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

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ABSTRACT

Aim

This project aimed to discover what kinds of feedback would help occupational therapy (OT) students at Brunel University London to improve their academic writing.

Method

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'.

Findings

Feedback on writing elicits strong feelings in both students and staff. Students observed that they often did not understand the feedback, were confused about the meaning of terms (e.g. 'structure', 'argument'), were confused by positive comments accompanied by a poor grade, and found it difficult to apply feedback to future assignments. Critical comments on their writing could lead students to question their suitability to the course and to OT 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' perceived lack of engagement with feedback. Role plays of feedback conversations suggested that students felt inhibited by the power relationship between themselves and staff, and were reluctant to ask penetrating questions about the feedback they received.

Conclusions

Feedback on writing elicits strong feelings among staff and students and the role of emotion in student learning should be considered, alongside developing mechanisms to improve trust in feedback between staff and students. 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. It also supports research suggesting that reduced opportunities for a constructive feedback dialogue inhibit learning and increase student dissatisfaction.

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BACKGROUND

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). Existing research in universities in the United Kingdom (UK) 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 higher education (HE) sector (Carless 2007). 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.

Occupational therapy (OT) students at Brunel University London had expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback received on their assignments, and despite attempts at improvement, it remained a perennial action point in the University's annual monitoring process. Students reported that they struggled to understand markers' comments such as, "The flow of the work could be improved for ease of reading," wanting "more clarity about what 'the flow of the work' means, with some examples." Staff, too, felt that there were inconsistencies in their language when talking about writing, and acknowledged their uncertainties about judging writing quality.

There appeared to be a clear need to identify what kind of feedback on academic writing works for students in OT, in order to develop guidance for staff and students. We hoped, in addition, that this might have wider relevance in the University.

From the outset, this was developed as a collaborative project between students and staff. It was led by two members of staff (GE, senior lecturer in OT; AW, Royal Literary Fund fellow) and two students (MM, BSc; RM, pre-registration MSc). We hoped to model a process where staff and students collectively shaped improvements, collapsing some of the hierarchical structures that tend to exist in academia, and empowering students to feel that their opinions count and their voices are heard.

AIMS

The 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.

The study 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).

- Students' and staff's perceptions of how to make feedback on writing more effective in helping students to improve.

METHOD

The project consisted of two linked activities:

    (i)   Three student focus groups ($n = 24$).

    (ii)   Two staff focus groups ($n = 12$)

Recruitment

BSc students in level 2 (2015 and 2016 cohorts), MSc students in year 1 (2016 cohort – the MSc is a two year course), and OT staff were invited to participate via email.

Table 1: Focus group participants

	Date	$n=$	Female	Male	Self-declared disability	BME participants
Student focus group 1: Level 2 BSc (2015 cohort)	Apr 2017	9	8	1	3	0
Student focus group 2: Year 1 MSc (2016 cohort)	Aug 2017	8	8	0	3	1
Student focus group 3: Level 2 BSc (2016 cohort)	Sep 2017	7	5	2	1	2
Staff focus group 1	Jul 2017	5	4	1	1	0
Staff focus group 2	Jul 2017	7	7	0	0	0

The OT Division has a relatively high number of students who need additional learning support, so the high proportion of student participants with disabilities for such a small sample (29%) 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. Black and minority ethnic (BME) students were under-represented.

Twelve of the 17 members of OT staff in the Division participated in the focus groups – one Reader, three Senior Lecturers and eight Lecturers.

Focus groups

All focus groups were facilitated by AW. MM and RM assisted with facilitation in the student groups, and GE assisted in the staff groups. Students were asked to bring an example of feedback they received on academic writing that was helpful to them, and one that was not.

Staff were asked to bring one or two examples of feedback provided to students that specifically mentioned aspects of writing (such as structure, clarity, flow of argument, grammar and punctuation).

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). All participants received written information about the study and gave written consent prior to participating.

The focus groups for both students and staff followed the same structure. Different activities (such as post-it notes on flipcharts and brief role-plays) were used to elicit: (i) feelings on feedback on writing; (ii) attitudes towards feedback on writing; (iii) experiences of feedback (using the examples people had brought); and (iv) ideas about what could change.

Data analysis

The focus groups were audio-recorded, and the observers (MM, RM, GE) took notes. Notes and transcriptions were analysed following Mason's (2002) method of indexing and categorisation.

RESULTS

Student focus groups

Among BSc students, there were more negative than positive feelings about feedback on writing, and emotions were felt very strongly. Writing was closely connected to confidence and to their 'writer identity':

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

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

There was a general feeling that being judged by the quality of their writing was 'unfair'; good academic writing was seen as irrelevant to being a good occupational therapist.

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

Criticism of their writing made some students question their suitability to OT as a career.

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

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. They saw themselves as hard-working and career-minded and expected feedback on writing to help them towards their career goals.

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

For both BSc and MSc students, 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 on board, appreciate it and learn from it, but most agreed that they could only engage with it once their initial emotional reaction had 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 marker's perspective.'

