AN EXPLORATION OF TUTOR FEEDBACK ON ESSAYS AND DEVELOPMENT OF A FEEDBACK GUIDANCE TOOL

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Introduction

The provision of appropriate feedback on assessed work to students in higher education has long been a topic of concern, not least at The Open University, UK (OU). Although The OU has a reputation for excellence in the assignment feedback provided to students (Gibbs, 2010), ongoing experience of OU academics is that students do not always appear to be responding to, or even in some cases reading, the tutor feedback. As established by Hattie and Timperley (2007), an essential aspect of providing feedback is discovering how students have interpreted it. In the OU distance-learning context, students typically do not contact their tutors to discuss the feedback on their assignments and frequently tutors are working somewhat in the dark with respect to how their feedback is received. This paper discusses some of the challenges raised by this situation typically experienced within the OU distance-learning model and reports on an investigation of patterns of tutor feedback in the context of written assignments in a health and social care module.

A second stage of the project reported here is the testing of a tool or guide intended to support tutors to unpack the academic language surrounding feedback on academic writing. For example, what does it mean if an essay needs 'more depth' or a student's writing is 'too descriptive'? How can a student replicate 'good structure;' next time if it is not clear what they did well last time? The tool aimed to meet three outcomes for students: to understand the rationale for their marks; to know what to work on next time and how to do it; to feel empowered and motivated to take control of and continue their studies. It will discuss the issues raised by tutors' efforts to apply the guidance.

Background literature

Recent studies of feedback on student assignments have highlighted retrospective feedback (feedback on the specific content and skills demanded by the assignment) outweighing that which is future-altering (feedback on generic skills and content), and also a deficiency in feedback on skills (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011). It has been argued that such imbalances may impair students' chances to respond positively in developing their academic writing skills (Walker, 2009) as well as their broader learning strategies (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Walker (2009) also claimed that more attention needs to be paid to explanations accompanying tutor

feedback. Table 1 shows Chetwynd and Dobbyn's (2011) matrix indicating four main feedback domains: retrospective on content or skills, and future-altering on content or skills, which has been applied to tutor marking guidance on an OU technology course.

Table 1: A feedback matrix, from Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011)

	Retrospective	**Future-altering**
Content		
Skills		

In addition to the technical and structural aspects of written feedback, there is also widespread recognition of the influence of the affective domain in feedback practices (Molloy et al., 2013; Carless, 2006). Emotions such as fear of failure or a sense of actual failure can interfere with a student's interpretation of feedback (Knight & Yorke, 2003), and awareness of this student vulnerability can also result in tutors delivering feedback designed to preserve a student's dignity (Molloy et al., 2013). Moreover, it has been established that 'first-year' students particularly need to be supported in the emotional aspects of learning, such as when receiving and interpreting assignment feedback (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Barnett (2007) has offered further insights, suggesting that there is performance involved in the act of assignment writing. The 'performance' is two-fold: 'reaching out to an audience' (in the OU setting, this is the tutor) and the performance involved in using language to create academic arguments (Barnett, 2007, p79). Barnett also discusses the element of personal investment in academic work, proposing that submitting an assignment is an act of proffering a gift. His suggestion that students are vulnerable to fear of rebuke and criticism in response to the 'gift' of an essay provokes further reflection on the transactional nature of assessment. Alongside the emotional context of assignment writing, there is also potential for miscommunication between students and academics. For example, we cannot assume that students will understand the language that academics and tutors use in guidance on academic skills (Higgins et al., 2002).

The context of the study

K101 'An introduction to health and social care' is a core introductory undergraduate module for the Faculty of Health & Social Care at The OU. As well as providing an overview of experiences and practices in health and social care and introducing theoretical concepts, K101 also has a role in developing study skills in a way that is accessible to a 'widening participation' audience. Additionally, K101 is an integral part of The OU's social work degree, in which the professional body mandates that all tutors provide feedback to students on the standard of writing in their assignments. During a project aimed at providing targeted writing development support for K101 students who were particularly challenged by academic essay writing, it became apparent that the technical aspects of essay writing could not be separated from students' personal struggles to understand the content of the module, the expectations of assessed work, and what it means to study at HE level.

