Student Engagement with Feedback: how does giving/receiving feedback make you feel?

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What kind of feedback helps students to improve their academic writing?

A project funded by Teach Brunel

and

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Brunel University London

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London School of Occupational Therapy

The Team

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A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Why this project?

- Research suggests that students often don’t understand feedback (Nicol. 2010)
- At Brunel, OT students (BSc and MSc) routinely expressed dissatisfaction with feedback
- External examiners noted inconsistency in feedback
- RLF Fellows reported student difficulty in interpreting feedback on assignments
- Applied for funding to investigate – Teach Brunel /RLF
- Robert and Muireann invited to join team

Aim

To find out what kinds of feedback – written and verbal - help students to improve their writing in future assignments.

The focus was on feedback about the **quality of writing**, rather than about the **content** – though these can be hard to separate.

Method

Two linked activities:

1. Focus groups with students across all years of study (3 workshops x 8-10 students).

1. Focus groups with staff (2 workshops on different days to allow as many of the 17 members of staff members to participate as possible).

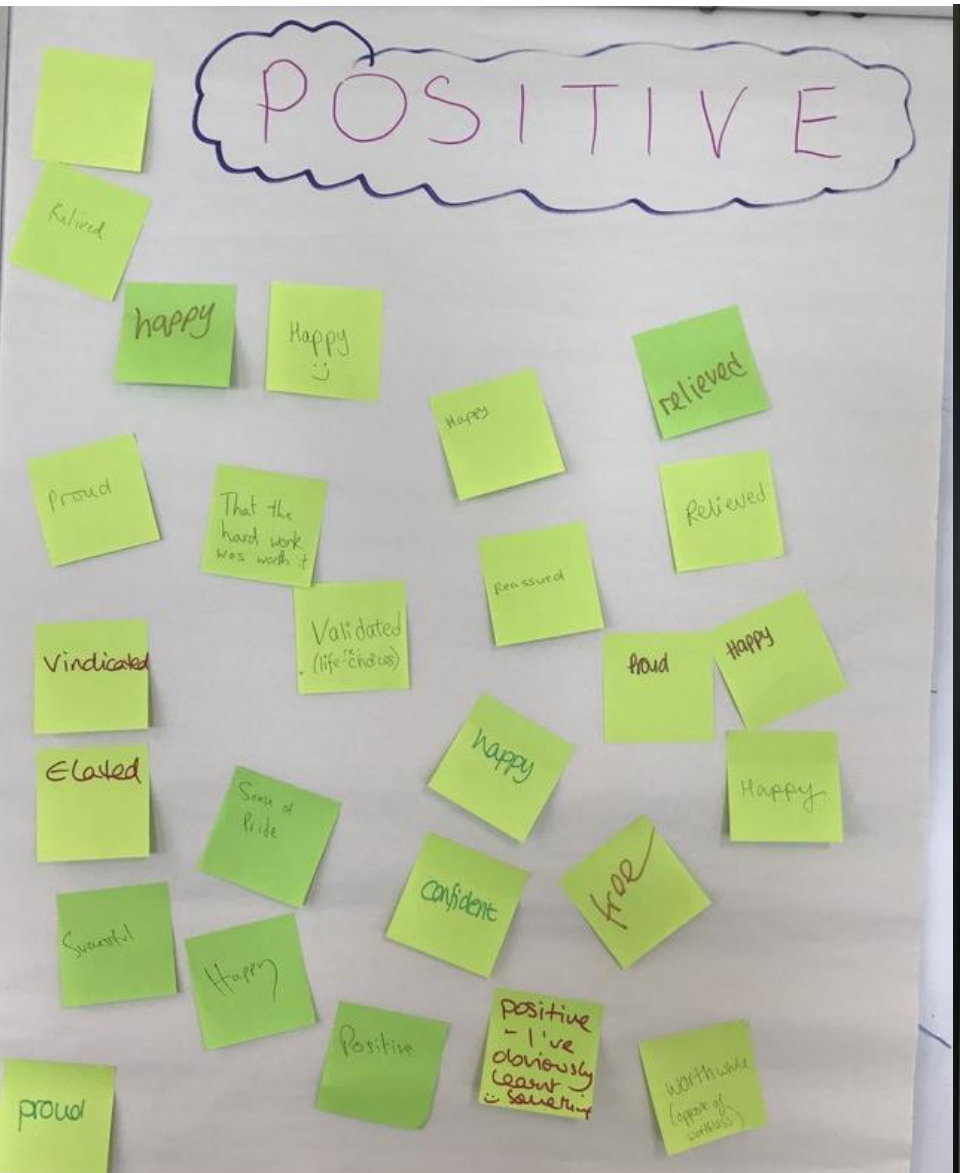
Focus Group Format

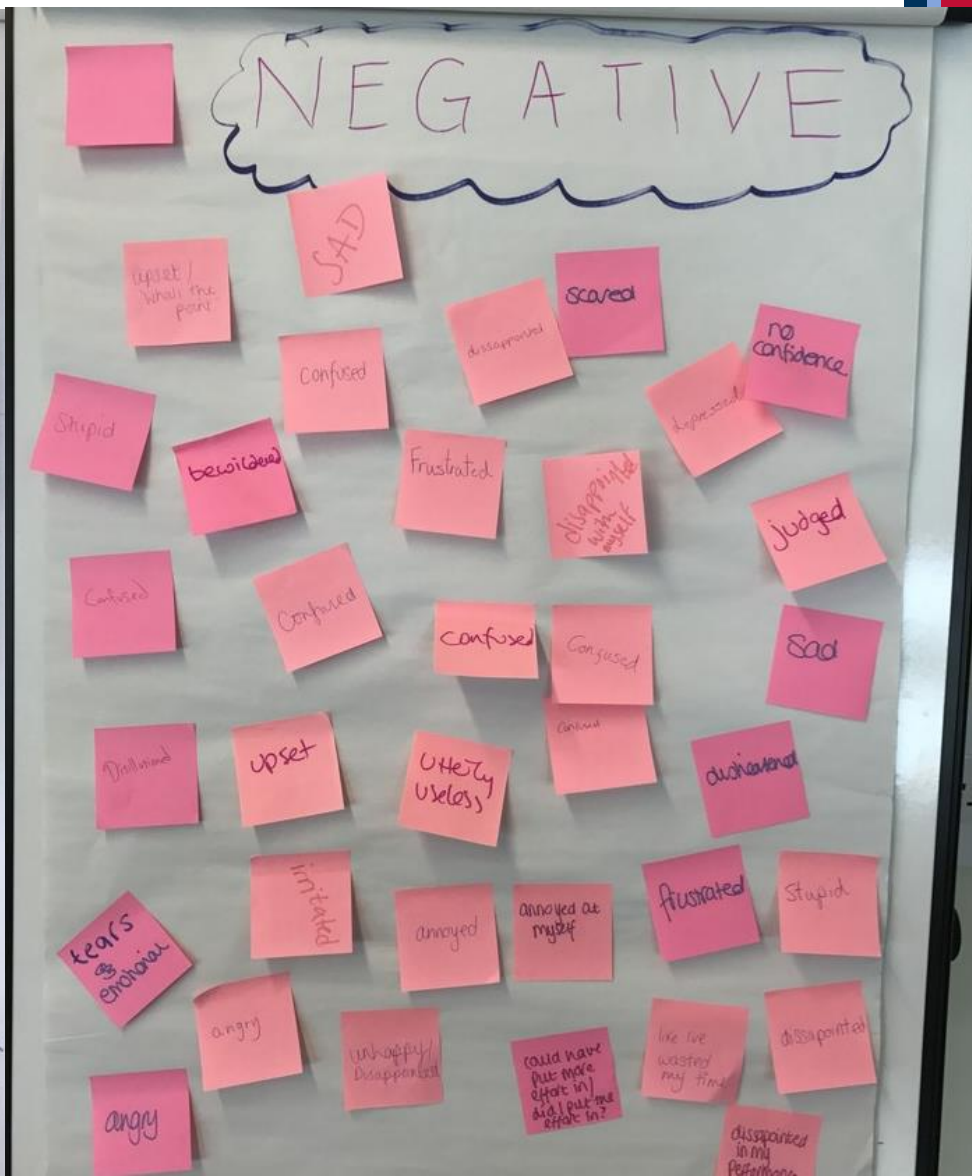
Outline for today's session

1. Feelings about feedback on writing
2. Attitudes towards feedback on writing
3. Experiences of feedback (examples)
4. Ideas about what could change

