

## **Individual Progress Interviews as a Method of Effective Student Feedback**

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### **Abstract**

Level 3 students on the Microbiology/Parasitology/Virology/Infection Biology degree course at the University of Glasgow are given a 15 minute interview by a member of staff, early in Term 2. The students bring their portfolio of assessed work with them and their progress and utilisation of the feedback received is reviewed. Advice is given on how they can improve their grades and individual targets set. The atmosphere is encouraging and supportive and students appreciate the individual attention they are given. Although very demanding of staff time, the interviews are felt to be an excellent way of providing feedback and support to students.

**Keywords:** Student feedback, Individual interviews Progress reports, Target setting

### **Introduction**

The impact that effective formative feedback has had on enhancing students' learning has been studied in the Enhancing Student Learning Through Effective Formative Feedback (SENLEF) project (Jawah et al, 2004). When teachers mark students' assessed work, they grade it in relation to a set of defined criteria. "Marking" is a separate activity from providing feedback and performs a different function in that it merely informs (both the staff and the student) as to the student's present standard. The value of feedback should be that it informs the student how to improve. Jawah et al (2004) argue that for formative feedback to benefit students, the students must first know what good performance is (criteria and goals), how their current performance

compares to this ideal, and most importantly, what they can do, to the best of their ability, to approach this ideal.

Staff may be very good at giving feedback to students, both orally and in writing, but the acid test is whether the students actually use the feedback they receive constructively. The FAST project (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (Brown et al., 2003) is developing evaluation tools for teachers to evaluate the impact of assessment regimes on their students' learning, one of which is the AEQ (Assessment Experience Questionnaire). One of the questions posed asks students what feedback they receive, and how they use and value it .

The National Student Survey results for 2006 (Teaching Quality Information website) showed that although Biology students at Glasgow University rated the overall quality of their teaching experience highly (average of 4.2 on a scale of 5, 115 respondents from a cohort of 170), their score for the quality of the feedback they received was markedly lower (average 3.6), and this finding was quite common across other Universities. Specifically, the students were asked to score on these features:

- Criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance – 3.9
- Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair – 4.0
- Feedback on my work has been prompt – 3.4
- I have received detailed comments on my work – 3.3
- Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand – 3.6

At a recent University of Glasgow Learning and Teaching Centre seminar presentation on SENLEF by Professor Matthew, he proposed 7 guidelines for what constituted good feedback. These included clarifying what good performance was by citing the criteria and giving an example of a good piece of work; illustrating how it met those criteria; encouraging students to self assess; providing corrective advice in relation to the criteria; encouraging dialogue between the learner and the assessor; encouraging positive motivation and self-esteem in the student; ensuring that the feedback provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; and ensuring that the feedback provides information to the teachers on how they should shape their teaching.

One method of providing feedback which addresses the three poorest scores in the Student Survey, and most of Professor Mathew's recommendations is the use of Progress Interviews. These have been used with Level 3 students on the Microbiology/Parasitology/Virology/Infection Biology degree course run by the Division of Infection and Immunity in FBLS for several years.

### **Current Practice**

Each student has a 15 minute interview with one member of staff, either the Level 3 Course Coordinator or the Level 4 Course Coordinator of the degree the student is hoping to progress to. The interviews take place early in Term 2. The timing when the interviews are held is crucial. There must have been a sufficient number and variety of assessed course components completed to comment on, whilst leaving sufficient time for any remedial work, suggested as necessary to improve the overall standard, to be completed.

The assessment of the course has a continuous assessment component of 34% with 66% coming from 2 degree exams in May. By the time the interviews take place, students will have completed 4 laboratory reports, one tutorial essay, have given one PowerPoint presentation to a small group of students, written a Problem Based Learning report in the form of a summary, "briefing" paper and undergone the Class Exam, worth 10% and in the same format as the degree exams. One purpose of the class exam is to provide practice at writing 45 min essay style answers, rather than the mainly multiple choice assessments used during Levels 1 and 2. Hence, a variety of assessment methods and learning skills will have been attempted. The member of staff and the student are each given a printed record of the grades so far (and their attendance record at labs and lectures), and the student brings their portfolio of all marked and returned work with them.

