"Now I've got the feedback, what do I do with it?" Strategies For Students to Get More Out of Tutor Feedback.

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Abstract

What do you think students do with your feedback on their work? Do they do anything more than read it? Does such a cursory reading enable them to unpack the necessary information from your feedback? If you think that students could get more out of your feedback then read on. This article explores a range of strategies that can be used to encourage students to extend their engagement with tutor feedback on their work, and thus, help them get more out of tutor feedback. The strategies cover the four main stages of preparation for assessment, marking, feedback tutorials and following up tutorials. Tutors are invited to consider which strategy or strategies could be relevant to their situation, and apply or adapt as appropriate.

Keywords: assessment, feedback, formative, hyperlinks, students, tutorials.

Introduction

Problems Students Find With Tutor Feedback

Askew and Lodge (2000) drew attention to the 'expectation' that tutor feedback will lead to student learning, but note that attention is not paid to '*how* learning can result from the gift of feedback' (p.6). In an earlier edition of this journal King, McGugan and Bunyan noted ' a growing body of evidence which indicates that the potential learning benefits of providing

students with feedback, however well crafted, are often not realised, with many students not valuing or understanding the feedback provided' (2008, p. 145).

These views draw attention to the two sides of feedback conundrum: tutor provision and student use, both of which are problematic. MacLellan's (2001) research suggests that tutors work from the assumption that the feedback they provide on student work is successful in aiding student learning. However, her summary of this research revealed that many students do not find tutor feedback helpful in detail, that feedback does not prompt discussion with tutors, nor does feedback help students understand the assessment process or improve their learning. These negative perceptions of feedback have also been found in the National Student Satisfaction Survey (UK) and research studies from the Americas and the Far East (Sprinkle, 2004; Carless, 2006).

Student use of tutor feedback has been identified as one of the weak links in the assessment chain. Weaver (2006) reported that whilst students found that feedback helped them to reflect on their learning, most admitted their failure to follow up feedback. Weaver linked this failure to their confusion on 'how to understand and use feedback.' Orrell (2006) concluded that this 'failure to inform and guide students explains the marginal status of feedback as a learning resource' (p. 441).

Hyatt (2005) identified the role of feedback in inducting students 'into the academic discourse community,' when exemplars and feedback advice enable student learning. By preparing students for feedback, setting out feedback information in a manner that facilitates student follow up, and by encouraging dialogue with students, we make students 'active participants' in the process (Price & O'Donovan, 2006). This approach from the tutor side to bring students into the process is mirrored by the advice given to students by Race's text *How to Get a Good Degree* (2007). He recommends that students should 'build on feedback' and 'systematically *use* it to improve and develop your work continuously' (p. 85).

Theoretical Underpinning

The ASK approach was developed with Pieterick, my co-author for *Giving Students Effective Written* Feedback (Burke & Pieterick, 2010). This was part of my National Teacher Fellowship project, and Pieterick's involvement in the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Critical Interventions for Enhanced Learning.) The ASK approach seeks to develop student attitudes to feedback and to equip them with a range of strategies to unpack and then act on tutor feedback.

ASK stands for the attitudes (A), strategies (S) and knowledge (K) that the approach seeks to develop in students in relation to tutor feedback. The aim is to provide students with a cognitive foundation that regards tutor feedback as an integral aspect of their learning journey. This understanding is crucial to extend student engagement with tutor feedback, to ensure that students pick up tutor feedback, explore comments and act on the issues raised by tutors.

Thus, the starting point is to help students develop a positive attitude to tutor feedback so that they collect, read and store the feedback. In a recent survey of a group of 35 second year Religious Studies students only 10% were able to locate all items of feedback from the previous academic year. This information came to light as students were required to start the academic year 2010-11 with a survey of feedback from the last academic year. Where the feedback had been provided electronically there was a higher rate of retention and access, approaching 80%, although some students were not able to locate the email sending feedback or access it via module e-submission portals.

Problems with student retrieval of feedback had been noted by Winter and Dye (2004) in research findings that 46% of tutors recorded at least 20% of assignments had not been collected. Tutors identified a number of reasons why students did not collect work, the main one being that if the student learnt the grade by other means they did not feel the need to pick the feedback up. One of the most interesting findings concerned high and low achieving students. They noted: 'Keen and 'A' grade students tend to always collect their work, and actively seek further feedback.' (Winter & Dye, 2004, p. 138). This active

engagement with feedback contrasted with the finding that over two thirds of tutors reported non-collections were fail assignments. The very students who needed the feedback to develop their work to the required standard seemingly lacked the motivation to even collect their work. One solution from tutors in the survey, was to ensure that the feedback provided did not feel like 'punishment' so that students would actively seek it and not leave it uncollected. These surveys revealed the need for an attitudinal challenge among students, particularly those who did not achieve the task learning outcomes successfully. Students need to be moved from a 'grade fixation' to a desire to access comments on their achievements. Another key factor Winter and Dye noted was semesterised modularity, which encouraged students to compartmentalise learning as they completed each semester. Again the challenge is to change such a closure bound view of feedback, to help students understand that the feedback on their learning in one module has relevance for their future learning, even if the subject content or the tutor is different.