Results– Student Groups

1. Feelings


POSITIVE
Relieved
happy
Happy
relieved
Hopes
Proud
That the hard work was worth it
Relieved
Reassured
Validated (life choices)
Vindicated
Proud
Happy
Elated
Sense of Pride
happy
Happy
Confident
free
Swanky
Happy
Positive
positive - I've obviously learnt something
worthwhile (sense of achievement)
proud


NEGATIVE
SAD
upset / what's the point
scared
dissapointed
no confidence
Confused
Stupid
bewildered
Frustrated
disappointed with myself
judged
Confused
Confused
confused
Confused
Sad
Confused
Upset
Utterly Useless
Confused
disheartened
irritated
annoyed
annoyed at myself
frustrated
Stupid
tears as emotional
angry
unhappy / Disappointed
could have put more effort in / did I put me effort in?
like I've wasted my time
dissapointed
angry
dissapointed in my performance

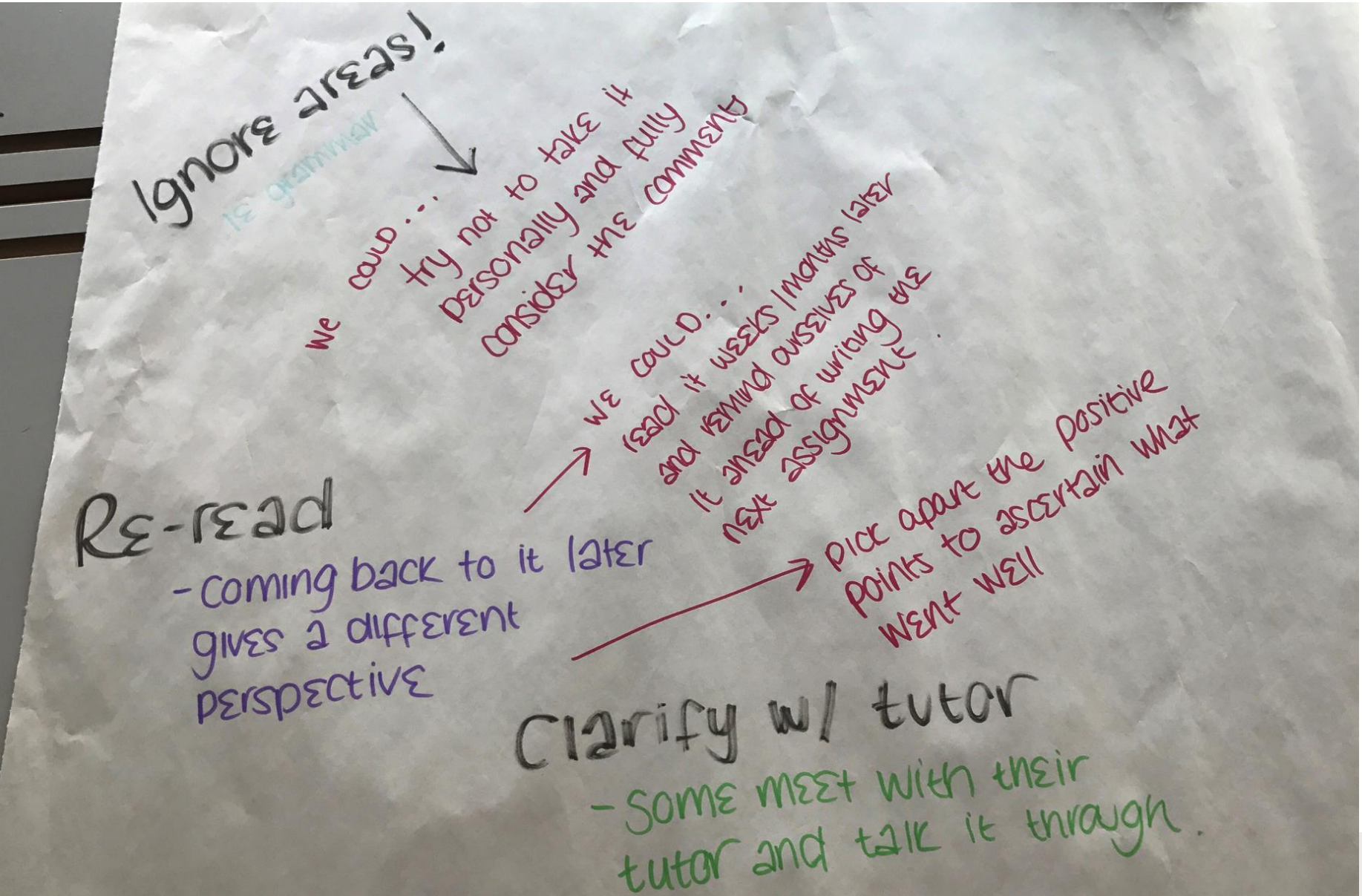
1. Feelings

- Academic writing can elicit strong emotions (negative and positive)
- Being judged on quality of writing deemed ‘unfair’ in context of OT
- Negative comments on writing can cause students to question suitability to OT as a career
- ‘Anonymous’ marking causes anger and frustration – and a disconnect (policy changed during project)
- Perceived mismatch between comments and grade causes frustration
- Feedback often ‘*not designed to help you improve*’

1. Feelings (MSc Group)

- more critical of quality of feedback
- less inclined to question suitability for OT career
- negative / positive feelings and emotions more evenly balanced and expressed less strongly than in BSc group

2. Attitudes


Ignore areas!
we could... try not to take it personally and fully consider the comments
we could... read it weeks/months later and remind ourselves of it instead of writing the next assignment.
Re-read
- coming back to it later gives a different perspective
pick apart the positive points to ascertain what went well
Clarify w/ tutor
- some meet with their tutor and talk it through.

2. Attitudes

- Some ambivalent attitudes towards feedback – focusing only on grade
  - Confusion over the language used: '*in more depth*' '*structure*'
  - Difficult to applying feedback across different 'genres' (essays, reports, reflections)
- Some helpful strategies – reviewing past feedback before next assignment
  - *'it helps to return to feedback after initial feelings have died down'*
- Changes made are mostly <u>concrete</u> changes (referencing, formatting) not <u>abstract</u> skills (building an argument, structuring effectively)
- Verbal feedback: mixed feelings about going to personal tutor who won't have corrected that assignment, highlighting inconsistency

3. Experiences

- Marking perceived as inconsistent and highly subjective, breeding mistrust and scepticism
- Strong desire for feedback conversation to help them understand the meaning of comments and how to use them to improve
- Imagining a feedback conversation, in role play, 'lecturer' did all the talking and 'students' are passive and subservient
