

# Formative feedback through conversations: “Now we’re talking!”

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## Abstract

This case study explains how we have embedded dialogic feedback within a core second year module at the University of Greenwich. We have introduced a comprehensive process of verbal feedback to complement the written feedback we provide to students on a module with a linked assessment design. The feedback process starts with opportunities for conversations with peers and the module leader during weekly timetabled workshops. We then use small group and individual meetings to discuss draft work and offer formative feedback. We have adopted a collaborative approach where both academic and professional services colleagues work together to provide feedback through conversations with students. Providing feedback in this way makes our practice more inclusive because a conversation brings in those students who have no draft to discuss and would therefore not be able to benefit from a traditional feedback opportunity for formative feedback on a written draft. Our experience is that making scheduled appointments for feedback meetings encourages participation.

## Introduction

This case study sets out how we have used conversations to provide formative feedback to a group of 36 second year students in the Business School at the University of Greenwich. The students are on an Accounting degree with an information systems focus and the module discussed in the case study has been designed to include elements of professional practice such as teamwork and delivering presentations to add to the technical skills which the students on the programme are developing. In 2018-19 we reviewed the delivery of the module to include a significant amount of formative feedback given by academic and professional services colleagues in conversations with students.

Feedback has the potential to make a major impact on a student’s academic achievement (Carless and Boud, 2018). However, academics and students sometimes have differing perceptions of feedback; academics can believe that their feedback is clear, relevant and useful but students do not always agree (Mulliner and Tucker, 2017). Mulliner and Tucker (2017) suggest that we might close some perception gaps if we include more opportunities for dialogue with students about assessment and feedback. Their suggestion resonates with Agricola, Prins and Sluijsmans’s (2020) finding that students prefer verbal feedback to written feedback. This is because the former provides the opportunity for students to question and understand their feedback and it is therefore perceived as more useful. Nicol (2010) agrees that delivering feedback through conversations with students can lead to improved assignments, although he notes that one-to-one conversations between lecturer and student are increasingly under threat in today’s era of mass education.

This paper sets out how we have used conversations to provide formative feedback in a second year module. The literature relating to formative and dialogic feedback is therefore reviewed in the next section and then the case study is discussed. The paper ends with concluding comments, including recommendations for practice.

## Literature review

Two key features of useful, actionable feedback are that it is timely (O'Donovan, Rust and Price, 2016) and usable (Dawson *et al*, 2019). However, students do not always act on the feedback they receive (O'Donovan, Rust and Price, 2016; Carless *et al*, 2011). The feedback focused on by some students is the part which seems to justify an unexpectedly low grade (Winstone *et al*, 2017) or feedback which students believe will lead to earning higher marks in a future assignment. Students do not always consider carefully feedback after a summative submission because they see as tenuous the link to their future assignments, which are often in different modules. On the other hand, formative feedback on a specific assignment is regarded as useful by students because they have it in time to apply it in that assignment and are motivated to do so in order to achieve a higher grade, thereby learning from the feedback received. In this way feedback becomes 'feedforward' which is "feedback ... that either impacts upon an upcoming assignment, or is given post-assignment with specific direction on how it can be applied to future assignments" (Hill and West, 2020, 84).

Winstone and Pitt (2017) highlight the importance of students engaging with their feedback. One way students might be encouraged to do that is through conversations with a lecturer where the focus is on how students can improve their work in the future (Beaumont, Moscrop and Canning, 2016). This kind of dialogue also shows students that a lecturer is engaging with an individual student's work which O'Donovan *et al* (2019) find is something our students like. In a conversation, a student can ask questions about the feedback being given and clarify how that feedback should be acted on in the future (Mulliner and Tucker, 2017; Nicol, 2010). A conversation also provides an opportunity for the lecturer to clarify assignment instructions and to answer a student's questions. This is important because students want the requirements for their assignments to be clear (O'Donovan, 2017).

It is possible to provide more detailed feedback in a conversation than in written comments. In a conversation a lecturer can look for verbal and non-verbal signals that a student understands the feedback that is being given, which is important if a student is to be able to act on it (Winstone *et al*, 2017). A conversation also provides the chance to monitor a student's emotional reaction to formative feedback. The lecturer can support the student through the conversation and encourage engagement with the feedback provided. Finally, a dialogue means that students can accept, question and even dispute their feedback so that they are effectively giving "feedback on their feedback to aid instructors in reflecting on its delivery" (Mulliner and Tucker, 2017, 269).

