D I S K U S

"Feedback was very helpful": the benefits of feedback on drafts for students learning.

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Abstract:
This article reports on a longitudinal study with students to explore the benefits for student learning from a feedback strategy providing feedback on drafts in a first year module. Initial student evaluation, from fifty first year Religious Studies students, is explored for the short-term benefits from this approach, and reflective evaluations from forty second year students are used to consider the longer-term impact of such feedback.
The research was based around Shute's 2008 advice that feedback was 'useful' if it provided students with 'motive, opportunity and means.' Students were motivated to act on feedback as they had the opportunity to apply their development in the next task. The detail provided in feedback provided them with the means to develop the necessary skills, and the motivation came from the opportunity to resubmit all revised tasks for summative assessment.
The aim was to help students learn how to act on feedback through the opportunity to improve their work through corrective and suggestive feedback. Students found the opportunity to correct minor errors the most useful aspect of this approach, followed by the benefit of learning how to use tutor feedback, and the insights gained from seeing exemplars from past student work.
Keywords: assessment; drafts; exemplars; feedback; formative; reiterative.

Introduction
"Feedback was very helpful, it gave a chance to first year students to adjust and understand what is expected of them." This reflection from a second year student on the feedback received on drafts in the first year of her study sets the scene for this article. This approach is an attempt to respond to the gulf between student experiences of tutor feedback in school and the higher education practices they encounter.

Torenbeek et al, 2011, identified a link between student generic skill development and the level of first year achievement. Beaumont et al, 2011 reported that many student experiences in relation to tutor feedback bring dissatisfaction to the surface within three months in higher education. These research insights led their team to recommend that "it is in universities' interests to adapt their assessment practices to support transition more effectively by taking into account students' prior experience" (Beaumont et al, 2011 p. 683).

The innovation set out in this article is a reiterative feedback strategy aimed to help students develop the skill of responding to tutor feedback by acting on feedback on drafts of their work. Students were provided with guidance on what to do with feedback, they were given additional materials to help them develop the required skills to act on feedback, and finally they were motivated to take this action through the opportunity to resubmit the piece of work, with additional feedback to confirm they had got it right or more feedback guidance to continue their development.

This strategy was developed in light of key points raised by academic researchers in relation to the failure of higher education to adequately respond to the needs of students who are new to higher education. It responds to questions about student use of tutor feedback, rather than issues about the quality of tutor feedback. Back in 2000 Askew and Lodge noted the expectation that students would learn from tutor feedback, but raised the question as to "how learning can result from the gift of feedback" (2000, p. 6). Over the past decade my focus on feedback has moved from tutor provision of feedback to student action on feedback. In my section of the text *Giving Students Effective Written Feedback,* 2010, my concern was to explore a range of strategies for students to use to get more out of tutor feedback. Reiterative feedback featured as one of the case studies, and this article explores the further development of this approach to enhance student learning.

Theoretical underpinning
Negative feedback from students in the UK National Student Satisfaction Survey has been a major impetus for debates within institutions on improvements to tutor feedback. Williams and Kane, 2008, provided a summary of the main findings in relation to assessment and feedback, which included effective practices that aim to get useful feedback to students in time for them to use it.

From the vast literature on feedback in higher education three key points have relevance for this attempt to make tutor feedback more relevant for student learning. Firstly, many research studies have demonstrated the challenges facing students in understanding feedback practices in Higher Education. Beaumont et al, 2011, reported that 65% of students identified feedback on drafts as a key aspect of their prior experiences in school and/ or college. Their study identified this experience of feedback as part of a "formative guidance process" whereby students were encouraged to improve work in light of teacher feedback. Thus, students were used to being given guidance whilst they were in the process of working on an assignment, and they "viewed the opportunity to discuss drafts and have access to exemplars as vital aspects of quality feedback" (Beaumont et al, 2011 p. 682). For students with such prior experiences the situation they will encounter in higher education will be very different if the tutor view of feedback is of a "post-submission summative event" (Beaumont et al, 2011). Tutors holding this view provide guidance in module information, and further information about requirements comes in summative feedback that may show students that they have missed the point.

Secondly, research continues to pile up year on year to show that students do not get full benefit from tutor feedback on their work. Brannon and Knoblauch

found there is "scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice" (1981, p.1). Thirty years later in 2011, Price et al noted that "the potential for feedback to enhance student learning is considerably underdeveloped" and stated there is a need to bring in a "new perspective" to focus on "engagement" (2011, p. 879).

