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

A project funded by Teach Brunel
and the Royal Literary Fund
carried out in the Occupational Therapy Division,
Brunel University London

Project team:

Gail Eva Senior Lecturer, Occupational Therapy

Muireann McMorrow BSc Occupational Therapy Student (3rd year)

Robert Molloy MSc Occupational Therapy (re-registration) Student (2nd year)

Anne Wilson Royal Literary Fund Fellow

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project aimed to discover what kinds of feedback would help students in the Occupational Therapy Division to improve their academic writing. We ran five focus groups – three with students (two BSc groups and one MSc) and two with staff. The discussion was structured around four aspects: 'feelings', 'attitudes', experiences' and 'ideas for change'.

We found that feedback on writing elicits strong feelings in both students and staff. Level 1 (L1) students, in particular, reported that critical comments on their writing led them to question their suitability to the course and to occupational therapy as a profession, whereas positive comments made them feel validated in their choice. Some students admitted that they did not read written feedback carefully or use it to improve; others 'cooled off' until they could read it more dispassionately. Most staff saw feedback on writing as an important element of teaching, but were frustrated by tight marking timeframes, workloads, and students' lack of engagement with feedback.

Students at all levels complained that they often did not understand the feedback, were confused about the meaning of terms (e.g. 'structure', 'argument') and found it difficult to apply it to future assignments. In part, this was because they could not question the person who marked their work as markers were anonymous. (This policy was changed mid-way through the project.) However, role plays of feedback conversations also suggested that students felt inhibited, by the power relationship between themselves and staff, to ask penetrating questions about the feedback they received.

Some students felt that generic comments on their writing were unhelpful unless supported by clear examples, marked up in the text. Many students were confused by positive comments, accompanied by a poor grade. They also mentioned a lack of consistency between different markers. The staff view was that the moderating system was effective in achieving consistency between markers.

Our findings tend to support the 'academic literacies' argument that lecturers within a discipline need to be clear and explicit about their expectations of student writing (Wingate, 2015). It also supports research suggesting that reduced opportunities for a constructive feedback dialogue inhibit learning and increase student dissatisfaction (Nicol, 2010).

We recommend addressing some of the issues arising from the project by:

- Acknowledging that feedback on writing is an emotional issue among staff and students and considering the role of emotion in student learning.
- Setting up a working group to consider how to improve trust in feedback between staff and students.
- Developing and running training for staff and students in how to have effective feedback conversations that recognise and manage the power imbalance.

BACKGROUND

A significant part of Anne Wilson's role as Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Brunel University London between 2014 and 2017 included helping students to interpret feedback on their writing. Feedback was often expressed in vague terms and not followed up verbally. Noticing that occupational therapy students experienced particular problems, Anne made contact with occupational therapy staff to examine the problem in more depth. This project grew out of discussions between Anne and Gail Eva (a Senior Lecturer in occupational therapy) on how to help occupational therapy students to improve their academic writing.

What is considered to be 'good' academic writing within a specific discipline is, in part, socially defined and yet the way we write tends to be habitual, tacit and rarely discussed (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This project builds on existing research in UK universities which suggests that students often do not understand the feedback they receive from tutors and so cannot use it to improve (e.g. Nicol, 2010). A feedback dialogue is seen as essential to student learning, enabling students to take control of their own learning and improve their performance (Jessop *et al.*, 2014; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, this dialogue is difficult to achieve and feedback remains a major source of student dissatisfaction across the UK HE sector. Although there is some anecdotal evidence that feedback on academic writing is a specific cause of frustration to students, (Peterson *et al.*, 2014) there is remarkably little research on this topic.

Students in the Occupational Therapy Division routinely expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback received on their assignments, and the need to improve feedback has remained a perennial action point in the University's Annual Monitoring process in recent years. The external examiners have also flagged up problems with inconsistencies in feedback. An audit of one study block where students were invited to comment on their feedback indicated some of the feedback that students struggled to understand. For example, a marker's comment that, "The flow of the work could be improved for ease of reading," elicited the response that: "I would like more clarity about what 'the flow of the work' means, with some examples." Students repeatedly noted that they would like the opportunity to discuss feedback with the marker. A workshop on academic writing and feedback, which Anne facilitated with a group of occupational therapy staff, highlighted the inconsistencies in language used by staff when talking about writing, and also their own uncertainties about judging writing quality.

We felt there was a clear need to identify what kind of feedback on academic writing works for students in occupational therapy, in order to develop guidance for staff and students – and that this might have wider relevance in the University.

A Collaborative Project

From the outset, this was developed as a collaborative project between students and staff – Anne, Gail, Muireann McMorrow (BSc student) and Robert Molloy (MSc pre-registration student). Muireann and Robert's own experiences confirmed that feedback in the Division needed to be examined and improved and that student involvement was essential. In our application, Robert suggested that: "Collaboration with staff on this project will give us an

invaluable opportunity to shape improvements, and may help to collapse some of the hierarchical structures in academia, empowering students to feel that their opinions count and their voices are heard."

The project was funded by Teach Brunel, with additional funding from the Royal Literary Fund for Anne Wilson's time. The four of us led this project together, communicating frequently and meeting regularly to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to contribute. Together we defined the questions to guide the student and staff workshops, gathered the data and interpreted the results.

AIMS

The main aim of the project was to find out what kinds of feedback (on writing rather than content) help students to improve the quality of their academic writing. We considered both written feedback and verbal feedback from occupational therapy staff.