Alongside the change of attitude is the development of a range of strategies (S) to engage with and act on tutor feedback. Consideration of strategies is important in higher education, as staff and students alike assume that students know what to do with tutor feedback. However, research by Weaver (2006) found that 75% of students reported that they had not received any guidance on how to use feedback prior to university, and over 50% had not received any guidance during their time at university. She concluded that students 'may need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can engage with it' (2006, p. 379). My own survey with students during induction (Burke, 2009) revealed that the majority of students (60%) reported that they had received no or limited guidance on what to do with teacher feedback. However, the encouraging fact is that the majority (69% of those surveyed) start higher education with a positive view of tutor feedback on their work. For many students these positive views were based on experiences of frequent and personal feedback from their teachers. Thus, there is a need for such students to adjust their expectations of feedback to practices in higher education, which are likely to involve fewer assignments and anonymous marking. This is where introducing students to a range of strategies to unpack and act on tutor feedback is crucial.

Research Underpinning Strategies

Our understanding of student learning from feedback has changed over the last decade as we recognise the complexity of the challenge facing students. Institutions are more responsive to the wide range of learning needs among students and recognise the importance of support for undergraduates, particularly in the first year of study. No longer do we assume that a learning need can be sorted by a 'quick fix,' as if the student has not yet grasped an aspect of academic practice, they are likely to need detailed support and practice to develop that aspect to degree standard. Tait, Speth and Entwistle (1994) noted this change in the 1990s in the development of skills materials for undergraduates as the 'study skills required in higher education are not the same as those needed in school' as the support required by students must address the 'nature and complexity of the tasks demanded by higher education' (p. 323-4).

The ranges of strategies explored in this article were developed in a National Teacher Fellowship project, in my work with students at the University of Wolverhampton, and collaborations with colleagues at Wolverhampton and Sheffield Hallam University. Each stage of development was disseminated at workshops and conferences between 2005-2011. A complete account of ways for tutors to understand more about the student reception and use of tutor feedback is available in Part Two of the text *Giving Students Effective Written Feedback,* Burke, 2010).

The range of strategies

There appears to have been a rapid development amongst tutors in the ways they help students work with feedback. A survey with tutors in the School of Health and Wellbeing, University of Wolverhampton 2011, revealed that the majority of tutors are already applying many of the strategies to be set out in this section.

Table 1. Strategies currently used with students.

Which strategies do you currently use to help students with feedback?	
Provide examples of good practice from actual assignment	90%
Encourage students to prepare questions for an essay tutorial	86%
Provide hyperlinks to follow up skills materials	81%
Break down the feedback comments into feedback/ feedforward	71%
Preparation of students for feedback form	43%

One strategy for each of the four stages of student engagement with feedback is set out as shown in the table below.

Table 2. Strategies explored in this article

Preparation	Marking	Tutorials	Follow-up
Preparing students for the feedback form used in their subject.	Making feedback more accessible by differentiating feedback from feedforward.	Using a form to help students prepare for tutorials by breaking down feedback and preparing questions.	Using a range of electronic means to provide hyperlinks to learning materials for the student.

1. Preparation

The ASK approach aims for students to understand the central role that feedback plays in their complex higher education learning journey. Prosser and Webb (1994) bring out the important role that external expert feedback plays in helping students to monitor their progress, by helping students 'to reflect on, and change, their understanding of the nature of the task in the context in which the task is undertaken' (p. 136).

In a 2011 workshop with staff in the School of Health and Wellbeing (University of Wolverhampton) preparing students for feedback forms was currently undertaken by 43% of staff. However, following the workshop session on the range of strategies, such preparation was ranked second in the potential it had to help students get more out of feedback, with 90% of staff reporting their intention to include preparation of students for

feedback forms.

