understand the topic or the requirements.
Title and Introduction	**The introduction shows a sound grasp of the question and provides a clear outline of the scope of the essay. The topic is well introduced and the scope of the essay is clearly defined.**	**/8**					
Logical Development & Subject relevance	**The material is logically organised and sequenced. The content demonstrates clear relevance. There is** no superfluous information.	**/10**					
Definitions and explanations	**The essay demonstrates an understanding of the topic with accurate definitions and explanations of key terms and concepts.**	**/8**					
Use of reference sources	Demonstrated use of relevant literature from both journals and textbook sources. Evidence of extensive reading.	**/10**					

Understanding of topic	All main issues understood, explored and evaluated and conclusion justified. The essay topic is thoroughly addressed.	/10					
Conclusion	Good concluding section which draws together the various points made, including summary of the main points and relevance of these.	/8					
Presentation of References	Thorough, clear, appropriate use of Harvard referencing for all references, easy to trace, full list of end references included.	/10					
Spelling and language	Appropriate spelling and use of coherent academic language.	/10					
Style, grammar and syntax	Clear and well constructed sentences, focused on a single or a few points. Well written paragraphs that contain a single or a few themes. Sentences are well organized and coherent. Clear, concise, writing that is easy to read & follow.	/10					
Length	Length is around the set word limit	/8					
Overall presentation	Neat, legible type, appropriate spacing and layout, use of headings and subheadings where appropriate. Cover sheet and marking form included.	/8					

Areas in the shaded areas above are ones you will need to work on before the next assignment

This form meets the 2006 and 2007 requirements of UniSA's Code of Good Practice: Student Assessment

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University of South Australia	Assessment feedback **Communication for Human Service**
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Note: Remember to include this completed assessment with your final Essay due on May 18th			**HD/D level work** An exceptional or very good piece of work in every regard. Have met and/or exceeded all the expected requirements.	**Credit level** A sound attempt exhibiting good quality work in some areas. Have met most of the requirements.	**Pass level 1** A sound attempt. Have met some of the expected requirements.	**Pass level 2** Just passable. Have not met many of the expected requirements	**Fail 1 or 2 level** Not passable - some or most areas need much improvement. Have not met the expected requirements for tertiary level. Do not appear to understand the topic or the requirements.
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Logical Development & Subject relevance	The material is logically organised and sequenced. The content demonstrates clear relevance. There is no superfluous information.	/10					
Definitions and explanations	The essay demonstrates an understanding of the topic with accurate definitions and explanations of key terms and concepts.	/8					
Use of reference sources	Demonstrated use of relevant literature from both journals and textbook sources. Evidence of extensive reading.	/10					

Understanding of topic	All main issues understood, explored and evaluated and conclusion justified. The essay topic is thoroughly addressed.	/10					
Conclusion	Good concluding section which draws together the various points made, including summary of the main points and relevance of these.	/8					
Presentation of References	Thorough, clear, appropriate use of Harvard referencing for all references, easy to trace, full list of end references included.	/10					
Spelling and language	Appropriate spelling and use of coherent academic language.	/10					
Style, grammar and syntax	Clear and well constructed sentences, focused on a single or a few points. Well written paragraphs that contain a single or a few themes. Sentences are well organized and coherent. Clear, concise, writing that is easy to read & follow.	/10					
Length	Length is around the set word limit	/8					
Overall presentation	Neat, legible type, appropriate spacing and layout, use of headings and subheadings where appropriate. Cover sheet and marking form included.	/8					
Areas in the shaded areas above are ones you will need to work on before the next assignment							

This form meets the 2006 and 2007 requirements of UniSA's Code of Good Practice: Student Assessment