The study also sought to understand:

- How students and staff feel about (positive and negative) feedback on writing.
- Student attitudes towards feedback and how they use it (or don't use it).
- What students and staff think should change in order to make feedback on writing more effective in helping students to improve.

METHOD

The project consisted of two linked activities:

(i)   Focus groups with students across all years of study (3 workshops x 8-10 students).
(ii)   Focus groups with staff (2 workshops on different days to allow as many of the 17 members of staff members to participate as possible).

The study had ethical approval from the Brunel University College of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee (ref no: 6442-LR-Apr/2017- 6985-1).

Our original idea was to follow the focus groups with a staff-student 'consensus development event' using the Nominal Group Technique (Lloyd Jones *et al.,* 1999), but high emotional temperature of the focus groups persuaded us that this was not the right way forward. We decided instead to make recommendations to train both staff and students in specific techniques that will help to make verbal and written feedback more geared towards improving the students' writing.

Focus Group Participants

Students were recruited via an invitation email from Gail to all students in the relevant year group. Muireann and Robert also informally encouraged students to participate. The email Gail sent to students can be found in Appendix 3.

Table 1: Student focus group participants

	Date of focus group	Female	Male	Students with a declared disability
Focus group 1: Level 2 BSc (2015-16 cohort)	Apr 2017	8	1	3
Focus group 2: Year 1 MSc (pre-reg) (2016-17 cohort)	Aug 2017	7	0	3
Focus group 3: Level 2 BSc (2016-17 cohort)	Sep 2017	5	2	1

Since the focus groups were self-selected, it could be argued that the project attracted disgruntled students, although this is not confirmed by anecdotal evidence from Muireann and Robert who know some of the students who took part. Occupational therapy has a relatively high number of mature students as well as students who need additional learning support, so the high proportion of participants with disabilities, for such a small sample, was not unexpected. The male to female ratio on the course is around 1:7, so the proportion of male and female students is about representative.

The staff focus groups were recruited by Gail through an email to all academics in the Occupational Therapy Division. Twelve of the 17 members of staff participated in one of the two focus groups. The email Gail sent to invite staff to participate can be found in Appendix 4. All participants were provided with written information about the study, and signed consent forms before participating in the group.

Gail was not present for the discussions in the student focus groups and Muireann and Robert were not present for the staff focus groups, in order to encourage discussion that was not inhibited by staff-student relationships. Students were asked to bring with them an example of feedback they received on academic writing that was helpful to them, and an example of feedback on academic writing that was not helpful. Staff were asked to bring to the group one or two examples of feedback they had given students on assignments that specifically mentioned aspects of the writing (such as structure, clarity, flow of argument, grammar, punctuation etc.).

Focus Group Format

The focus groups for both students and staff followed the same structure:

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

However, the activities and prompts were different for staff and students. The activities and prompts for the student focus group can be found in Appendix 1a and 1b, and for the staff group in Appendix 2a and 2b.

Gail introduced each group by outlining the aims of the project and reassuring participants that their contributions would be anonymous. She also acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to separate feedback on writing quality from feedback on content but that, wherever possible, we would be focusing on feedback that specifically mentioned aspects of the writing.

Anne facilitated the groups while Gail (in the staff groups) and Muireann and Robert (in the student groups) observed and took notes.
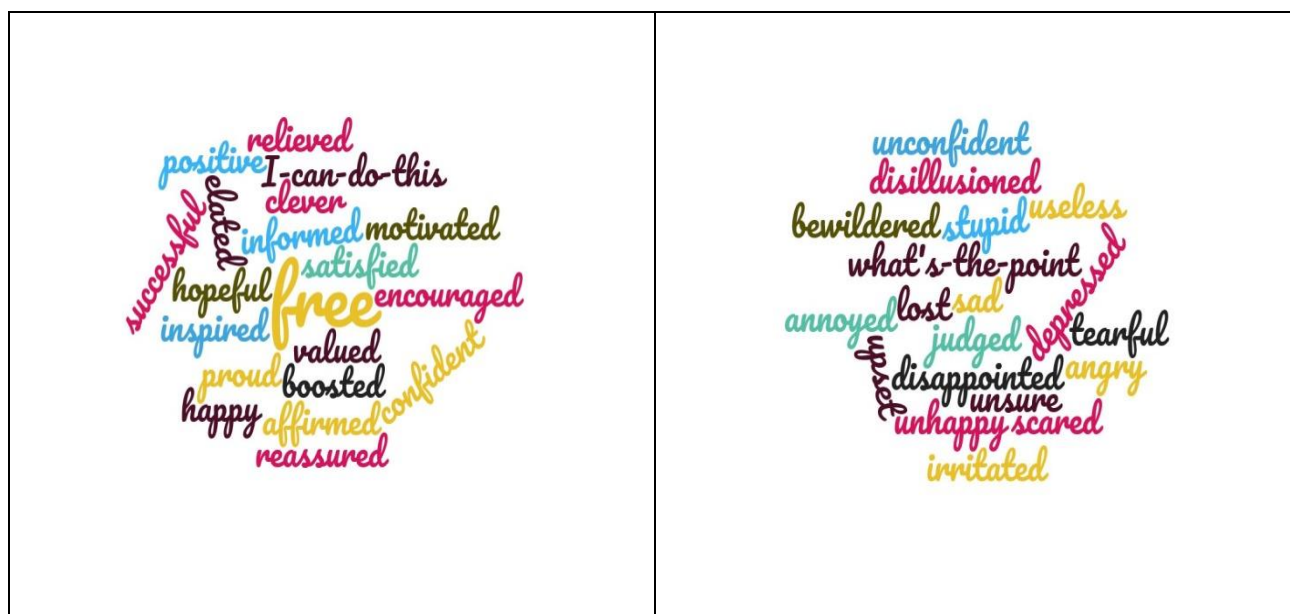
RESULTS: STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

