

Meet the Researcher: Feedback literacy pilot project

Briefing for Participating Students

Introduction

One of the most important skills that we develop during our life is how to learn effectively. One of the challenges of starting university can be learning how to direct our own learning and work independently. This exercise is designed to give you an insight into how your lecturers do this, using the example of how they use feedback on their work to enhance it.

You will be given a lot of documentation during the course of the exercise, but don't worry! you are not expected to read it all. Its presence has two functions: first, to demonstrate the sheer scale of revision that goes into academic work prior to publication; and second, to show how researchers make good use of feedback to improve their work. We usually only get to see a researcher's work when it is published as the final, shiny product of research. This is therefore a wonderful opportunity for you to understand how papers are drafted and developed, and to see that they usually begin life in a far less perfect state.

You will work in a group to read the documents, and decide what you would like to ask the researcher about how they deal with feedback. Your questions can focus on the content of their work, as well as the processes. Getting feedback can be very emotional – just as it may be for you with your coursework or exams – so don't be afraid to ask about their feelings too! You may also be asked to present your findings after talking to the researcher. Think about what you have found useful about the activity, and what you have found useful for your own working practices.

Preparation for the activity

The researcher (it may be your personal tutor, or a module tutor, or other member of staff) will send you a number of files. These may include: various drafts of a paper, reviewers' feedback on it, editors' comments, cover sheets and the final paper.

We recommend that you start by reading the abstract, introduction and conclusion to the final paper. (You may wish to read the whole thing or divide it up between you, but everyone should read the abstract, introduction and conclusion). From these, try to work out what point the research is trying to make and why it is important to the field. You may wish to discuss this with the researcher.

We recommend that the next thing you do is look at the earlier draft of the work, and then at the feedback that it received from the reviewers and / or editors. From there you may want to look at a particular piece of feedback in more detail. Look at the reviewers' comment regarding this. Can you spot what it was referring to in the earlier paper and how it has been addressed in the later version? Is there anything that's unclear to you in this process that you would like to ask the researcher about?

Now compare the reviewers' comments with the editor's comments (if both are available). Is it clear to you why the editor has selected these pieces of feedback as key to improving the paper? If not, this is something that you may want to discuss with the researcher when you meet them.

Discuss these points in your group, and draw up a list of questions/topics that you would like to discuss with the researcher when you meet with them and try to prioritise them, so that you can ensure that you discuss those most important to you.

Meet the Researcher

Make sure that you leave plenty of time to find the researcher's office and arrive on time. Researchers are very busy people and while many love to speak to students about what they do, your conversation is likely to go much better if you arrive promptly.

If you do not already have an established way of greeting each other, take your cue from any emails they have sent you. Some prefer to be addressed by their title, others may feel uncomfortable being addressed formally. If in doubt, either ask if it is okay to call them by their first name or address them by their title until they tell you otherwise.

As you work your way through your list of questions keep an eye on the time. You may need to skip questions in order to make sure that those most important to you are discussed. But researchers can find this activity very engaging too, so allow for the fact they may run over time!

Take notes as you go but make sure that you write these up as soon as possible after the meeting: it is much easier to make sense of notes the sooner you do this. The value of writing up your notes promptly is hard to over-state.

Follow up

You should receive instructions from the researcher you meet (or another member of staff) about what to do after the activity by way of follow-up. But for your own purposes, do take time to think about how researchers use feedback. Which aspects of this can you apply to your own academic work? How can you go about this? Which aspects do you think would be more difficult to apply and why?

We are keen to find out what you thought of this activity. The researcher you meet will send you a short question about it after the activity has finished. This is a trial project, and we would be very grateful indeed if you could answer the question, so we know how far the activity has been helpful for you.

Thank you again for taking the time to read this sheet and for taking part in the activity: we are very grateful!

Dr Jenny Marie (j.marie@ucl.ac.uk) and Dr Nick Grindle (n.grindle@ucl.ac.uk)
UCL Arena Centre for Research-based Education

CC-BY-SA 4.0