These works suggest that it is necessary to change student attitudes towards feedback, from what Winter and Dye, 2004, noted as the "grade fixation" tendency. They found that if students could access their grade electronically many did not pick up their assignments to read tutor feedback. In addition, Davies and Wrighton, 2004, noted that students regarded feedback as specific to the particular assignment, and if they did not have an opportunity to implement the feedback before the module ended, the feedback lost both relevance and impact. These studies show that students want immediate feedback and do not want to wait until the end of the semester to find out how they are doing. Duncan et al, 2007, noted that a wait until the end of the semester "created anxiety and uncertainty," as first year students did not possess points of reference they could use to self-assess their work.

Finally, a third theme in research on feedback, focused on a reconsideration of actual feedback practices in order to make feedback more useful to students. Taras, 2006, identified the "injustice" in undergraduate marking, as a kind of double standard in the academy. She highlighted the part reviewers can play in the development of an academic journal article, whereby initial writing was corrected, revised and refocused in light of comments. Why, she wondered, are undergraduate students "denied expert iterative feedback?" Given the wide ranging research on the challenges facing new students, she states "One would expect undergraduate work to call for more formative feedback than the work of academics, not less" (2006, p. 368).

Together with my co-author Pieterick in *Giving Students Effective Written Feedback* we identified the attitudes, strategies and knowledge that underpinned the approach we wanted tutors and students to take towards feedback. The first step concerns "attitudes" towards feedback, to move from the retrospective view which regards feedback as only having value in relation to past learning, to an understanding of the importance of the feedforward element for current and future student learning. Central to the development of such an attitudes is a need for students to be introduced to and to utilize a range of "strategies" to unpack and act on tutor feedback. Together these two elements will help students gain the "knowledge" that feedback is a crucial element in their learning journey.

Reiterative feedback on drafts
This strategy was developed in light of my earlier research with students to induct students into feedback practices in Higher Education so as to meet the requirement to "ensure that appropriate feedback is provided…in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement" (QAA, 2000).

Assessment regimes that allow students to resubmit work in light of tutor feedback can provide active student engagement with feedback. While not all work can be resubmitted, many writers argue that resubmissions should play a more prominent role in learning (Boud, 2000). Furthermore Gibbs and Simpson, 2003, and Tang and Harrison, 2011, support the sequencing of

assignments so that students can use the feedback on the first assignment to inform the next task. Vardi, 2012, found that "substantial improvements in student writing' occurred in situations where students were able to respond to 'text-specific feedback'" (2012, p. 169).

I was involved as an observer on Duncan et al's 2007 study on a single round reiterative project. This provided students with the opportunity to act on three specified aspects of tutor feedback, by making changes to highlighted sections of their essay, and resubmitting for the possibility of a higher grade. In a previous research study with Religious Studies students, Burke 2007, student ability to respond to tutor feedback was developed through tutorials and workshops. This process enabled students to take control over their learning by drawing on tutor feedback, developing the required skills, and then resubmitting their essay. Almost 70% of students agreed that acting on feedback by re-writing an essay helped their learning.

Shute stated that useful feedback depended on "motive, opportunity and means" (2008, p. 175). These three factors sit at the heart of the development in this article. Students are given the motive by being able to improve their grade, the opportunity through the reiterative cycles, and the means through links to skills development materials.

The motive is important as through 'learning by doing' students will develop a positive attitude towards feedback, seeing that acting on feedback can improve their work. Students consolidate this positive attitude to feedback through the opportunity to act on the formative feedback to develop their work. Price et al 2010, noted the importance of the opportunity to apply guidance provided in feedback.

All too often students view feedback retrospectively and consider the feedback as relevant only if they were to do that assignment again. In this instance they do actually do the assignment again, and through this are able to see the positive impact that feedback can have on their work. In the first instance students will be pleased that they receive a higher grade for their work, but in the long term students may get personal satisfaction by seeing the improvements in their own work. This is particularly relevant for first year students who are anxious to do as well as they can, and many find the practice in resubmission helps the development of skills.

The third aspect 'means' is often left out of discussions on feedback, Shute elaborates that this means that the student "is able and willing to use it." The ability to use feedback is dependent on the student being able to unpack and then act on tutor feedback. However, such action may be dependent on the development of skills or understandings that the student does not possess. Although there is extensive skills support provision in higher education there is still a need to make a closer link between tutor feedback on work and students consulting skills support to take action on that feedback. I was horrified to find that only one of the 50 first year students had consulted a skills tutor in relation to feedback, and that is in a module where they have weekly reminders, are provided with the contact details for skills support and actively encouraged to make use of such provision. Cottrell had noted that "changes in the student body go hand in hand with the need for different kinds of teaching and with increased emphasis on skills development" (2001, p. 6). In addition Tait et al remind that students need to develop their study skills to cope with the "complexity of tasks demanded by higher education" (1994, pp.