The students seemed better able to implement concrete changes (referencing, formatting) than abstract skills (building an argument, structuring effectively). They reported that the most helpful comments were those that were linked to examples in the essay, explanations of what was done well, and specific suggestions about what to work on in future.

'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.'

Students were confused by the inconsistency between positive comments and grade, and did not always find suggestions for improvement useful.

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

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

'[We are] 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.'

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.

'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'.

At the time of this study, markers were anonymous. Although this practice has now changed (as a consequence of this project), anonymity of marking was the aspect of feedback on writing that caused the most upset.

'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.'

Students weren't clear about the reasons for marking being anonymous but speculated that its purpose was 'to protect staff from students.'

Not being able to clarify feedback with the marker caused frustration.

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

Students had a strong desire for 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.'*

Participants 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. The student role-players were respectful and subservient while the lecturer role-players did all of the talking. There was very little dialogue between the two, and the perceived power gradient between staff and students was evident in every scene. Commenting on the experience afterwards, students explained that they wanted to challenge and ask questions but were unsure how to express themselves to their lecturers.

Students' ideas of what could improve feedback on writing

Students would like feedback that:

- Allows them to follow up written feedback in a conversation with the marker.
- Is more constructive, and also consistent across markers and assignments.
- Gives specific 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.
- Links clearly to assignment guidelines.

Students feel that a feedback dialogue 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.

Staff focus groups

Staff had complex feelings about giving feedback on writing – and, like the students, these emotions were strongly felt. They felt positive when marking good work, and fed up, annoyed and anxious when work was weak. They appreciated the role of marking in developing students' abilities, but it was also associated with pressure and anxiety in their own role. Student achievement was perceived as a validation of good teaching and brought a sense of pride and relief; providing critical, negative feedback on the other hand fed into frustration and disillusionment with teaching.

Staff noted that they would welcome more feedback for themselves on their marking but time constraints and feedback deadlines often meant that the full marking and moderation cycle was not completed, and this feedback was not available.

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

Staff experienced 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?"'

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

> '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?"'

Staff wanted students to apply themselves to reading comments carefully and to take time to understand them, not take them as a personal criticism. 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 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?'

Staff felt that, ideally, feedback should be an interaction between students, markers and moderators, but noted that it was not the norm for students to approach staff to discuss feedback. In reality, they often did not know how students responded to feedback, nor how helpful it was.

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

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.'

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,'*

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

Staff ideas about what could improve feedback on writing

Staff could identify a range of problems with feedback, but were less certain about how to address these. 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 – but there was also a feeling that markers need protecting from angry students.

Thoughts about improving feedback included:

- Agree within the team on the language used in giving feedback and what was meant by common phrases, such as 'structure', 'critical analysis', 'flow', 'paragraphing'.
- Ask students what they found most useful in feedback, and using this to improve the process.
- Provide more formative feedback in a way that does not increase the work load.
- Address inconsistencies between markers, and agreeing standards for the level and depth of feedback provided by markers.
- Find ways for students and staff to reflect together on how to make feedback a more collaborative process.
- Use encouraging and positive language in giving feedback, for example, 'Have you considered this?' rather than 'This is wrong.'

DISCUSSION

The role of emotion in feedback on writing

Feedback is an inherently emotional business (Molloy *et al.,* 2013) Negative feedback (either verbal or written) 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 facilitate learning:

> *'This capacity of feedback to stir up emotion [...] 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.

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 news 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 *you* 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. There is thus a need to make feedback on writing more collaborative in order to defuse emotion and increase learning.

There is also strong evidence in the literature – confirmed in our study – that feedback plays into students' sense of self and that students filter staff comments through their existing beliefs and motivation for learning. Students' views of themselves as writers have been built up over years and may be hard to challenge, but it may be helpful to ask questions to bring to light students' ideas about themselves. This can give staff the opportunity to encourage a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2017) and to offer an alternative view – for example, that there is not one 'kind of person' who is suited to OT and that becoming an occupational therapist is a process of incremental learning.

Trust, teacher-student relationships and feedback

Ashwin (2015) 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. 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 repeatedly 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'. Nash and Winstone (2017) suggest that the challenge is to move from a culture of mutual blame between staff and students to a culture of shared responsibility.

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 is envisaged as the 'expert' explaining to the student what they need to 'fix' and the student nodding passively their understanding and acceptance.

OT 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. The message is not getting across that written assignments develop their ability to think analytically, develop an argument and solve problems they will encounter later in practice. Our project also reveals a gap between OT staff's views of what constitutes good academic writing and students' understanding of what is expected of them. 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. 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'.

In addition, OT 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. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 could be accomplished through considering how to create a culture of shared responsibility between themselves and students, and reframing 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 embracing a growth mindset, understanding the positive role that uncomfortable emotions can play in stimulating learning, how feedback can challenge a fixed self-concept and how this can be a barrier to improvement, the role of emotions and the importance of trust in feedback, and how academic literacies tend to be assumed rather than communicated.

These shared understandings could be developed through 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, gaining the tools and vocabulary to comment on different aspects of writing 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, and 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 OT 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, and how to prepare for and manage feedback conversations.

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