We realised that K101 students might not always understand or be able to respond appropriately to the written feedback. It became clear that there was a chain of communication events, each of which was vulnerable to misinterpretation, from the intentions of the academic writing the question, the student guidance and tutor marking guidance, the diverse understandings of the genre of essays in HSC and what constituted a good essay writing style. Small-scale investigations of the student experiences of writing essays and tutor experience of supporting essay writing at the OU (e.g. Donohue & Coffin, 2012), indicated that students and academics or tutors could potentially make very different sense of the requirements of an essay task.

In 2011/12 the introduction of self-reflective questions in two K101 tutor-marked assignments (TMAs), aimed at encouraging students to engage with their tutors' feedback and reflect their responses back to the tutor, provided an opportunity to evaluate an aspect of the student-tutor dynamic within this process. The questions, included in TMA 02 and TMA 07, focused on students' perceptions of how they had responded to their tutor's feedback. In both TMAs, students were asked to give very short answers to the questions 'What aspects of your tutor's advice from previous feedback have you tried to use in this assignment?', 'What have you found most difficult about this TMA?' and in TMA07 only, 'How do you view your progress since you started K101?' The focus of the first part of this paper is on the observable distance-tuition interface between student and tutor. It analyses the tutor feedback and the insights students reflected back to their tutors. The second part of the paper summarises a pilot implementation of a tool to facilitate structured explicit and meaningful feedback in K101.

Stage 1: exploring feedback practices and explicit student responses

Aims

This stage aimed to evaluate the relationship between tutor feedback on student essays and student responses to the self-reflective questions. Trends in retrospective and future-oriented feedback, and content and skills feedback were explored during the course. Additionally, the relationship between tutor feedback and student's responses to the feedback documented in their self-reflective notes was evaluated.

Methods

In this longitudinal observational survey, samples of tutor feedback summaries were systematically analysed for 'content and skills' content and their retrospective or future-altering orientations (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011). In addition, student responses corresponding to their tutor's feedback were analysed according to the content or skills orientation. Taking Chetwynd and Dobbyn's (2011) matrix as a starting point, the 'skills' element was further subdivided to take account of the range of writing skills being developed in the course and the clear distinctions being made by the tutors in their feedback. It should be noted that tutors also provided comments on the script, but these were not included in the

study. The final matrix for analysing tutor and student feedback applied seven skill categories, with 'content' as the eighth category (see Table 2).

Table 2: Matrix of content and skills categories for feedback analysis

Content and skills	Tutor retrospective (focused on the marked essay)	Tutor future-oriented (framed as work for future assignments)	Student S-R notes
Study skills: self-organisation, study strategies, providing a word count (as good academic practice), signposting to/offering further resources or support			
Referencing: all referencing skills			
Cognitive skills: ways of handling content – interpreting/answering the question, defining terms, using concepts, and developing an argument			
Content: use of evidence and course materials			
Style: flow, signposting, clarity (beyond basic grammar issues), word contractions, and 'voice' (such as use of first person)			
Structure: organisation of the essay, word count (whether the appropriate length), and paragraphing			
Grammar and spelling: sentence construction and spelling			
Presentation: layout and choice of font			

Sampling

Electronic tutor-marked assignments (eTMAs) were sampled by hand via the eTMA monitoring system, which itself randomly selected marked scripts for quality assurance monitoring. An initial sample of 52 students became depleted, due to some not submitting self-reflective notes, not downloading feedback, or ceasing to submit TMAs. The final sample of 25 students (about 1 ½ per cent of course completers), each with different tutors, provided a complete data set for the purposes of the study. In total, the data comprised 125 samples of tutor feedback on five essays per student/tutor pair, and 50 samples of student self-reflective notes. Although there were seven TMAs altogether, TMA05 was omitted from the study because it was based on a team project rather than material related to the course content.