At first, there will be a learning curve for academics as they begin to engage in conversations with students in this way and, specifically, learn through experience how students might communicate confusion or disagreement with the feedback being given. There are also other issues to be aware of when designing a schedule of formative feedback opportunities. For example, O'Donovan *et al* (2019) highlight the risk that the final grade for an assignment might reflect mark deductions for matters not commented on in the formative feedback. This can make students dissatisfied. Academics recognise that feedback can, and should, come from various sources, including from peers (Carless and Boud, 2018). Peer feedback might be delivered through written comments but also through conversations with each other (Nicol, 2010). Therefore, when students work on a group assignment, there is a natural dialogue that emerges as they work on improving their assignment together. The challenge is that students may not recognise or use feedback other than written comments provided by their tutor on work they have submitted. Specifically, Mulliner and Tucker (2017) suggest that peer feedback is not always valued or sought.

## Case study

### Background

The context for the case study is a post-1992 UK university with a commitment to widening participation. Within the class there are so-called 'commuter students' who tend to live at home throughout their programme and sometimes have considerable employment and family commitments outside of university (Maguire and Morris, 2018). The class also includes students who joined the university with lower entry qualifications through an extended four-year programme. The students therefore face various challenges: students whose entry qualifications include Business and Technology Education Council diplomas (BTECs) are accustomed to a robust formative feedback loop to support their studies; commuter students have limited time for self-study or for planning their future careers; and students with low entry qualifications can lack confidence in their academic ability or their potential to secure a graduate job.

We addressed these challenges in two ways. First, we increased the amount of formative feedback provided on the module. The assessment structure was a linked series of an initial individual report, group presentation and final individual report. This multi-stage assessment structure meant that written feedback on the first item of assessment provided formative feedback toward the second item (Carless *et al*, 2011) etc. The feedback structure was enhanced by formative verbal feedback before assignments were submitted for grading. Second, we brought an employability consultant onto the module team. The consultant was involved in planning and teaching on the module, and she delivered some of the verbal feedback. Conversations enabled the consultant to build relationships with students to encourage them to use employability support services provided by the university.

## **Weekly workshops**

The module is delivered over a single term in 12 weekly two-hour workshops. Laptops are provided so that students can work on their presentations and reports with the lecturer present to answer questions and provide guidance. It is worth noting that not all students can bring their own laptop, especially in a widening participation university. Therefore, the provision of laptops for students makes the learning activities in the module more inclusive because everyone can work on their assignments in class. The workshops are where the dialogue, and therefore feedback, on the module start. However, whole class teaching may not be viewed as feedback by students (O'Donovan, Rust and Price, 2016) and so the module leader had to signpost regularly that these 'informal' conversations were feedback. In addition to conversations in the workshops, we provided formative feedback in the following ways.

## **Initial report**

Our plan was to introduce opportunities for emailed written feedback on the initial and final individual reports before submission (Reilly, 2019). However, the offer of emailed feedback on the initial report was taken up by very few students, which is consistent with the view that not all students will take up this kind of opportunity (O'Donovan, Rust and Price, 2016). Based on this experience with the initial reports, we immediately changed our plan, which had been to offer written feedback on the draft final reports. Instead we provided face-to-face meetings with students as described below.

## **Group presentation**

The relational aspect of feedback is noted by O'Donovan *et al* (2019). Good relationships between a lecturer and student provide the environment for verbal feedback to be delivered and received effectively in a conversation. The reverse is also true; a conversation about a student's work provides the opportunity to build the relationship. Therefore, we used the feedback opportunity to build a key relationship outside of the department. Students can be reluctant to access university careers services. Therefore, we wanted to bring employability support into the module to embed it in the programme structure for second year students (O'Leary, 2017).

As the module included a group presentation, it was a good fit for the consultant to deliver content on teamwork and presentation skills (Leopold and Reilly, 2020). However, the main motivation for this collaborative approach was to enable the consultant to build relationships with the students, including through conversations in the workshops which she delivered and, importantly, in face-to-face meetings where she gave verbal feedback to students on their mock group presentations. At those meetings she could make links to skills they would need in assessment centres and interviews. As these were second year students, she could also offer support for placement applications.

Written feedback was provided after the presentations. During the workshops following the presentations, the module leader spoke to the students in their groups to explain the written feedback, answer questions and emphasise its usefulness in two main ways. First, it provides feedforward into

the final report as the next stage of the module's assessment structure. Second, it feeds forward to future presentations on the programme and in a student's career.