1. Feelings associated with feedback on writing

We constructed two word clouds to illustrate the positive and negative emotions students associated with feedback:

How does positive feedback on your writing make you feel?   *How does negative feedback on your writing make you feel?*

We will consider the responses of the BSc and MSc groups separately, since there were some marked differences between the two in the 'feelings' section.

BSc students

There are more negative feelings about feedback on writing than positive feelings – and emotions are felt very strongly.

> '[I'm] so embarrassed by feedback that it has shattered my confidence.'

Academic writing itself can elicit strong emotions. Writing taps into issues of confidence, both in understanding concepts and creating the essay.

'It feels very personal. I hate writing! I'm not a good writer. Showing people my writing makes me feel vulnerable.'

'My life is ruined from writing essays!'

There is a general feeling that being judged by the quality of your writing is 'unfair' in the context of occupational therapy, and that good academic writing 'irrelevant' to being a good occupational therapist. Practice placement results are seen as a more valuable indicator of performance.

'No-one is here because they are an academic; we want to work with people'

Negative comments on writing made some students question their suitability to occupational therapy as a career. Bad feedback causes self-doubt.

'It's like an anonymous person is saying, you shouldn't be doing this.'

Whereas positive feedback makes students feel validated, motivated and inspired about their career choice.

'It makes you feel confident as a professional.'

Up until September 2017, markers were anonymous, a practice which caused anger and frustration - and a disconnect between students and staff. This practice was changed at the start of the 2017-18 academic year, and students now know who has marked their work. However, the focus groups were carried out prior to this change, and anonymity of marking was the most frequently mentioned and complained about aspect of feedback on writing.

'You send this thing into space and get a grade and don't know where it came from.'

'I felt it went into a random mark generator… it makes me so angry. The comments are contradictory and I can't go to anyone about it because it's anonymous'

'How can you learn from what you did wrong if there's nobody to discuss it with? It just leaves you feeling conflicted and confused.'

The perceived mismatch between the comments and the grade are also a source of frustration.

'They say it's good and then the grade is low and you've no idea why.'

Comments were not specific about how to improve.

'Asking how to get a better grade can be frustrating because the response is often 'just go more in depth' which isn't helpful.'

MSc students

The MSc group was more overtly critical of the quality of staff feedback than the undergraduate groups. They also showed a greater desire to engage with the feedback and to use it to improve. This group was more willing to question the quality of feedback from staff. They considered themselves 'serious' and 'professional' and expected feedback on writing to help them towards their career goals. Poor quality / inconsistent feedback caused annoyance and dissatisfaction.

'I don't mind if someone tears apart what I've done as long as I am told how to fix it'.

Anonymous marking was mentioned by this group as well as a cause of frustration. Students assumed that its purpose was 'to protect staff from students.'

Negative and positive feelings and emotions are fairly evenly balanced and not expressed as strongly as in BSc group.[1]

2. Attitudes towards feedback on writing

Ambivalent attitudes towards feedback were evident. Participants had difficulty in letting go of their feelings to discuss this topic objectively. Their understanding of how they *should* use feedback seemed to do battle with perceived poor quality of feedback and defensive feelings. They agreed that – ideally – they should read feedback, take it board, appreciate it and learn from it, and that they should also have the chance to challenge it and ask questions about it. They believed that being given an opportunity to discuss the feedback with the marker would make it less likely that feelings of defensiveness would get in the way of learning from the feedback.

> *'You feel suspicious of the feedback, believing that it was written subjectively.'*

> *'Lecturers are defensive about the feedback they give.'*

Some students admitted that they were reluctant to read feedback, only really paying attention to the grade. Asked, 'Do you use feedback?' they replied:

> *'No, we don't use it, because we still don't understand what they want.'*

> *'I suppose we should read over past essays and feedback before writing the next one.'*

> *'I don't know how to incorporate this feedback into the next style of assignment. The fact that the next assignment asks for us to write in a different structure/style renders the last feedback redundant'.*

Other students had positive ideas about how to use feedback constructively.

> *'I use a dictionary to look at words I don't understand the meaning of.'*

> *'I print past feedback out and read it [but] I never follow up any queries because I don't know who to go to.'*

> *'I go to my personal tutor. They give me their interpretation of the feedback.'*

> *'We've been told to go to ASK to help with writing. I always do. But I still get picked up about my referencing which is frustrating.'*

When students sought advice from staff, advice could be inconsistent between lecturers.

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[1] Robert Molloy suggested that the lower emotional level of the MSc group might be influenced by the fact that this MSc group had just come back from a few weeks summer break when we ran the group and last received feedback on an assignment two months previously. Anecdotally, he reports that emotions among his group regarding feedback immediately after an assignment can run as high as among the undergraduate groups.

There was a general consensus that it helps to return to feedback after initial feelings have died down.

> *'When I first get feedback I read it over and over and just get more and more frustrated.'*

> *'We should read back over it later, trying to see it from the markers perspective.'*

Some frustration over feedback on writing can be traced back to lack of clarity in assignment guidelines.