323-4). Thus, hyperlinks to resources and inputs into class sessions ensured that all students received relevant materials to develop their skills.

Feedback on drafts: application
Religious Studies is a discipline that requires clear and concise expression, a level of objectivity and a consideration of the appropriateness of sources. How do we assist students in this development? Vardi's 2012 research on how students "negotiate … aspects of content, form and context" recommended for skill development to be supported by 'disciplinary lecturers.' Corrywright and Morgan's *Get Set for Religious Studies* is one of the few introductory texts to link the introduction to a discipline with the skills required to study and to present the results of study. They note "Essay writing at university level demands knowledge of the conventions of academic discourse and especially of the way of writing accepted within the academic circle of your particular subject" (2006, p. 150). This recognition ties the development of skills to the context.

Within our small Religious Studies department learning from assessment is a central part of the student experience. This article focuses on the explicit introduction students are given to skill development and writing within Religious Studies. This provides the opportunity to learn how to act on tutor feedback so that students can implement this learning in other modules. Tutor feedback in all modules attempts to distinguish between feedback on performance, and feedforward to develop academic practice, with hyperlinks to aid this process.

Fifty first year Religious Studies students submitted drafts of four tasks for the module *Jews, Judaism and the Holocaust*. The tasks were sequenced to become more academically demanding in moving from a book review, through a comparative exercise to critical essays. However, the same expectation was present for grammatical accuracy and appropriate referencing in all marking.

Past student work had identified uncertainty about aspects of grammar. Use of capital letters can be a particular problem in Religious Studies when referring to God. The use of the capital 'G' signifies a belief in one God as held in a monotheistic religion. The use of a small 'g' changes the word to god, meaning a belief in one god amongst many, as believed in polytheistic religions. Moving on to referencing and here the main problem was the ability to accurately refer to the author under scrutiny throughout a review. Dan Cohn-Sherbok proved to be too much of a challenge for most students. He was referred to as Dan, Cohn Sherbok, cohn-Sherbok, Cohn-sherbok, Cohen-Sherbok, Sherbok, Sherboks, sometimes with several spellings in one review. Thus there were issues about grammar and referencing in all tasks that required consistent feedback to students in relation to grammatical rules and referencing conventions.

This initiative built on research insights from previous studies, Burke 2007 and 2011, to provide a model of feedback on drafts to induct students into the discipline community. This was done through consistent feedback given on the four draft pieces of work, where each task built on the previous one and provided an opportunity for students to respond to earlier feedback and avoid mistakes. Thus, if the feedback on the first task, the book review, noted problems in referencing, students were able to use a hyperlink to access

information on referencing which they could apply in the second task. Feedback on the second task would let the student know if they had applied this information correctly. For more complex aspects of academic writing some students may require several attempts before they get it right. Thus, the four tasks provided the opportunity to identify an area for development, for the student to develop and apply their new understanding, and then in light of additional feedback students could refine and reapply rules and conventions. Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, drew attention to the importance for student learning from feedback to receive "further assistance" if necessary on their attempt to act on feedback. This same point is reiterated by Price et al, "Even is the student understands the gap in their knowledge or skills, they may not be able to act on the feedback without further help" (2011, p. 892).

Finally, at the end of the module students submitted all four tasks for grading. They received feedback that commented both on their overall achievement and how well they had attempted to address issues in tutor feedback. Central to this approach was the requirement to mark carefully and consistently, to highlight aspects to be developed, and to provide students with additional guidance in order to develop understandings and/ or skills in order to self correct. Previous research with students, Burke et al 2009, identified three types of material to support learning from feedback; additional information, on-line tutorials to practice, and finally exemplars to display the aspect of academic writing in a real piece of student work. Students were directed to the most relevant materials for their particular need through a hyperlink in the feedback.

Student views on feedback on drafts

This section provides these first year student views of the reiterative feedback process. Students completed a questionnaire drawn from items students in the previous year had raised in their evaluation of the feedback on this module. Students provided quantitative data in their rating of how far they felt the item helped them to improve their learning. In addition they were asked to provide a comment to support their rating, and thus provide a qualitative insight into their thinking. The table provides a list of the questions, set out in the order rated by students. This is followed with a summary of student comments on each question.

