

# Teaching students to learn from feedback: a narrative review of best practices for educators on essay-based assignments for improved feedback literacy

Evelyn Svingen, Department of Social Policy, Sociology, and Criminology  
Contact: e.svingen@bham.ac.uk

## Abstract

Essay-based assignments form a large part of undergraduate-level teaching, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Reviewing and providing feedback on these types of assignments can take considerable time and effort for an educator, which makes it very disappointing when some students struggle to know how to utilise this feedback for their future improvement. In this narrative review, I posit that a lack of engagement with, and ability to learn from, feedback is something that we are able to change. Fundamentally, student engagement with feedback and the way we as educators provide this feedback are not always compatible. Understanding this disconnect can lead to improvements in the way students engage with and subsequently learn from our feedback. This paper has several recommendations for educators: first, that it is important to teach the students how to engage with feedback and learn from it, as well as to establish a dialogue with students about it; and second, that any feedback given to the students must have a very clear goal-directed instruction on how a student can take any comments and apply them to their future assignments. These practical suggestions should help the educators enhance their students' ability to engage with feedback, leading to better learning and educational attainment.

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## Introduction

Essay-based assessments are a large part of student learning at university level, especially in the humanities and social sciences. As educators, we recognise the need for timely and

useful feedback that allows students to reflect on their writing and to improve for the next time. Nevertheless, it is not always clear what useful feedback entails, especially for students. In this narrative review, I aim to collate some practical advice from studies in higher education institutions that can help us improve our professional practice.

There is much literature around the benefits of peer feedback (e.g. Kerman *et al.*, 2022; Latifi and Noroozi, 2021). However, this review will focus on the feedback that a practitioner provides to their students regarding aspects of their performance on an assignment. Ilgen and Davis (2000) introduce a model in which they explain that feedback is designed to close the gap between the existing level of skill/knowledge and the desired level. The aim of any feedback is to have a targeted, constructive effect on a student's future academic performance, which is essential for educational attainment and improvement on the course. In addition, feedback provided by the practitioner can either motivate the student to close the gap between the current performance and the desired level, or cause the student to lose motivation and abandon the task entirely (Ilgen and Davis, 2002).

Feedback is often not read, engaged with, or understood by students (Ellery, 2008), and some researchers studying student engagement have found that there is a lack of clarity of understanding among students of what we mean by good engagement (Buckley, 2018). Nevertheless, this is something that can change, and improving educator feedback literacy can lead to an improvement in student feedback literacy and educational attainment as a result (Carless and Winstone, 2023). In this narrative review, I set out to collate the existing studies and recommendations that stem from them to offer practical suggestions on how to formulate feedback that students will be more likely to engage with and learn from.

### **Feedback and student engagement - what do we know?**

As essay-based assessments are a common way of assessing students within universities worldwide, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences, there is an ongoing need to discuss the way we as educators give feedback. In a questionnaire conducted by Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002), they found that 97% of students indicated that they usually read the written feedback they receive, and 82% of the students claimed to “pay close attention” to feedback. Moreover, 80% of students agreed with the statement that

feedback they receive is useful. The finding that students are eager to engage with feedback they receive is replicated in many studies (Hyland, 2000; 2003; Weaver, 2006), although some studies (Crisp, 2007) found that as many as 39% of students (out of 51 in the study) only spend 5 minutes or less reviewing their feedback. In educational literature, ability to engage with feedback is often referred to as feedback literacy.

Carless and Boud (2018) define feedback literacy as "the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies" (p. 1316). They argue that feedback literacy is not simply about being able to receive feedback, but about being able to use it to improve one's learning. Boud (2013) argues that feedback literacy is an essential skill for lifelong learning. He suggests that universities should create a culture of feedback where students are encouraged to seek and use feedback to improve their learning and "feedback is given and received openly, honestly, and constructively" (p. 26).

Therefore, giving feedback is a worthwhile activity. However, the form that it takes can greatly influence student engagement. For example, Carless and Boud (2018) found that students often report that they are not satisfied with feedback provision, which is backed by an extensive analysis of student NSS scores (Bell and Brooks, 2018). We know that students want to engage with feedback, but they might not find all forms of it as useful: Dawson *et al.* (2019) discovered that what students think good feedback is may be quite different from staff perceptions of this.

It is important to keep motivation in mind when giving students feedback (Harlen, 2006), especially because student emotions can shape the way that students engage with it (Värlander, 2008). Most importantly, because the aim of giving feedback to students is to facilitate their improvement from one assessment to the next, feedback can either motivate the student to improve or make them disengage from the task (Ilgen and Davis, 2002). Additionally, assessment stress and anxiety are common experiences among university students. A study by Bruffaerts *et al.* (2018) found that 22.5% of college freshmen reported experiencing high levels of stress, and 15.6% reported experiencing high levels of anxiety. Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that emotion is an integral part of the assessment process,

and that it can have a significant impact on student learning. Therefore, it is important to stay mindful of student emotions when thinking about feedback (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Winstone and Carless, 2019).