> *'It can be hard to work out what you're expected to do and that makes it extra frustrating when you get the feedback.'*

When asked about changes they have made in relation to feedback, most students mentioned concrete changes (referencing, formatting) rather than abstract skills (building an argument, structuring effectively).

> *'We like getting feedback, and especially enjoy when it is thorough. We like to receive technical advice on how to reference etc.'*

Assessments take a variety of forms (essays, reports, reflections) and students found it difficult to apply feedback from one type of writing to another, to improve incrementally.

> *'Each piece of coursework is completely different so our approach is different and previous feedback cannot carry over.'*

The timing of feedback is not always in time to build on lessons learned for the next piece of writing, and students may not have feedback on one essay before starting the next one.

> *'Feedback is not received sometimes before we start the next assignment.'*

There was confusion over the language that lecturers use when giving feedback on writing, for example, being told to write 'in more depth' and to 'structure their work.'

> *'When the comment states 'you should expand your points' – how do you do that and stay within the word count? They don't tell you what to cut out.'*

Between the MSc focus group and the second BSc focus group (and after both staff focus groups) the Occupational Therapy Division decided to change the policy of anonymous marking. We asked the BSc group what they thought about the change. Most students welcomed the change, feeling that it would break down barriers between students and lecturers and allow for more open dialogue. However, some students were more apprehensive about the change. They felt that the inconsistencies among markers could create conflict and resentment.

> *'It may sway my judgement of that lecturer. Maybe there should be a way to go through a third party.'*

3. Experiences of feedback on writing

Discussing the feedback on an actual assignment in pairs helped students to express their thoughts more fully using examples.

Students expressed a strong desire for the opportunity to have a feedback conversation to help them understand the meaning of comments and how to use them to improve.

'It helps … to have a chance to understand where [markers are] coming from. Otherwise I have no context for the feedback, I can't hang it on anything because it's just a comment.'

'From this feedback I don't know what else they wanted, and that's where you need a one-to-one discussion, where I could go, "Well, what do you mean by this?"'

Students were asked to role play a feedback conversation in pairs, with one person taking the role of a student, and the other, a member of staff. When they imagined a feedback conversation in the role play, the student role-players were respectful and subservient while the lecturer role-players did all the talking and there was very little dialogue. Students wanted to challenge and ask questions but seemed unsure how to express themselves in the role play situation. The perceived 'power gap' between staff and students was played out in every scene.

Students appreciated the general feedback comments, but they wanted specific instances marked up on the original script.

'I had one essay feedback where someone's gone, "On page 6 you had da-da-da; on page 9 you did this," and that was really helpful because I could identify what they were talking about. But no one else has done that ever.'

Marking was perceived as inconsistent and highly subjective - and this bred scepticism about the fairness of the process.

'I [am] sceptical or a bit apprehensive to … implement changes recommended by one marker, and then be criticised for that by the next marker.'

'A bit suspicious of it – marking is quite subjective. There's a lack of consistency between markers so we're a little suspicious of taking too much from feedback.'

Students wanted specifics of what was good in an assignment, so they could do it again and they also wanted positive suggestions about what to do better.

'This was the essay I got the best grade on but in terms of the comments, there's not much that tells me why. And that would have been really handy so I could transfer that to other things.'

'When it's a bad grade, they say, "You haven't done this," but there's not enough, "You could do this…"'

The MSc students seemed better able to separate themselves from their work than the BSc group. They were more vocal about wanting the opportunity to have a feedback conversation to help them understand the meaning of comments and how to use them to improve. The student/staff role plays among the MSc students tended to depict staff as unhelpful and the student as more challenging. One student commented:

'We need to find out what's wrong. I would never question things in undergrad but I now would.'

4. Ideas of what could improve feedback on writing

Students would like feedback that:

- Links clearly to assignment guidelines.

- Is not anonymous i.e. allows them to follow up written feedback in a conversation with the marker.
- Is more constructive, and also consistent across markers and assignments.
- Gives examples and explains how to make any changes.
- Indicates clearly the **hierarchy** of comments i.e. what is major and what is less important.
- Is specific to that essay, but also that makes general comments on writing which can be applied to future assignments.
- Indicates what was done well, but also what to do to get a higher grade in the future.

Students feel that verbal feedback is helpful because it:

- Allows students to ask questions and clarify any confusion.
- Identifies and clarifies strengths and weaknesses and helps students to understand what they need to do in order to improve.
- Is reassuring and can prevent a complete loss of confidence.

Students suggested that staff – like MSc students – should pick out three main points to be improved upon next time.

> *'It's a good idea to get us to do this, but honestly sometimes the feedback has been so poor about what to do better that I've struggled to find even two points to improve. If staff had to do this they would focus more on helping us do better next time.'*

At the end of the focus groups many participants commented that they were pleased to have had the opportunity to share their experiences of feedback on writing and to be heard on this issue.