- MSc students most keen for feedback dialogue to help them improve – more challenging of staff in role plays

4. Ideas

Feedback should:

- be more consistent across markers and assignments
- indicate clearly the **hierarchy** of comments i.e. what is major and what is less important
- be specific to that essay, but also to make general comments on writing that can be applied to future assignments
- indicate what went well, but also what to do to get a higher grade

Verbal feedback helpful because:

- it allows student to ask questions and clarify any confusion
- it helps students to improve by identifying strengths and weaknesses
- it is more reassuring and can prevent a total loss of confidence

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Results – Staff Groups

1. Feelings About Marking

- Staff have strong feelings about feedback on writing
  - Pride & relief when marking good work
  - Fed up, annoyed or anxious when marking poor work
- Frustration when students don’t use the feedback given
- Lack of engagement attributed to students disinterest or apathy
- Frustration that students expect to be given step by step guidelines, leaving no room for intellectual creativity

2. Attitudes

- General agreement about purpose of feedback
  1. to help students organise their thinking
  2. to develop and as future professionals,
  3. to justify grade and set actions for improvement
- Consensus that feedback <u>should</u> be a two-way process
- Considerable gap between how staff want students to respond to feedback and how they actually respond to it

BUT

- Also a feeling that ‘we don’t know much about the student perspective’

3. Experiences

- Wanting to be fair and do justice to students' efforts
- Some staff feel insecure about their ability to give useful feedback on writing
  - Related to disconnect between staff and student perspectives
  - Also relating to time and resource constraints
- In role play scenarios students were similarly passive, expecting the lecturer to give the answers
- Feeling that students' emotions get in the way of attending to feedback, and responding constructively

4. Ideas

- Some wanted students to be able to discuss feedback with the marker
  - but general feeling that markers need protecting from angry students
- Creation of glossary of common language used in feedback with shared understanding of common phrases
- Need to address inconsistencies between markers, to agree standard for level and depth of feedback
- Need a system to ask students what they find most useful in feedback
- Use encouraging and positive language

Themes

1. The role of emotions in feedback
2. Trust, teacher-student relationships and the importance of a 'feedback dialogue'
3. How academic literacies (i.e. ways of talking and writing specific to a discipline) tend to be assumed rather than communicated

Thank You For Listening!

Any questions?

What do you think?