Back in 1987, Hounsell explained that there might exist a disconnect between student perceptions of what is expected from them and staff understanding of a good essay and academic discourse, which could form a big part of the feedback literacy gap. Riddell (2015) surveyed 68 first-year undergraduate students in English and found that 74% were unsure what is required of them to do well in an assignment. Students struggle to engage with feedback because they are often unable to "read between the lines" of what the assessor is asking them to improve on (McCune, 2004), possibly because they are unclear on how they can meaningfully engage with the assessment criteria. Engaging with feedback can often form a part of a "hidden curriculum" (Cramp, 2012), which is a phrase open to interpretation, but often refers to some expectations of the students' learning that are implicit (Orón Semper and Blasco, 2018). Engagement with feedback might not be a skill that students are familiar with, especially among the "non-traditional" students (Cramp, 2012). This issue could be a main reason for the disconnect between the level of feedback the tutors believe we provide and the usefulness the students see in it.

This gap may be at the heart of the difficulty that some students face when trying to make sense of their feedback (Sharif and Zainuddin, 2017). Blair and McGinty (2013) recognise the difficulty of communicating written feedback, and explain that the tutor's comments may often be misunderstood by students. Norton and Norton (2001) found not only similar results, but also that the discrepancy between expectations of students and staff may increase in the third year, possibly because the students have not yet adjusted to the increased complexity of what the assessment criteria are asking them to do.

Once we recognise the need to address this gap, we need to think about the most effective ways to close it. Blair and McGinty (2013) suggest the use of feedback dialogue, i.e. a conversation between students and teachers about the nature of feedback. Defeyter and McPartlin (2007) claim that engaging students in a discussion about the purpose of assessment and feedback helps to make students motivated and engaged in both the

assessment and the feedback. Engaging in a dialogue with students around how to engage with feedback and what to expect from it can be very beneficial to both students' motivation to engage with feedback (Värlander, 2008) as well as learning that comes from it (Dowden *et al.* (2013). Dowden *et al.* (2013) also suggest addressing the expectations of the coursework as well as engaging with feedback at the very beginning of the course, thus creating an active dialogue with the students from the very start.

While some staff share a view that students only want feedback that will get them a higher grade (Swann and Arthur, 1999; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009), the majority of students (71%) claim to be at university for the joy of learning and becoming better (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002). However, many students do not understand what is expected of them to get a high grade in assignments and what they are being judged on (MacLellan, 2001). This disconnect is likely to exacerbate the difficulties of engaging with feedback if students feel that they get comments relating to aspects of their work that they do not perceive as relevant. This finding highlights the need to engage in dialogue with students over assessment criteria as well as skills on how to engage with feedback.

It is especially important to engage in the feedback dialogue early in the course (Dowden *et al.*, 2013). Helping students engage with feedback early might greatly help their ability to learn from the comments they receive, but there are some aspects around the form that feedback takes that can make a big difference to student engagement with the comments. This was studied by Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2002), who interviewed 19 students across two institutions and obtained 94 responses to a questionnaire which asked about the students' experiences of what makes feedback helpful. They found that students perceive feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful, if it is too impersonal, and if it is too general and vague to be of any formative use. Weaver (2006) conducted interviews with 44 students and also found that feedback was seen as unhelpful if it was too general or vague, and lacked suggestions for improvement. In addition to this, Weaver noted that focussing on the negative and being unrelated to the assessment criteria was deemed unhelpful by students.

Hyland (2000) analysed six case studies in a mixed-methods longitudinal project and found that students were looking for feedback that would help them learn how to write other assignments better, rather than help them 'fix up' their current assignments. Similar findings were found in the qualitative study by Chokwe (2015), who argued that feedback should be understood more in terms of 'feedforward', and any feedback should help students improve their future assignments.

All these studies indicate that to help students learn from the feedback they receive, the comments need to engage with what the students should do better next time, rather than what they did badly on a current or past assignment. Students are not as good at connecting the dots as tutors believe them to be (McCune, 2004), and greater care should be shown when giving feedback to ensure that the directions for change are clear. Additionally, a study by Ellery (2008) showed that additional guidance on how to improve in the future can be given verbally to the whole class. This, in addition to improving comprehension, can be tied to the concept of timeliness in delivery of feedback.

Studies consistently report that for feedback to be effective, it needs to be delivered in a timely manner (Ellery, 2008; Higgins, Hartly, and Skelton, 2002; Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2005). However, this is not easy to achieve with growing student numbers and increasing staff workloads. Ellery (2008) notes that feedback can be delivered in verbal form to the whole group and can be quite efficient. On the other hand, such an approach can be less popular with students (Orsmond, Merry and Callaghan, 2004), and many believe the comments do not apply specifically to themselves and tend to ignore them. Nevertheless, if the conversation about learning from feedback was started early in the course, that effect might be mitigated.