Selecting and coding the data

The text of the tutor feedback was coded according to the eight content and skills elements and further differentiated into retrospective and future-oriented feedback (see Figure 2). The detailed attributes of the skills categories were developed inductively through working with the samples. The categories of students' reflective notes were similarly documented. 'Cases'

were created to map the 'feedback journey' of individual students and to determine any relationship between tutor feedback and the student's reflections.

Findings

Some tutors had separated their retrospective and forward-feeding feedback on the page. In other cases, tutors had combined retrospective and future-oriented feedback into one sentence or paragraph. Retrospective tutor feedback mostly outweighed future-oriented feedback, particularly for cognitive skills and content. Figure 1 gives an example of the number of tutors using particular categories, showing the prevalence of retrospective feedback for the two feedback categories 'content' and 'cognitive skills'. The most popular category for students was referencing, closely followed by study skills and cognitive skills (see Figure 2). Some of these elements are likely to have been in response to tutor input beyond the TMA feedback summaries.
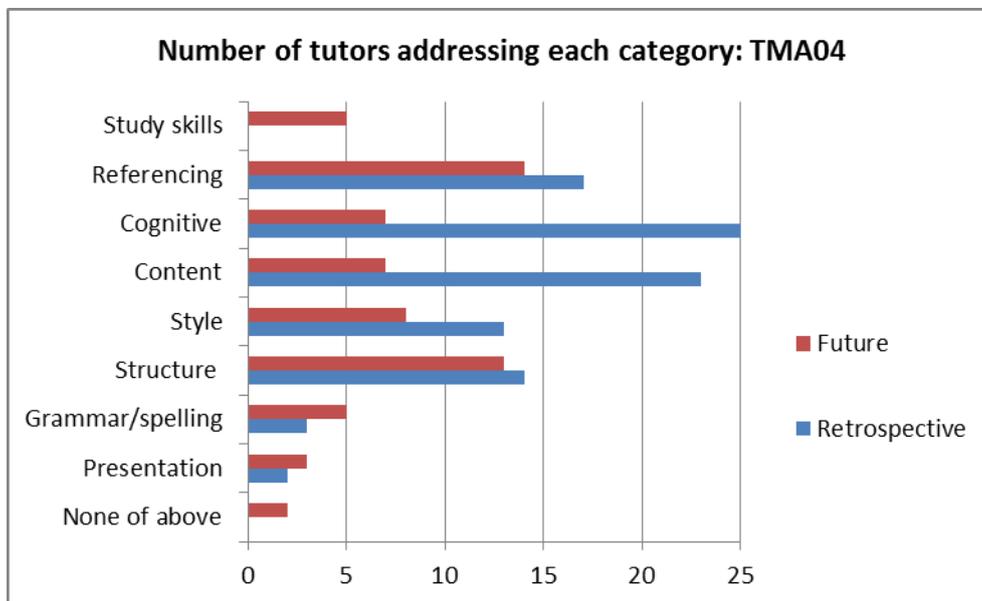

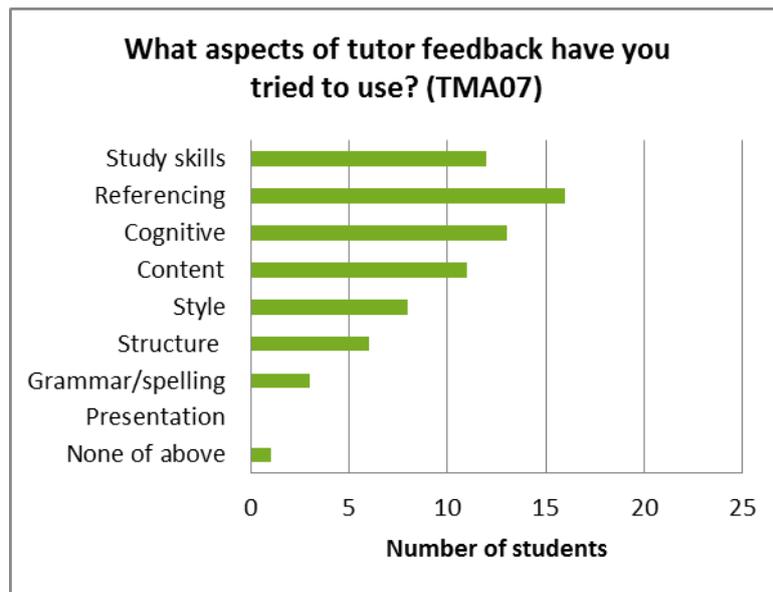Figure 1. Number of tutors (max 25) referring to the designated categories: TMA04