Table 1. Student comments and ratings on feedback on drafts		
	Range (1-10)	Mean score
1. It helped me sort out minor errors to improve my grade	9 – 10	9.6
2. It was helpful to do drafts so we learn to act on the feedback	8 – 10	9.48
3. It was helpful to see examples of student work	7 – 10	9.45
4. It was helpful to get consistent feedback on grammar and referencing	8 – 10	9.4
5. It was helpful to get advice in sessions to explain what was required	7 – 10	9.20
6. It was helpful to do small tasks and work on	7 – 10	8.8

one point at a time		
7. It helped to have a hyperlink to advice or practice	7 – 10	8.56
8. It was useful to have tests on problem areas in class	5 – 10	7.2

Summary of student comments:

1. **Sorting out errors**: Students rated the value of reiterative feedback to help them sort out minor errors and thereby improve their grade as the most useful aspect of feedback. Student comments explained their frustration at feeling that their grade could be affected by minor errors that they were capable to correcting if they had the chance to do so. Some referred to these as "silly mistakes," essentially aspects of grammar or referencing that they were capable of correcting. Indeed the opportunity to correct them, not only might improve grades, but it provided the opportunity to learn as "once these mistakes are corrected you are more likely not to repeat them." This opportunity to correct mistakes helped students to practice, follow guidance and thus develop their proofreading skills.

2. Good to do drafts so we learn to act on the feedback

Students noted that this opportunity was beneficial in their first year at university, as it helped them to adjust to university standards. Again responses were split between those that rated the opportunity to act on the feedback on drafts as a way of improving their grades, and those who focused on the opportunity to develop their learning. Those stressing grade improvement referred to the final submission as "to the best of their ability," as it would be a "shame not to maximize their grade by acting on feedback." Those focusing on learning referred to the opportunity to check, to develop, and improve understandings. One student stated how "this helps you to learn to spot your own faults and be able to correct them in future work."

3. It is helpful to see examples of student work

Students found exemplars helped their learning in the following ways. Firstly, many students referred to their value in helping them to structure their work, as exemplars "set a template," or a "basic framework," as they acted as guidelines or models. Secondly, students found exemplars useful as they stimulated thought about the task, from "an insight into other people's work to compare with yours," also as a way of learning the standard required. Some students also provided examples of how 'seeing' another piece of work allowed them to be objective: "I have a tendency to use long quotes and by looking at examples it has given me a better understanding of how to use quotes."

4. It is helpful to get consistent feedback on grammar and referencing

Consistency had been built into the process so that students had the opportunity in the four tasks to act on the initial feedback on the first task, try in the second, and reapply if they still had problems. This brought in multiple opportunities to correct and develop within the parameters set by one tutor. This was important, as often students get frustrated when tutors appear to want different things.

One student noted: "consistent feedback should lead to consistent referencing and grammar." This quote sums up the view of many students on the value of

practice "because the only way to get this stuff right for me is practice and being reminded where I'm going wrong."

5. It is helpful to get advice in sessions to explain what is required
Time was spent in class sessions discussing the general issues arising from feedback provided on each task. This also involved input on aspects of academic writing that the majority of students would benefit from. Student comments indicated that they 'appreciated' these opportunities to explore aspects of planning, writing and referencing in order to 'understand what is required.' Some students referred to the importance of such inputs at the start of their course as "it is a bit overwhelming… so advice is useful."

6. It is helpful to do small tasks and work on one point at a time
Student responses identified a range of benefits from the breakdown of the assignment into four main tasks, where each task was completed and they received feedback on it before moving on to the next task. The tasks were also sequenced in terms of complexity and one led into the next. The first task was a book review, in which they were to undertake a CARS check on the author, and to summarize an interesting section. They then had to compare the section in their selected book on beliefs about God with the section in a key text. They then moved from two sources to four sources in setting out the challenge that the Holocaust posed to Jewish beliefs about God. The final task required them to explore one theological response to the challenge the Holocaust posed to Jewish beliefs about God, here they had to use a primary source, then draw on critical commentaries to weigh up the success of the response.

Students identified three key benefits from this approach. Firstly, in relation to the complexity of the tasks they appreciated the start working from one source to the final task drawing on multiple sources. They also noted that concentrating on one task at a time enabled them to gain a better understanding of each 'small chunk.' For one student it helped as she found it "very confusing to cover different points, one point at a time is easier and clearer."

Secondly, students found the short tasks were easier to handle in terms of time. The requirement to do small amounts of work over a number of weeks was less of a challenge than completing one large task. One student noted "it makes the course more manageable..." This ability to cope with small tasks also led into the final point, as shown by this response "it gives you more time to read and prepare for assignments, so it is less stressful."

Finally, several students noted that this breakdown of tasks, interspersed with feedback, made the work less stressful. For first year students in their first year a lot of time can be spent worrying if their work is on target, so to hand work in early in the semester provides them with some instant feedback.