Malecka, Boud, and Carless (2022) argue that feedback literacy mechanisms can be embedded within the curriculum through a variety of teaching strategies, such as: providing students with clear and specific feedback on their work; teaching students about different types of feedback and how to use them; giving students opportunities to practice giving and receiving feedback to their peers; and creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable seeking and using feedback.

To summarise, the literature suggests that staff should not assume that students arrive at university with the necessary skills to understand and engage with feedback in the ways it is intended, and that greater care should be taken by tutors to explain how feedback should be approached. Additionally, the comments that students receive on their essay-based assignments should clearly indicate how they can apply the comments to future assignments. Consistently introducing the concept of engaging with feedback early in the course may enhance the students' ability to learn from it, and it in turn can form part of university culture, changing the students' attitudes towards learning from feedback.

### **Practical recommendations for feedback practices**

Winstone and Carless (2019) argue that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement, yet it is difficult to implement productively within the constraints of a mass higher education system. They explain that it's important for educators to design feedback processes with the learner in mind, helping them develop their own self-assessment skills as well as give feedback which is mindful, specific, and actionable.

There are several recommendations for educators of all levels that deal with essay-based assignments for university-level teaching. Firstly, setting clear expectations of how to learn from feedback can help students engage with it better. Although Crisp (2007) suggests that students do not spend more than 15 minutes looking at the feedback they receive, students themselves believe that they engage thoroughly with it (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002). Many students may not be aware of the purposes of assessment (MacLellan, 2001), making it important for the educator to address the assessment criteria and the purpose of formative as well as summative assessments at the beginning of the course (Dowden *et al.*, 2013). As noted above, it is helpful to engage the students in the assessment criteria and feedback practices at the beginning of the course (Defeyter and McPartlin, 2007).

Secondly, any feedback that students receive must be goal-directed. It is not usually sufficient simply to tell a student where they have gone wrong - misconceptions need to be explained and improvements for future work suggested (Higgins, Hartly and Skelton, 2002). Judgmental statements that allow no room for manoeuvre (e.g., 'good report', 'fails to

answer the question', 'poor effort') are seen as unhelpful and, particularly if critical or dismissive, can cause anger or hurt, resulting in students becoming unreceptive to tutor comments (Lea and Street, 2000; Weaver, 2006). Following Weaver (2006), it is clear that students understand the importance of receiving criticism, but to be perceived as useful, feedback needs to offer concrete suggestions for improvement. Without that, students may perceive feedback as damaging to their self-esteem and disengage from the course altogether (Ellery, 2008; Ilgen and Davis, 2002; Young, 2000). Instead of telling the students what they have done wrong, it is important to tell them what they can do better instead. For example, it is worth replacing 'do not use passive voice' with 'use active voice'.

Thirdly, it must be clear to the student how feedback is not only relevant for a particular assessment, but also to their future learning. In a similar vein, comments should not focus solely on spelling and grammar. Fostering 'higher order' critical skills may have more long-term educational value (Higgins, Hartly and Skelton, 2002), and the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) in helping students improve their grammar and syntax might support this. It is imperative for students to know how they can connect feedback to future improvements to effectively engage with the comments they receive (Orsmond, Merry and Callaghan, 2004; McCune and Hounsell, 2005). Consequently, feedback should not only aim to assist students in completing a similar task successfully at some stage in the future but ideally should also be transferable to other tasks that they might be expected to undertake.

Fourth, in line with the recent advancements in GAI tools, I suggest exploring their use in universities. The literature around the use of GAI in writing is in its infancy, but overall, it indicates that GAI writing applications are still a long way off from being able to evaluate critical writing elements such as originality, fluency, creativity, and argumentative strength (Gardner 2021; Jia *et al.*, 2022; Srivastava *et al.*, 2020). However, due to considerable recent advancements in natural language processing, studies consistently show that these applications are quite good at catching syntactic, lexical, and stylistic errors (*ibid.*). Ensuring free university provision of GAI to students, such as *Revision Assistant* and *TurnItIn Draft Coach*, could lead to a levelling of the playing field for students studying in a foreign language as well and leave tutors to spend their time and effort on giving 'higher-level' feedback, rather than correcting errors in writing.



## Conclusion

Essay-based assignments are widespread in many universities around the world and, as such, constitute a large proportion of assessment practice in higher education, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences. Ultimately, the aim of any university programme is to teach students skills and knowledge, and the aim of assignment feedback is to help students learn and get better at a task.

However, the skill of learning from the feedback provided and knowing how to apply the comments to future assignments, also known as feedback literacy, formulates an example of a hidden curriculum. There may be a disconnect between how useful the tutors believe their feedback is and the ability of students to engage with it and use it. Therefore, this narrative review suggested some practical evidence-based practices that anyone can use.

The suggestions are centred around teaching the students how to engage and learn from feedback, starting the dialogue early, and formulating comments around what needs to be done to improve rather than what is currently lacking. Engaging students in the right way could increase their motivation to improve their writing and in turn, lead to higher educational attainment.

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