RESULTS: STAFF FOCUS GROUPS

1. a) Feelings associated with the task of marking assignments
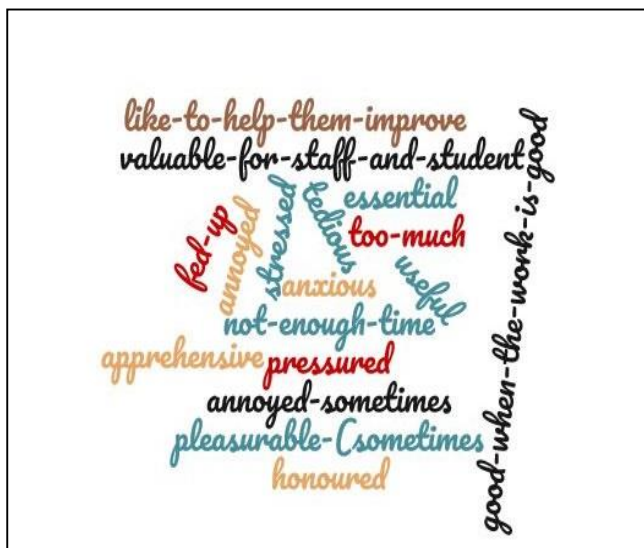
Staff described a mix of positive and negative emotions – positive when marking good work, and fed up, annoyed and anxious when work was weak. One staff member commented that it was an honour to evaluate work (regardless of quality) that students had worked hard on. Time

constraints and feedback deadlines that conflicted with other priorities caused stress and pressure, and also meant that the full marking and moderation cycle was not completed. In particular, that staff felt that they would like more detailed feedback from moderators on their marking, so that they knew how they could improve in the future.

> 'The three week turnaround pressures the moderator. We're moderating whilst we're teaching and we're moderating while we're marking something else.'

1. b) Feelings about giving feedback on writing

How do you feel when you can give positive feedback on writing?

How do you feel when you have to give negative feedback?
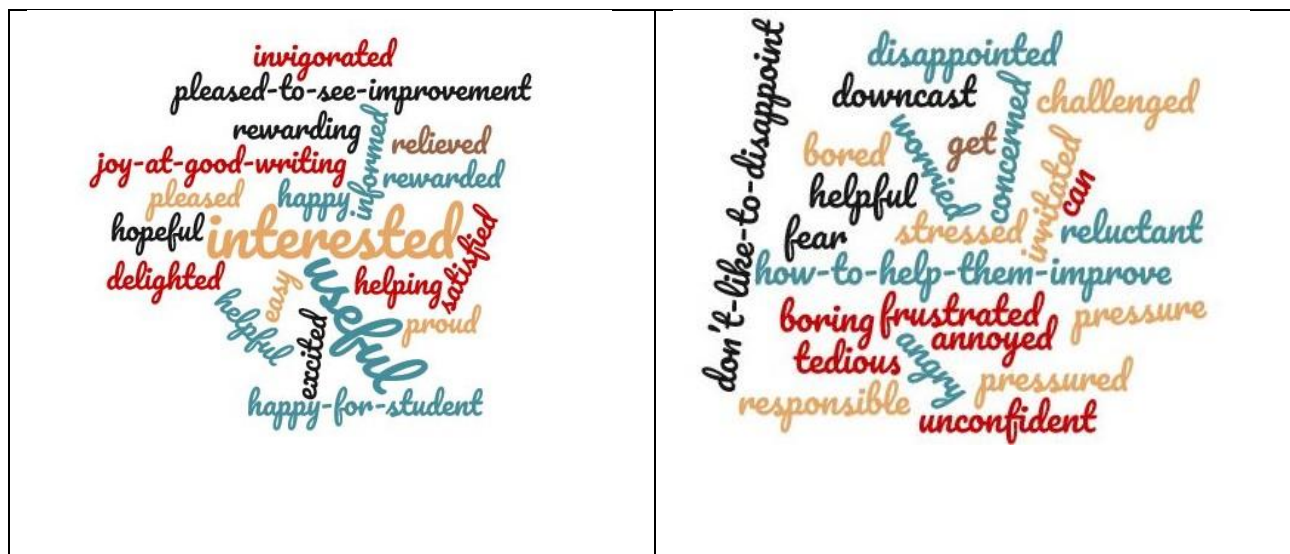
Staff had complex feelings about giving feedback on writing – and these emotions were strongly felt.

> '[I have] been doing this for 20 years and still find marking emotional.'

They appreciate the function of marking and feedback to develop students' abilities – but it is also associated with pressure and anxiety in their own role. Student achievement is a validation of good teaching and brings a sense of pride and relief. Providing critical, negative feedback feeds into frustration with teaching.

Staff felt a strong sense of personal responsibility:

> 'You feel a responsibility if the work is not good, particularly as a dissertation supervisor. It feels like a reflection on you.

Staff expressed frustration, irritation and annoyance when students did not appear to engage with feedback.

> 'I get very irritated and annoyed if … students have not engaged with [previous] feedback, [and they] have not even tried. If a student isn't making the effort, I think, "What am I doing this for?"'

'It's apparent that students don't read their feedback. "Why don't you read it?" "Well I just move onto the next thing." It's like students see each assignment as its own little silo, with no connection between them. Students don't seem to realise that it's a cumulative process.'

The lack of engagement was attributed to students' disinterest or apathy.

'Students don't take the time, they don't invest in understanding their feedback.'

'Students who have failed and come to the revision session not having read their feedback – it's baffling. It's almost a passive-aggressive reaction which leaves you thinking, "What part of this are you going to take responsibility for?"'

'Some students don't bother with the feedback if they're happy with the grade: "If I'm happy with a B why do I need to bother to respond to feedback? It's good enough."'