Most Schools or subjects in HE develop specific proforma for feedback, and whilst these ensure consistency in the form of feedback students receive, students in combined awards may face two different proforma. Taking students through the form in advance can help to alleviate student anxiety in the critical moment when they receive their feedback. Foresight of the feedback proforma and prior preparation on the kinds of thinks tutors are looking for (perhaps in line with Butler and Winne's (1995) proposed five functions of feedback) can help student reading. Students can develop an understanding of the areas of their work to be assessed and the form that comments are likely to be presented in. Workshops with students that explore the types of comments that tutors use, such as set out by Haines (2004), can help students adjust to the higher education setting.

Comparisons between student expectations and higher education practices in commenting were identified in my research (Burke, 2010), noting tutor comments to be more impersonal and critical. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) state that students should be initiated into feedback as a 'unique form of communication, to ensure that they 'conceptualize' feedback in the ways intended by the tutor. Weaver (2006) also focused on the need for preparation as 'students who do not yet share a similar understanding of academic discourse as the tutor would subsequently have difficulty in understanding and using the feedback' (p.380). Subject preparation as set out below can help students engage with tutor comments by giving them some idea of what to expect.

In this assignment you need to use information from the field visit to the Gurdwara to discuss points of similarity and difference with the presentation of Sikhism in a textbook. You are required to explore reasons for the differences. In marking attention will be given to your use of material to engage with this set task. It is likely that feedback comments will cover the following areas:

The first area concerns the conceptual understandings you hold in relation to the methods used to study aspects of religion. Secondly, feedback will consider if your work is lacking in essential information, so feedback will check that you have provided details from the class

field visit to the Gurdwara, details from your selected text book as well as issues raised on methods to study religion. Thirdly, feedback will address any assumptions that you make on the basis of prior knowledge that are inappropriate for this task. You need to approach the task in a phenomenological manner, bracketing out your prior assumptions, so that you focus on the material under consideration. This task may be particularly difficult if you bring prior insider knowledge of Sikhism, as you are not required to provide your knowledge of Sikhism but to compare the two sources under consideration. Fourthly, feedback will explore how well you have dealt with the complexity of academic knowledge; in particular you need to address 'theories' that seek to explain differences between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) viewpoints. Finally, feedback will help you 'restructure schemata' if your work suggests that there are aspects of the underpinning theories of phenomenology and the study of religion that you seem to have misunderstood' (Burke, 2010, p.91).

Such approaches can ease student anxiety and make it easier for students to receive and cope with judgments on their work. Boud & Falchikov (2007) state: 'learners should be helped to prepare them- selves for receiving and coping with judgments by others through understanding the assessment regime to which they are subject' (p. 154).

2. Marking: Feedback/ Feed forward

This approach was developed to help students differentiate between tutor comments that feedback on their marked work and tutor comments that provide feed forward information to inform future learning. Research has shown that students are often unable to transfer tutor feedback on work from one assignment to the next, or from one module to the next, or from one subject to another. Such an understanding of feedback means that students look backwards and interpret comments as located in the past. This view also means that students feel passive in relation to the feedback, their work was finished and they cannot do anything about it. Thus, many students think tutor comments would be useful if they were to do the same essay again, but as they cannot then the comments are not relevant to future learning. Students express frustration with feedback comments that identify mistakes or problems without indicating to students how to put things right. Separate feed forward comments can specify the steps students need to take to develop their skills or

align their work with subject expectations.

The two sections for feed forward were added to the feedback sheet for Religious Studies, firstly, to split comments on aspects of performance into feedback and feed forward. The distinction is also shown by the use of different font colours for each area (green for feedback, and blue for feed forward.) The feedback comments refer to what the student has done in the essay, recognising achievement and areas for improvement. Feed forward comments guide students on how to do something about the areas for improvement.

Table 3.   Example of Feedback/ Feed forward

	Feedback	**Feed forward**
Structure	You showed a good level of engagement with the material, but your focus on the question could have been tighter.	You need to think about the way that you unpack the essay question, and then check that your plan focuses explicitly on the set task.

3. Feedback Tutorials

The *Getting More Out of Tutor Feedback* form, set out below, aims to facilitate the principles set out by Gibbs and Simpson (2004) to ensure that students 'receive and attend' to feedback, and then act on the feedback to improve their learning. The section featured here deals with preparation for a feedback tutorial with the marking tutor.

Carless (2007) found that many students were reluctant to approach lecturers for essay feedback tutorial, which meant that they missed the opportunity to learn effectively from feedback. Orrell (2006) similarly noted that if tutorials are voluntary then students who lack confidence or who are failing may opt out. For many students facing up to their lack of success is a problem, thus, a way to help students is required so that they take the opportunity to discuss their work.

