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# Improving the student learning experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment

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**Celtic Manor, Newport, Wales**



# Feedback context

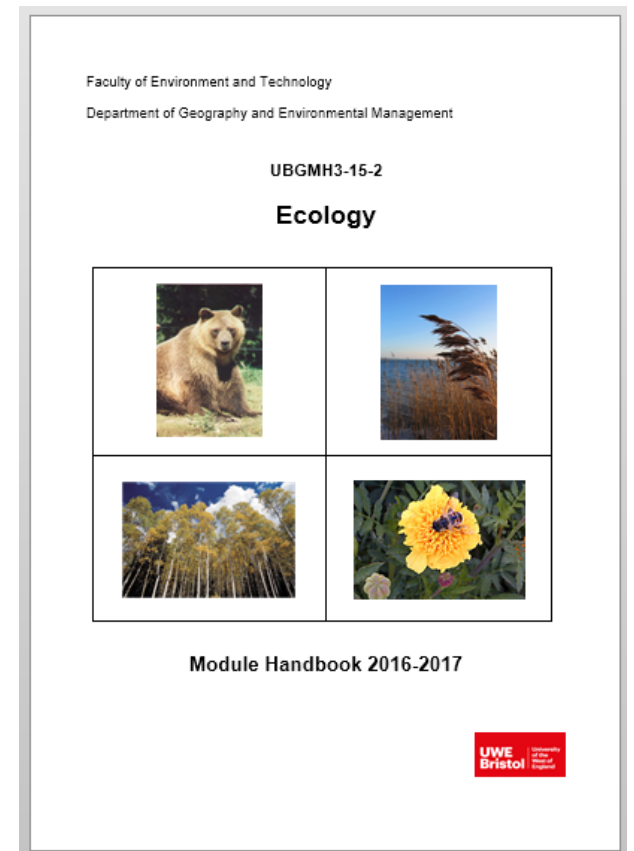
- feedback should help students to:
  - understand current performance
  - understand how to close the 'performance gap' in future assignments
  - have the confidence and belief they have control over their success
  - maintain motivation throughout their degree

(Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

- but ... there is a recognised gap between staff perceptions of feedback and the student experience (Price et al., 2011)
- low satisfaction scores for assessment/feedback in national student surveys

# Feedback intervention

- we implemented an assessment approach on a second year physical geography module to optimally support students' use of feedback
- based on premise that feedback should occupy a central position within a **dialogic** approach to learning & teaching (Alexander, 2004; Sutton, 2009) and be **future-oriented** (Sadler, 2010; Beaumont *et al.*, 2011)



# Definitions

- **dialogic feedback** is the creation of meaning and understanding via spoken discourse between lecturer and student, or student to student (Nicol, 2010)



- **feed-forward** refers specifically to feedback given by tutors that:
  - impacts upon an upcoming assignment
  - is given post-assignment with more specific direction on how this can be applied to future assignments (Carless, 2007)





# Research aims

1. Explore **student perceptions** of the dialogic feed-forward approach and whether it asserted a **positive influence on their learning experience**
2. Identify if and how the **task-specific behaviour** of students was altered by the assessment approach
3. Identify the extent to which students believed their **self-efficacy** and **self-regulation** skills were improved
4. Examine whether the assessment approach **enhanced student performance** and whether it could potentially raise **NSS scores** related to feedback

# Module assessment structure

Supporting Lectures

Students  
choose essay  
from selection

Students write  
draft essay

Students  
submit draft  
and attend  
'feed-forward'  
meeting

Students  
reflect on  
meeting and  
essay – grading  
their work

Students  
complete and  
submit final  
essay

Assessment  
discourse

Feedback  
discourse

25% module  
assessment

75% module  
assessment



# Data collection

## Qualitative case study approach

- individual semi-structured interviews ... two consecutive year 2 cohorts at end of module (2015-16 and 2016-17) ... analysed thematically via grounded theory
- 44 interviews ( $\bar{x}$  30 mins), 61% response rate: male = 45% female = 55%
- group semi-structured interviews with level 3 students elucidating post-assignment behaviour
- essay performance data pre- and post-assessment intervention (inferential stats)
- answers to NSS feedback questions





# Selected results

## Enhanced learning experience

- **Point of contact pulls thinking forward** - more time/thought put into assessment:

*'you don't just have the hand-in at the end of the semester. You have **something a bit earlier on to make you get more work done**, which I find really good because **it's more of a motivation and driver to get work done early**' R6*

*'it **pushes you to get more work done before the deadline and then you can have lots of feedback** and then have more time to improve. I **don't think I would have done as well without the meeting**' R21*

*'I **treated the feedback day as hand-in day**. It **made me do my essay earlier**' R38*



# Selected results

## Enhanced learning experience

- **conversation** compels students to **engage critically** with their work:

*‘when I have had drafts handed back to me and it’s just written over, either **I don’t understand what they are trying to say**, or it’s not clear enough. I can ask you questions **if we’re talking to each other about it, it’s easier to see things** ... It’s definitely better to talk about it’ R7*

*‘I’ve had it before where you get electronic feedback and **you might not be sure what some of the comments mean** ... being able to discuss it is important. You get that progress and can **discuss how you can change it as opposed to just saying this is wrong**’ R9*