Staff felt that, ideally, feedback should be an interaction between students, markers and moderators, but noted that it was not the norm in the occupational therapy division for students to approach staff to discuss feedback. While students could go to their personal tutor to discuss feedback, tutors sometimes struggled to interpret colleagues' comments.[2]

'Students get feedback like 'very good section' and then they give the student a C. Then I don't know what to say to my tutee.'

Staff were not confident that assignment guidelines were as helpful as intended. There was the feeling that students always wanted more direction, and that no matter how much information was provided, it was never enough.

'The more you give, the more students want; they become dependent on you.'

'We value academic freedom and intellectual creativity, and the students just [say], "tell us what to do!"'

Masters students, in particular, were expected to be able to work independently:

'We should be able to give [MSc]students just a title for an assignment and they should be able to interpret that and argue their case.'

Staff compared their own student experiences to current student expectations, and wondered about the change in educational culture.

'It was different when I was a student: you were given the title and you got on with it. Is this the consumerist culture?'

2. Attitudes towards feedback on writing

We looked at feedback on writing from a pedagogical perspective.

Staff felt that the purpose of feedback on writing was to help students organise their thinking, to develop and grow as future professionals who would aspire to stretch themselves even further.

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[2] The staff focus groups were conducted before the departmental policy on feedback was changed.

It was a mechanism for setting expectations and clarifying academic standards. Feedback served to justify and explain the student's grade and to set specific actions for future improvement.

Staff wanted students to apply themselves to reading comments carefully and to take time to understand them, not taking them as a personal criticism of them. They wanted students to read the essay again in the light of the comments, and seek clarification from the moderator, or personal tutor, for anything they were unsure about. Moreover, they wanted students to use the feedback to improve future work.

> *'I want them to understand the problem with their writing and do something about it.'*

Staff also commented that, in reality, they often did not know how students responded to feedback, nor how helpful it was.

> *'I have no idea if a student [has] actually used the feedback. I would love to know!'*

> *'Actually we don't get much of a response from students – we only hear from the one or two who are particularly angry.'*

Staff felt that students were critical of feedback, and questioned the marker's judgement.

> *'I have all As and Bs [on other assignments], I can't get a D!'*

The extent to which feedback was a two way process was seen to be very limited.

> *'I think we are very disconnected from student reactions.'*

The idea of meeting with students as the identified marker was viewed with some caution.

> *'… it could be very uncomfortable – [I would] feel vulnerable.'*

In summary, there was general agreement about the pedagogical purpose of feedback and it being core to staff's roles. Feedback on writing was intended to help students to communicate in an appropriate professional and academic style, to calibrate their performance against others, and to develop and improve. Staff were unsure about the scope of their role in improving the 'nitty-gritty' of students' writing, for example:

> *'Is it my role to tell students about paragraphing?'*

There was a considerable gap between how staff wanted students to respond to feedback and how they actually responded to it, but also an acknowledgement that staff didn't know much about the student perspective because there was so little follow-up discussion with students.

3. Experiences of giving feedback on writing

Staff brought examples of feedback they had provided, and discussed these in the group. Again, there was strength of feeling about feedback on writing, on one hand related to being fair and doing justice to the students' efforts, and on the other, frustration with poor writing and lack of improvement from previous attempts.

> *'[I might be thinking] "That was stupid," but need to phrase it well – remembering that students have put a lot of effort into their work and the need to be respectful.'*

Staff felt the need to curb the expression of their frustration.

'[I recognise] that sometimes one needs to take a step back – I'm getting harsh, my frustration is coming through.'

Staff can feel insecure about their ability to give useful feedback on writing.

'Is it me? Am I getting this wrong? Is this really a bad essay or is it just me?'

Some of this is related to the disconnect between staff and student perspectives on feedback, some is related to time and resource constraints.

As in the student focus groups, staff were asked to role play a feedback conversation between a student and a lecturer. The same dynamic was observed, with the lecturer role-player doing the majority of the talking. In the discussion afterwards, it was apparent that staff felt that they had different expectations to students about the purpose and usefulness of feedback conversations.

'Students don't come prepared to the discussion on feedback – they're expecting us to tell them how to do it. I'm so fed up with passivity,'

'I feel we explicitly need to say to students – the purpose of feedback is to feed forward.'

'The way students fixate on one thing is so unhelpful.'

Staff felt that students' emotions (anger, disappointment, frustration, anxiety) got in the way of them attending to feedback, and responding constructively.

4. Ideas about what could improve feedback on writing

Staff could clearly identify a range of problems with feedback, but were less certain about how to address these. They experienced real frustration that students seemed primarily focussed on their grade, with feedback seeming to be of secondary importance. They agreed that inconsistency among markers (in type of feedback and level of commitment to feedback) was a problem, and that there was a need to be more transparent about marking processes to students. Some thought that the practice of not allowing students to discuss feedback with the marker needed to be re-considered – but there was also a feeling that markers need protecting from angry students.

Thoughts about improving feedback included:

- Having a focussed discussion (and creating a glossary) in the team about the language used in giving feedback and what was meant by common phrases used, such as 'structure', 'critical analysis', 'flow', 'paragraphing', and so on.
- Gaining a better understanding from students (by asking them) about what they found most useful in feedback, and having an ongoing system for communicating about this.
- Restructuring assignments to include more formative feedback in a way that did not double the work load.
- Identifying ways to address inconsistencies between markers, including agreeing standards for the level and depth of feedback provided by markers.
- Finding opportunities and/or creating structures for feedback discussions where both students and staff reflect together on feedback given in a collaborative process.