The form below is intended to empower students by putting them in charge of the process. This is an important psychological factor as it means that the student is requesting

information from the tutor, rather than being in a passive role where the tutor is in control and tells the student where the problems are. This stage of preparation and the use of an agreed template puts the student in control, and by way of prepared questions enables the student to ask questions about the feedback and their performance. This follows Boud's recommendation that students should not just be viewed as 'passive recipients of feedback' (in Boud & Falchikov 2007).

Race, Brown and Smith (2005) noted that defensiveness could be a disadvantage in face-to-face settings. However, this use of an agreed template legitimises the student asking questions, and thinking about the wording of questions in the preparation for the session can mean that students frame questions in a non-challenging manner. Also the template offers a way for students to ease themselves into the role by using the first question to check that their understanding of what is required by a tutor comment is correct. Thus, the student could start by saying, in thinking about your comment that I 'should make more use of quotations I include,' 'I understand this to mean that when I include a quote I should draw out the implications that the quote has for my essay. The quote might back up the point I am making, or it might offer a different perspective so I can use it as a jumping off point for the next part of my essay. In either case I need to make explicit reference to my reason for including the quote' (Burke, 2010, p.105).

This first stage serves to show the tutor that the student is taking feedback seriously and trying to work out how to act on comments made. This acts as a bridge to the more difficult stage of asking questions about tutor comments that are not so easy to understand. This may involve asking for clarification about terms or phrases used in feedback, or challenging a judgement made in a feedback comment. In the latter case, students can feel aggrieved if they think they have done something which the feedback states are lacking.

Students who lack confidence may take the opportunity to discuss their work with a skills tutor before they meet with their subject tutor. This distancing from the provider of feedback, especially if some comments are negative can help the student identify and phrase the questions they want to ask about feedback. In research with students, reported in Burke (2007) several drew attention to the importance of tutorial discussion to deal with

comments that appeared to be contradictory. One example involved the use of both 'objective' and 'personal' on a feedback form, and it was only through discussion that the student was able to develop an understanding of the point the tutor was trying to make..

Overall feedback tutorials were found to encourage learning from feedback, in way that fed forward, as noted by this comment: 'It was a good opportunity to discuss strengths and weaknesses, which we do not always have the opportunity to do because once work is marked I'm thinking ahead to the next essay and don't act on the feedback' (Burke, 2010, p. 107).

Table 4.   Preparation for a tutorial

Preparing for a tutorial: *Use these prompts to prepare for a tutorial with your module tutor or skills tutor. Make an appointment and take this form and your marked assignment to the tutorial.*	
Feedback that you understand	**Fill in the actions you intend to take on these points and discuss with your tutor**
You should make more use of quotation	*I understand this to mean that when I include a quote I should draw out the implications it has for my essay. It might introduce a topic, or back up a point, or introduce a different opinion.*
Feedback you do not understand	**Fill this column in during the tutorial**
Unconsolidated argument!	

4. Follow up recommendations

Feedback banks have been identified as an important resource for tutors in providing access to the range of statement that tutors are likely to make on student work. In this instance the aim is to build on such work but to focus on statements that link to electronic resources for students to use in following up feedback advice. Walsh (in Bartholomew & Walsh, 2008), in monitoring student 'needs' in the area of unpacking and using tutor feedback, found students to be very positive about hyperlinks for their learning. Students

make extensive use of the internet so hyperlinks in feedback follow their preferred styles of research.

Stephani (1998) reported that students want information on how to develop their work, and my own research with students revealed that students often fail to follow up tutor feedback because they don't know what to do with it (Burke, 2007). It is also the case that marking tutors are often in the best place to make recommendations to students on how they can develop their skills. Students can struggle to find appropriate texts, at the right level to develop their skills. McGinty (2008) found that it was far from straightforward for students to check academic conventions by themselves. This may help to explain Weaver's (2006) finding that only 4% of students referred to study skills books in following up feedback. Thus follow-up recommendations in the form of hyperlinks to electronic materials have the dual benefit of academic scrutiny and selection by tutors, as well as ease of use in requiring a click on the hyperlink for access.

The hyperlink strategy builds on the opportunities available through electronic marking in providing hyperlinks to learning resources to enable student action on an aspect of the feedback. This input can make sure that feedback meets Section 6 of the QAA Code of practice on Assessment of students, the recommendation 'that appropriate feedback is provided…in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement' (Quality Assurance Agency, 2000). Relevant hyperlinks to electronic materials can focus student learning on an aspect of their academic practice, and facilitate their development.