# Selected results

## Enhanced learning experience

- **Motivational** and **empowering** due to **pertinent application**:

*‘the bit in between my draft and writing the final piece was the best bit because **I knew what I was doing** and could tweak it and **I enjoyed that process of making it better**. It **gave me more confidence** in my writing skills’ R7*

*‘my first draft was quite vague and I didn’t really know what direction I was going with it. Then, **after speaking and having the feedback**, I spent more time on it because I **knew where I needed to go with it**’ R8*



# Selected results

## Task-specific behaviour ... and self-regulation

*'it helped me to **realise how to critique my own essays** because I was able to sit down with you and go through the essay and know exactly why you were commenting on something ... **It allows me now to see in other essays the same things I'm doing**'*

R10

*'Now, I feel like **I can evaluate at different stages throughout assessment** and therefore **make changes**. **Before, I just skimmed over work, handed it in, and got feedback at the end without really thinking about it**'* R29



# Selected results

## Self-efficacy

- students display increased self-efficacy: stronger beliefs in their capabilities to accomplish tasks in future
- Altered their level 2 behaviour:

*'I've **altered the way I approach other modules ... like preparing essay plans for exams** ... when I was doing my plans I said ok that needs more, that needs a reference, because I had thought about it for the Ecology essay'* R28





# Selected results

- students also self-avow to altered level 3 behaviour:

*‘I felt my **critical analysis was improved** through the feedback session and this has been helpful writing other essays and exam answers ... I was **able to achieve higher 2:1s and 1sts at level 3** because my understanding of critical analysis had improved’*

*‘Since this module I have made sure that **whenever possible I meet with academics and discuss my work**. This is something which **prior to the Ecology module would scare me** as I was embarrassed by the mistakes within my work’*

# Selected results

## Enhanced student performance

Significantly higher marks 2015-17 v 2011-13  
( $p = < 0.0001$ )

Band (%)	2011-2012 (%)	2012-2013 (%)	2015-2016 (%)	2016-2017 (%)
0-39 (inc. NS)	16	5	0	5.5*
40-49	9	14	3*	5.5*
50-59	34	38	28	17
60-69	41	38	58	58
70-100	0	5	11	14
Number (n)	32	37	36	36

Average Ecology mark 4.5% higher than average  
mark for other second year optional modules  
( $p = 0.01$ )

Dialogic assessment

\* Did not have a meeting

# Selected results

## Enhanced NSS and TEF metrics

- **all** students rated the module as giving them high quality feedback: detailed, conversational, personalised, timely (relevant application), multi-faceted
- **all** students said the feedback helped them clarify things they did not understand: proactive engagement with learning – they had to prepare for the meeting, think about their work, ask and answer questions



# Conclusions

Dialogic feed-forward assessment enhanced the student learning experience by:

- Increasing **motivation** to engage with current assignment
- Increasing **confidence** in their ability to complete the assignment
- Solidifying **good practice in-task** & supporting **higher grades**
- Increasing **satisfaction** with the feedback process (potentially boosting NSS metrics)
- Positively **changing behaviour** working towards future assignments



But ... dialogic feedforward space is a **borderland space** (Hill *et al.*, 2017)

# Dialogic Feedforward Assessment Cycle

## Process & Principles

Prior experiences of assessment



### Open Boundaries Feedforward

- Raise awareness about skills transferability
- Assessment becomes more than a grade - habits of good learning

*Distribute assignment*

### Preparatory Guidance

- Explanation of criteria
- Discussion of task

- Tutor introduces task goals, criteria and standards (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).



### In-Task Guidance

- Model answers
- Generic Feedback
- Peer assessment
- Self assessment

- Tutor clarifies task goals, criteria and standards (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).
- Peer discussion of criteria and standards (Liu & Carless, 2006).
- Students judge their own work developing in-task assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2010).

*Submit draft assignment*

### In-Task Performance Feedforward

- Draft discussion
- Audio feedback
- Exemplar paragraphs
- Criteria/standards related

*Submit final assignment*



- Proactive recipience (Winstone, 2017).
- Motivation/self-efficacy (Ritchie, 2016).
- Self-regulation (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol, 2010).
- Emotional risk/resilience (Barnett, 2007).

- Students engage early with task & generate personal understanding via dialogue – take ownership (Carless, 2006).
- Students understand standards as interpreted by tutor (Carless, 2006).
- Students can ‘make good’ – motivated to close performance gap and knowing how to get there (Blair & McGinty, 2013).
- Affective spaces: ‘head on learning’, anxiety but caring and personalized (Yang & Carless, 2013).





# Implications for practice

To rise to the challenges for assessment and feedback in future, we could:

1. Deliver all feedback before formal grading, meeting with students or establishing peer feedback (Nicol, 2010)
2. Offer students mastery experiences (Ritchie 2016), completing phased tasks, and receiving verbal feedback and encouragement to improve their capabilities
3. Deliver curricula that adopt coherent assessment objectives and standardised grading schemes to facilitate developmental feed-forward (O'Donovan et al., 2016)
4. Offer enhanced resource at critical feedback moments when students find learning particularly challenging (O'Donovan et al., 2016)

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# Thank You For Listening



## Questions?

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