### ***Peer feedback***

The presentation required students to work together in small groups of four. By providing laptops so that students could prepare their assignments during the workshops, students were in an environment which facilitated discussion among themselves. Students created their presentations together outside of the workshops but in the workshops the module leader could direct their group conversations. Specifically, the module leader prompted students to discuss the feedback received on their mock and then actual group presentations. In this way the students helped each other to access and understand feedback so that it was used as feedforward toward their final reports.

### **Final report**

Following the low take up of the offer to give emailed formative feedback on the draft initial reports, we designed a schedule of face-to-face appointments to deliver formative feedback on the draft final reports (Espasa *et al*, 2018). Giving verbal feedback in this way provides opportunity for dialogue because the meeting is not one where the lecturer speaks and the student listens; it is an opportunity for a student to play an active part in the feedback process. As the feedback was in the form of a conversation, the module leader could still discuss a student's ideas, clarify the assignment requirements and answer specific questions even when a student kept the appointment but had no draft report at the meeting. This is an example of inclusive teaching and learning because it brings in those students who have no draft to discuss and who would not therefore be able to benefit from a traditional feedback opportunity for formative feedback on a written draft.

## **Conclusion**

This case study sets out the benefits of providing feedback through conversation in order to create a supportive learning environment. We have used conversations with the module leader and a colleague from the university's careers service to make the feedforward process more inclusive for a group of 36 second year students. The pressure on resources and issues around workload might challenge this approach to student support. However, by designing the weekly workshops to include conversations with all students about their work, much of the verbal feedback could be given within the timetabled activities thereby putting no additional time requirement on the module leader or the students. The workshops also facilitate peer-to-peer conversations to provide and explain feedback (Nicol, 2010). However, important aspects of the support offered were the face-to-face feedback meetings which required a certain time commitment but were shared between the employability consultant for the mock group presentations, and the module leader for students' individual final reports. Nicol (2010) explains that with large student numbers, this type of support through one-to-one meetings can be difficult to provide. If student numbers grow, a future challenge will be how we continue to provide verbal feedback, especially in one-to-one meetings.

Encouraging all students to engage with the feedback opportunities on offer was another challenge. To encourage engagement, students were given scheduled appointment times. We found that the mock presentation meetings were better attended than the report meetings. Anecdotally we heard from students that this was partly because they did not want to let the rest of the team down. It may also be because an individual student felt under less pressure to be prepared in advance and 'perform' in the meeting.

The following recommendations for practice arise from the case study:

- 1 Invite students to scheduled individual appointments rather than offering a drop-in opportunity. Drop in sounds more convenient for busy students but many will not 'drop in'. A scheduled appointment can be changed if necessary, to fit with a student's other commitments.
- 2 Where necessary, the meeting can be virtual rather than in person although arguably the latter is better for building a relationship. It is worth noting, however, that sometimes virtual meetings are the only option available, such as at the time of writing when our on-campus activities have been suspended.
- 3 For a large group, consider how verbal feedback to all students is achievable. This can be done during timetabled sessions to reduce the workload pressure on staff. However, class sizes should not be so large that it is difficult to speak to each student. Small group meetings can be useful opportunities for conversations if one-to-one meetings are not feasible.
- 4 Consider who is giving the feedback. This type of conversation provides the opportunity for relationships to be built between students and colleagues outside of the usual programme team. Here the module leader invited a colleague from the careers service to be part of the formative feedback process in relation to students' mock presentations. This approach shared the workload for delivering verbal feedback and benefited students by bringing employability support into the curriculum. Three points to note are as follows: the consultant was involved in the planning so she understood the entire module content and delivery, and how her feedback conversations would fit in; the module leader organised the schedule of mock presentations to reinforce the message to students that these were an important part of the feedback process on the module; and the consultant briefed the module leader after the mock presentations to ensure consistency of the feedback given by the module team. This briefing included referring any technical questions about the content of presentations on to the module leader.
- 5 Frequently signpost the various sources of feedback on a module. Where this is explained in a module handbook, supplement that information with regular repetition during face-to-face classes and meetings with students.

By delivering feedback in conversations with students, we can make our practice more inclusive, recognising that some students will not submit a written draft for review however much we encourage them to do that. A conversation enables students without a draft to participate in the feedback process in a way which would be impossible if we only offered written feedback on draft work.



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## Author biography

Dawn Reilly is a Principal Lecturer in financial accounting and Programme Leader at the University of Greenwich. Before entering higher education, she worked as an accountant and taught professional qualifications within further education. The latter experience sparked her interest in widening participation, and the impact of programme design and academic support on student performance. Her research interests are in the area of business education including how we close attainment gaps, deliver formative feedback and provide employability support within the curriculum.

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