During the interview, the staff member and student discuss progress to date, identify any weaknesses, and look to see if the comments for improvement written on the returned work have been taken note of and have resulted in any improvement. Individually tailored advice is given and targets set. The very fact that the student keeps

their assessed work together leads to a reflective self appraisal and seeing all their grades so far listed in the order in which they were done seems to awaken in the students a competitive desire to see an improvement – (we recommend that they stick their piece of paper up over their study desk!). It also provides an opportunity to praise and congratulate those students who are performing well, with exactly the same motivational result in that they strive to maintain their performance. The staff member makes a note of any issues that have arisen and these are lodged with the Course Coordinator.

- The students really appreciate this one-to-one attention and it provides an opportunity for other problems to be aired. Often the reason for poor attendance, poor performance or missed assessments is the pressure of outside work commitments, and appropriate advice or referral can be given.

The interviews are only 15 minutes long but because they are very focussed, that time is usually sufficient. If a student does have particular problems which cannot be resolved then, a further meeting can be arranged.

### **Staff Time Considerations**

The Progress Interviews do take up a lot of staff time. The Level 3 class is usually comprised of 80 students and four staff interview roughly 20 students each, so 5 hours is required, 20 hours of staff time in total. The choice of staff to conduct the interviews is also very important. They should be approachable, empathetic and encouraging and the students must feel comfortable with them and know them, so the course coordinators are usually the most appropriate.

The L4 course coordinators especially find it very useful to interview their prospective L4 cohort. The practicalities of arranging the interviews are probably easier with science students, as they are scheduled on one of the days when the students are in an all day lab. With the permission of the staff member taking the lab, students are allowed to leave for 15 minutes to attend their interview, which takes place in a cluster of small

rooms immediately adjacent to the teaching laboratory. Such an arrangement leads to 100% compliance by the student.

## **Student Feedback**

The students are genuinely appreciative of the fact that a staff member actually cares about their progress. Feedback from students is very positive, with over 90% of this year's students saying that it was extremely useful.

Specific comments (sought at the routine student questionnaires on the course) have included:

- Gives ideas on how to improve
- Encouraging
- Provided reassurance
- Constructive criticism
- Motivational
- Supportive
- Encouraged me to identify my strengths and weaknesses
- Encouraged me to think and talk about my progress
- Great to be treated as an individual
- Would like a second earlier/later interview

## **Discussion**

Recently, Dr Theresa Lynch of the University of Birmingham has published a Code of Practice for Student Development and Support in Schools (Lynch, 2006) which is in effect a "contract" between the School and the student, outlining the minimal level of support which the student can expect throughout their University career. It brings together all the various support services under one umbrella, in the following areas: *"individual student support including welfare issues; progress review tutorials; review of academic feedback; skills support and advice; and review of students' personal development planning"*. (page 3)

It states that each School should have a Head of Student Development and Support with defined responsibilities in these areas, including guidance and leadership to staff who are supporting the students as tutors. The tutors should be provided with documentation, induction, training and development programmes. The code also lays down responsibilities for the student partner in terms of committing to regular meetings with their tutors and bringing to those meetings, materials necessary for meaningful discussion of their progress. These materials could include standard progress forms provided by the School, and samples of marked, annotated work. An important outcome of the meetings should be the setting of individual targets for the student. This personalisation of progress targets, with each student being treated as an individual would surely be very beneficial and would probably increase both retention and success rates. The Progress Interviews described here would only form a small part of an overall care and support service for students, but we have found them to be a very effective method of providing feedback for our students.

I would like to acknowledge those staff in Infection and Infection who have conducted the Progress Interviews over the last few years: Drs Davies, Barrett, Aitken, Douce, Graham and Fulton.

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