- Using encouraging and positive language in giving feedback, for example, 'Have you considered this?' rather than 'This is wrong.'

DISCUSSION

The results of our project touch on a number of issues that are prominent in the literature on learning and teaching:

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

This section discusses our results in the context of the literature and raises questions that have led to our recommendations for future action.

The role of emotion in feedback on writing

Both the student and the staff groups report an emotional reaction to giving and receiving feedback on writing, with the undergraduates reporting the strongest emotions. In their chapter on the impact of emotions on feedback, Molloy *et al.* (2013) note that feedback is an inherently emotional business. The effects of negative feedback (either verbal or written) on learners, given in the wrong way and at the wrong time can have long-lasting impact, beyond its intent (Ende *et al.,* 1995), and can even affect career choices (Boud and Falchikov, 2007). The strength and vehemence of the reactions of some of our student participants seems to confirm this. However, Boud and Molloy (2013) also argue that emotion can play an important part in learning:

> *'This capacity of feedback to stir up emotion - a challenge to baseline ease or certainty - is why it can motivate behaviour in both positive and negative directions. If learners are provided with information that they have to wrestle with, reflect on, experiment with, this can act as a potent stimulus for learning and for reconsidering new ways of knowing and doing. It may not feel comfortable, certainly in the beginning, but there are ample studies to indicate that feedback as a stimulus has a more powerful impact on learning than any other variable in education, including class size and teacher experience.'*

Boud and Molloy (2013) suggest that part of the problem is that the prevalent model of feedback implicitly relies on a behaviourist, rather than a constructivist (Tynjälä, 1999) model of learning – the lecturer as 'expert' and the student as 'novice'; the student as 'passive recipient' and the lecturer as the 'bearer of bad news'. This idea, applied to our groups, sheds a slightly different light on the emotions of both students and staff. The 'bearers of bad new'' were anxious about upsetting students; the recipients of bad news were upset. But what if the students were first invited to give their own interpretation of the feedback? Could the whole exchange be re-framed to make it a collaborative learning exercise rather than a justification and explanation of comments on a specific assignment? Encouraging students to self-evaluate ('what did you understand from my feedback?' 'what do <u>you</u> think you need to improve in your writing next time?') before launching into an explanation of written comments could encourage students to take a more active role in the feedback process. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that, without

a sense of ownership in the process, or content, of feedback, it is not surprising that students often don't act on feedback, or in fact, don't even bother to read written feedback. How to make feedback on writing more collaborative (in order to defuse emotion and increase learning) is clearly an area for discussion in the Division.

There may also be an argument for taking feedback out of the context of marking, as suggested by the education blogger, Joe Kirby (2015).

Some of the staff's anxiety about feedback seemed to derive from the pressures of marking and the amount of time they spend doing it. This feeling of being over-burdened also seems to inflame their irritation when students fail to read the feedback, or respond to it, appropriately. Our staff groups viewed the task of marking more negatively than positively, which raises the question of whether there is scope to change staff perceptions of marking. It might be interesting to investigate under what conditions staff might enjoy marking and see it as more central to their teaching.

There is also strong evidence in the literature – confirmed in our study – that feedback plays into students' sense of self and that the impact of external feedback depends on how students filter the information through their existing beliefs and motivation for learning. (Such as the student in our study exclaimed passionately *'It feels very personal. I hate writing! I'm not a good writer.' Showing people my writing makes me feel vulnerable.'*) Students' views of themselves as writers have been built up over years and may be hard to challenge, but it may be helpful simply to acknowledge that these views exist and encourage students to approach assignments with an open mind. Asking the student how they interpreted a particular piece of feedback can bring to light their ideas about themselves – and about occupational therapy as a profession – and give staff the opportunity to offer an alternative view – for example, that there is not one 'kind of person' who is suited to occupational therapy and that becoming an occupational therapist is not a question of 'you either have it or you don't', but a process of incremental learning. Boud and Molloy (2013) suggest that 'addressing the dissonance through dialogue may be much more productive than the educator providing the same message but louder, or offering the same message but from a different angle.'

Trust, teacher-student relationships and feedback

Ashwin (2015), referencing the literature, notes that trust is a vital component of the feedback relationship and that it is particularly important for teachers to trust students to be active in their own learning:

> *'Trust appears to be one of the most crucial emotions that we need to develop as teachers, if we wish to extend agency and autonomy to our students and to see them as an essential component in the teaching and learning process.' (Ashwin, 2015)*

David Carless (2013) advocates a key role for trust in the feedback process. He bases his definition of trust on Tschannen-Moran (2004), i.e. *'one's willingness to be vulnerable based on an investment of faith that the other is open, reliable, honest, benevolent and competent'.* He argues that:

'All these five features relate in some way to assessment and feedback ... openness and transparency in assessment procedures; reliability of judgements; honest feedback which identifies weaknesses as well as strengths; goodwill and generosity of spirit from the feedback provider; and the competence of others to provide useful feedback.' (Carless 2013)

A lack of trust appears again and again in the responses of our participants. Some students expressed a lack of trust in the guidelines and requirements, the fairness/equality of marking, the quality of marking and feedback. Some staff expressed a lack of trust in students – that they don't read feedback; that they care only about the grade and not about learning; that they don't use feedback because 'they can't be bothered'. There seems to be an urgent need to explore where this mutual lack of trust comes from in the Occupational Therapy Division and to look at systemic ways of addressing it.