Today, all of the problems associated with marking hard copies of essays have gone. I receive student work electronically, mark on screen by adding comments, and complete a feedback form that students can access electronically. I keep a copy of the marking and feedback that can be used in tutorials if students forget to bring a copy of their work. Whilst I would argue that marking electronically has helped improve the marking process for me as a tutor, the main beneficiaries from such a switch are students. They can receive their feedback earlier and more easily than was the case with hard copies. These practical factors mean that more students will actually receive their feedback (than was the case in the past when 50% of scripts may not be collected). They may get their feedback earlier

than in the past, within a two to three week period after submission, making it more likely that students will remember their thinking about the actual assignment. This study reports on how these practical benefits can be taken a step further by using the electronic medium to provide students with links to follow up materials to ensure that they are able to develop in the areas specified in tutor feedback. In the past tutors might have suggested that students locate a book and explore sections to develop their academic skills, but electronic formats make it possible for students to just click on a link to access such materials.

Early research with RS students in 2008 revealed that 100% agreed that the provision of electronic links helped their understanding of feedback. Firstly, they helped students to see where they were going wrong by providing explanations, e.g., in the use of the apostrophe. Many students misused apostrophes but when provided with a link to information that explained the purpose of an apostrophe, and illustrated uses, students were able to apply correct use in later assignments. Secondly, students valued recommended sources so they were not left 'Googling' and not really knowing if the information they found was relevant or appropriate for their level of study. Thirdly, students valued exemplars which demonstrated the use of academic practice. These enable students to 'see' where they went wrong, and how to present the work appropriately. They found exemplars in their own subject area particularly valuable as these allowed students to see the 'what was required. This supports the finding of the SENLEF project on the value of feedback in giving the student information on how to improve so that their work approached the 'ideal' performance (Juwah et al 2004).

Recording/ following up a feedback tutorial

In addition to the use of hyperlinks to guide student feedforward, hyperlinks can also pay an important role in following up tutorials. I wanted to develop a form template that could be used in tutorials to quickly record discussion and then be sent to the student with follow up advice. My thinking had been influenced by a doctor friend who was developing a system whereby following a consultation where the doctor told you that you had got x, he would order relevant information which would be printed out and waiting for you in reception to take away and explore in your own time. Depending on your operating system- you can

save the form as a Word template- fill in details and then use 'File' send to or publish' to email recipient- fill in student address and send. The bottom of the form includes a chart of categories and hyperlinks so just select what is relevant and paste in.

Discussion

Behind all these strategies is the need for students to take seriously the requirement to act on tutor feedback. This is the means by which students develop relevant academic literacies. All too often we (staff and students) minimize the action that may be required to develop an aspect of academic practice to degree level. I often remind myself that when I did my BA, MA and PGCE all assessment was essay based, which involved taking books from the library and developing an argument. Look at what we require students to do today- we expect a much wider skills set- and need to support them appropriately.

Perhaps the main challenge in this approach is not for students but for tutors. We are often sceptical about student effort and frustrated by what appears to be reluctance or avoidance of feedback advice. However, when considering feedback from a student perspective we may be able to see the complexities facing students in their unpacking and acting on our feedback. Many tutors would argue that they do not have the time for feedback tutorials, but if students do not have the opportunity to discuss their understanding of our feedback and its implications, then there is a strong possibility that they will continue to make the same mistakes. Our feedback policies need to be set against what Tatner (2007) refers to as the 'acid test:' do students use feedback constructively to improve their learning.

The results of the survey of staff feedback policies from the School of Health and Wellbeing suggest a greater appreciation of the challenges facing students in their use of tutor feedback and a willingness to adopt strategies to help students.

Table 5.   Tutor perceptions of the potential of strategies to help student use of tutor
feedback (post session).

Please rank potential use 10-1 (10 most useful)	Yes	No	Rank
Break down the feedback comments into feedback/ feedforward	85%	15%	7.1
Preparation of students for feedback form	100%	0	6.8
Provide examples of good practice from actual assignment	100%	0	6.6
Encourage students to prepare questions for an essay tutorial	100%	0	6.5
Provide hyperlinks to follow up skills materials	92%	8%	5.7

Tutor feedback is clearly an essential element for successful student learning. Strategies, such as those included in this article can assist this transition to degree level, by making transparent the standards required in the provision of exemplars and relevant learning materials.

The strategies explored in this article set out ways that students can be guided to make more use of tutor feedback. It is not envisaged that every student would use every strategy for every assignment. The use would depend on the student, their stage of learning and the particulars of the assignment. However, it is central to the ASK approach that students would be introduced to and encouraged to utilise as many feedback strategies as possible to enhance their learning repertoire.

(A copy all materials referred to can be accessed via HumBox (http://humbox.ac.uk/2333 including handouts to use with students.)

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