7. It helps to have a hyperlink to advice or practice
The feedback given on each task was succinct, partly due to the pressure on marking time, but also so as to not confuse students with too much information. The feedback was supplemented with a hyperlink to an electronic source to provide additional detail to help students take action on points noted in feedback. The majority of learning needs related to aspects of grammar and referencing, so links were provided to basic sites to help students get right aspects of grammar they needed to check on and practice. Students appreciated the ease of access and the additional information provided. Some

students noting that it helped them put right a problem that they had not realized before, one reported, "they help a lot. I followed up the link on writing paragraphs to learn what I was doing wrong and how to improve." Which was also recognition that some links address 'personal needs' on topics that individuals "found quite difficult and help is needed."

Half of the group actually followed up hyperlinks to access such materials, a disappointing figure given that all they had to do was click on the link. However, this fifty percent figure is higher than the figures cited in similar studies, Weaver, 2006, found only 4% of students surveyed consulted study skills books for guidance on issues raised in tutor feedback on their work.

8. It is useful to have tests on problem areas in class

Informal tests in class were brought in on aspects of academic writing that the majority of students would benefit from practice on. Generally we assume in making feedback comments that students will be able to act our advice and self correct, but this is not always easy. Students may have been taught grammatical rules at school, but if they have misused some rules in their general writing they may now not be sure of what these rules actually are. This was certainly the case in relation to apostrophes and capitals, especially when one of the tasks required them to set out God's attributes. Student drafts showed that the majority were not clear on when to use apostrophes and capital letters. Short tests were completed in pairs that required them to correct a piece of text by adding apostrophes and capitals. They were then provided with the grammatical rules concerning the use of apostrophes and capital letters, which they were able to use to correct their responses to the test.

Issues for discussion
1. Impact of receiving feedback on drafts and acting on advice

Price et al, 2010, noted that because of the complexity of tutor feedback it is difficult to assess its effectiveness for student learning. However, an assessment of the effectiveness of this feedback on drafts is possible as the feedback provided was very specific and essentially corrective. The short-term impact of feedback on drafts can be accessed through a comparison between the grades the students received on this module and other modules in which they did not have the opportunity to act on feedback. Almost half of the student group (47%) received a higher grade in the *Jews, Judaism and the Holocaust* module than in their other modules. Just over a third received the same grade, and a small percentage, 16%, received a lower grade. This suggests that the opportunity to act on feedback had a positive impact on grades. This finding that formative feedback has an impact is supported by other research studies cited by Shute, 2008, which show improvements to learning.

The fact that over a third got the same grade can be explained by the response from the vast majority of students, 85%, that they were able to use feedback advice from *Jews, Judaism and the Holocaust* in other modules. In addition, most students, 95%, felt that they would have been able to improve their grades in their other modules if they had received feedback on drafts. The longer term impact of acting on feedback on drafts on student learning can be accessed through responses from second year students, reflecting back on this experience from the first year of their study. Students were able

to remember the changes they made to drafts, many providing details of the changes to structure, developing points, grammar and referencing. One student noted "I found the feedback on my drafts very helpful as it helped me see where I was going off track." Whilst one student summed up the benefit "Feedback was very helpful, it gave a chance to first year students to adjust and understand what is expected of them."

2. Debate about higher / lower level academic skills

This approach to build support sessions into class lectures is contentious as it focuses on the development of academic skills; skills in literature searching, planning, writing and referencing. Many works on feedback consider such skills as soft or basic skills, which should not be considered by tutor feedback. Students in Ferguson's 2012 survey, found comments on such pedantic matters, grammar and referencing, less important than comments on content and structure. Although follow up comments included a suggestion that such comments could be useful if they provided guidance for improvement: "Focus on the fine detail is not useful, what is needed is an explanation of how to improve" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 56).

The approach in this article does make the link between fine detail and how to make the required improvements, and comments set out in the previous section show that students appreciated the opportunity to correct basic errors. This approach holds that if students do not possess the necessary skills on entry to higher education this deficit will hamper learning throughout their course of study. In addition this approach attempts to address the criticisms we hear about the poor skills graduates bring to the workplace. Many of our graduates aim to go into initial teacher education, and their writing skills will be tested at the interview stage.

This innovation to provide formative feedback on drafts of student work within a module aimed to induct students into the standards and conventions within their subject. This links to advice from research studies, such as Vardi 2012, to support skill development within a subject discipline. Feedback helped students improve the standard of their work by correcting their mistakes and focusing their efforts on task requirements. Comments from students show that the opportunity to take action on feedback had an impact beyond the module, not only in the practical correcting of mistakes, but also in developing a strategy to apply tutor feedback to future learning.

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