Figure 2. Number of students (max 25) referring to the designated categories

The following two examples of 'cases' show differing patterns of tutor feedback and student responses in their self-reflective notes. They give some indication of the range of feedback patterns observed in the sample through plotting the categories of feedback observed in individual student-tutor cases. In addition to these observations of feedback categories, it was also apparent in the majority of cases that there was scope for increasing the clarity of feedback summaries through improving the structure and by unpacking the jargon. For example, what does it mean if an essay needs 'more depth' or a student's writing is 'too descriptive'? How can a student replicate 'good structure;' next time if it is not clear what exactly was good about the structure last time? In addition to this, it seemed judicious to offer tutors further guidance on how to develop more future-oriented feedback, even though retrospective feedback also appeared to have a future-altering impact (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Student whose writing did not progress smoothly, yet who seemed to recognise the need to develop cognitive skills (r = retrospective tutor feedback; f = future-oriented feedback; SR = student self-reflective notes after TMA01 and 06)

◆	◆				◆					◆	◆	Study skills
◆						◆			◆		◆	Referencing
◆	◆		◆				◆		◆		◆	Cognitive
	◆				◆		◆		◆		◆	Content
◆	◆						◆		◆		◆	Style
◆	◆	◆	◆		◆				◆	◆	◆	Structure
												Grammar and spelling
		◆										Presentation
						◆		◆				None of above
r	f	SR	r	f	r	f	r	f	r	f	SR	
TMA01			TMA02		TMA03		TMA04		TMA06			

Figure 4. Student who made good progress and seemed to respond well to retrospective feedback
(r = retrospective tutor feedback; f = future-oriented feedback; SR = student self-reflective notes
after TMA01 and 06)

Stage 2: developing a tutor feedback tool

A feedback tool, which focused on the tutor's feedback summary, was developed following the analysis of tutor feedback and the corresponding student self-reflective notes reported here. A list of ten principles was proposed, driven by a desire to meet three outcomes for students: to understand the rationale for their marks; to know what to work on next time and how to do it; to feel empowered and motivated to take control of and continue their studies. Space on the feedback forms was premium, and tutors were requested to steer away from complicated sentence padding such as 'You do evidence your ability to…' or 'You do need to focus on ensuring that…'. The tool also specified a consistent structure and urged tutors to double-check their own spelling and sentence construction. The recommended feedback sequence comprised: motivational opening, retrospective feedback on strengths, retrospective feedback on weaknesses, and future-oriented feedback on how to develop skills in future work.

Principles

The feedback summary should:

1. Be clearly structured, and written in clear, simple language.
2. Contain a prominent motivational element.
3. Be appropriate for the stage of the student journey.
4. Be meaningful to each individual student.
5. Signpost to script comments where appropriate.
6. Include 'retrospective' feedback on the submitted work: strengths and weaknesses.
7. Include 'future-oriented' feedback.
8. Provide feedback on both content and skills.
9. Flag appropriate events and/or resources.
10. Make the implications clear if a student is failing.

The bulk of the document featured examples of wording for the feedback summary, for example, 'you showed your understanding of the question partly by defining the important terms', or 'I was just able to follow how one point/idea/topic led to another'. Future-oriented feedback included: 'Try to adopt a more formal writing style, by bringing in more of the specialist language and the concepts discussed in the module', and 'When you plan your essay, try linking some K101 source material (e.g. video, a resource, or discussion in the Block) to each part'.

The tool was piloted in 2013/14 and feedback gathered from nine tutor volunteers. All pilot tutors willingly embraced the principles and adjusted their feedback practice to varying degrees. I would like to share the feedback and the subsequent adjustments made to the feedback tool at the EDEN workshop, along with further discussion of links to the relevant literature.

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