The issue of trust tends to lead back again to the relationship between the students and the academics and how each perceives the other in the feedback exchange. The role plays in our focus groups starkly illustrated that the feedback conversation in occupational therapy is envisaged as the 'expert' explaining to the student what they need to 'fix' and the student nodding passively their understanding and gratitude. With the change in policy that markers are now known to the students, perhaps there is an opportunity to develop a view of this conversation that moves beyond the 'bearer of bad news' meeting the passive recipient? Carless (2013) depicts dialogic approaches to feedback as *'interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified,'* and that this type of exchange is facilitated *'when teachers and students enter into trusting relationships in which there are ample opportunities for interaction about learning and around notions of quality.'* How can occupational therapy staff and students create the conditions in which there is an honest and constructive feedback dialogue, in which the student plays an active role?

Occupational therapy and the concept of academic literacies

Some of the students' comments suggest that they do not understand why academic writing is important, or how it relates to their future practice. There is a sense that being 'good at academic writing' is irrelevant to being a good occupational therapist.

The message that written assignments demonstrate (and develop) students' ability to think analytically, to solve problems, to develop an argument and defend it and that these are skills they need for solving problems they will encounter in practice, is clearly not getting across. Might it be time to re-visit how the importance of academic writing and its place within occupational therapy is communicated in the early stages of the degree?

Academic writing is not simply a generic skill, devoid of social context; what is considered to be 'good academic writing' is situated within, and shaped by, a particular social context, within which there are distinct power relationships. Learning to write academically at university is a key part of establishing a 'new learner identity' (Briggs *et al*., 2012) in the transition from school to university (Brooks *et al.,* 2007) and is closely linked to the student's sense of self. Citing Lillis (2001), Ashwin (2015) notes that learning to write well at university *'... involves students engaging with particular practices and a set of views of what good writing is which are shaped by*

the histories and cultures of our academic disciplines and institutions, and which privilege the forms of writing which are valued by those with power within these contexts.' Theorists like Lillis see learning as 'situated discourse practice' and the language and culture students encounter in their discipline as 'academic literacies'.

Our project reveals a distinct gap between occupational therapy staff's views of what constitutes good academic writing and students' understanding of what is expected of them. In addition, occupational therapy staff are not always consistent between themselves about what 'good' looks like nor in what they expect from student writing. Not all staff are confident about commenting on writing quality. Feedback tends to highlight these gaps and inconsistencies and to cause frustration on all sides. Do staff share a consistent understanding of what constitutes good writing in occupational therapy? Can such an understanding be developed through discussion? Wingate (2015), a key proponent of the academic literacies approach, advocates moving away from a 'discourse of deficiency and remediation' in student writing and suggests that academics should understand better what is academic literacy in their discipline in order to 'make visible the invisible'. This includes teaching students how to select and read sources and, crucially, how to write in the different 'genres' (essays, reports, reflective accounts etc.) required by the discipline. Is there an explicit plan in both pre-registration occupational therapy courses for the way that students build their writing skills from one assignment to the next? This might help students to apply feedback more successfully across different types of assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **We recommend that the emotional component of feedback for both staff and students should be acknowledged and addressed and its role for student learning carefully considered.**

For staff, this might mean:

- Considering what changes might make marking more enjoyable and more central to teaching.
- Understanding the positive role that uncomfortable emotions can play in stimulating learning.
- Considering how feedback might be separated from marking.
- Re-framing the feedback model from behaviourist to constructivist (i.e. moving away from the 'giver and receiver of bad news' to a model that includes student self-evaluation within a collaborative approach).

For students this might mean:

- Understanding the positive role that uncomfortable emotions can play in stimulating learning.
- Understanding how feedback can challenge a fixed self-concept and how this can be a barrier to improvement (finding something difficult does not mean that you cannot get better at it - you need to keep an open mind).
- The role of emotions in feedback.

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

2. We recommend setting up a staff-student working group to consider how to improve the feedback processes, and trust in the feedback relationship between staff and students within occupational therapy.

The group's remit might include sharing interpretations, negotiating meanings clarifying expectations of academic writing in occupational therapy as well as discussing Carless' (2015) five aspects of trust – open, reliable, honest, benevolent and competent – in the context of feedback on occupational therapy assignments. The outcome might be some kind of contract between students and staff that expressed a shared ownership of the way feedback is conducted in the Division.

The expectation that students should develop writing skills across assignments needs to be pro-actively thought through, with feedback received in time to apply it to subsequent work. The presentation of assignment guidelines and their interpretation (so that students can understand the alignment of feedback with the task) also needs consideration.

3. We recommend separate training for staff and students in how to have an effective feedback dialogue that recognises and manages the power imbalance.

For staff this might include:

- Developing and agreeing a model for good practice in feedback conversations.
- Training in how to prepare for and manage feedback conversations.
- Training to give them the tools and vocabulary to comment, confidently and consistently, on different aspects of writing (building an argument, structure etc.) that focus on what students can improve next time.
- Checking with students regularly on what type of comments they find most helpful.
- Presenting written comments in a hierarchy so that students can see instantly which are the most important.
- Agreeing as a staff group what form written feedback should take and in what level of detail.

For students this might include training in:

- The relationship between academic writing and occupational therapy practice.
- What feedback is for and how it can help them to improve their writing.
- How to seek feedback within the context of a power imbalance.
- How to prepare for and manage feedback conversations.

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