

# Do students want and need written feedback on summative assignments? Engaging students with the feedback process - a topic review activity.

## Abstract

Written feedback is a vital component of the learning and teaching cycle. However, despite its reported positive impact, the effectiveness and efficiency of written feedback is relatively under-researched. This topic review activity offers a valuable insight into whether students wish to be engaged about the type of feedback they receive on a summative assignment in one of the final (capstone) topics in their undergraduate nursing degree. Our findings suggest that if given the choice, a large percentage of students would take the opportunity to elect the specific amount and type of written feedback they want on their assignments. However, more research is required to determine the reasons behind this choice and how the type/amount of written feedback students chose affects the quality of student learning. A heightened awareness and understanding at both an individual and institutional level of how students use feedback can influence feedback practices. If feedback is effective it has the potential to enhance student learning, and if it is efficient it will maximise teaching and learning resources.

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# Introduction

Feedback has been widely advocated as a vital component in learning and teaching (Bruno & Santos 2010; Carless 2006; Rae and Cochrane 2008; Parboteeah & Anwar 2009; Walker 2009; Weaver 2006), and according to Ramsden (2003, p 187) 'it is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students' progress'.

Indeed, there is strong evidence to show that effective feedback leads to improved learning (Bruno & Santos 2010; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006), and written comments on assignments have been shown to facilitate improvement in students' knowledge, understanding and learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). However, despite its reported positive impact on learning, the effectiveness and efficiency of feedback is relatively under-researched (Carless 2006; Walker 2009; Weaver 2006) particularly in relation to summative assessments and whether written feedback is desired or necessary on all student assignments.

This paper describes a University topic review activity that offered third year undergraduate nursing students a choice about the amount and type of written feedback they wanted on a summative assignment in a final (capstone) topic. This activity was undertaken in order to explore student feedback preferences and to raise awareness amongst academic staff members in an effort to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of feedback practices

## Background

Feedback is widely advocated as one of the most powerful influences in student learning and achievement (Bruno & Santos 2010; Carless 2006; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Parboteeah & Anwar 2009; Rae & Cochrane 2008; Ramsden 2003; Walker 2009; Weaver 2006). However, it is important to keep in mind that the effects of feedback can be either positive or negative depending on how and when it is given (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Hyland & Hyland 2001). It is not enough for lecturers to provide feedback for the sake of providing feedback. In order for it to be useful and effective, certain principles must be adhered to and there must also be a learning context to which feedback is addressed (Hattie and Timperley 2007).

Feedback is said to be effective if students act on it to improve future work. Glover and Brown (2006) suggest this is most likely if feedback is understandable, frequent, timely, sufficient, detailed enough, can be linked to assessment aims, and focuses on learning rather than marks. Educational settings traditionally focus on three types of feedback; 1) outcome feedback, or knowledge of results, 2) corrective feedback, including provision of the correct answers, and 3) process feedback, which includes explicit information for adapting study strategies (Peterson and Irving 2008). In this setting, there is a strong overlap between feedback and assessment.

Process feedback is usually associated with formative assessment and is used to close the gap between what students do and do not know. Formative feedback tells the student what a 'good' performance looks like, how their current performance relates to 'good' performance, and how to close the gap (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). In other words, formative assessment and feedback is used by teachers to let students know how learning is proceeding and to facilitate the improvement of student learning (Biggs 1999; Brown, Lake & Matters 2011; Hornby 2003).

Outcome feedback and corrective feedback are typically associated with summative assessment and can be used to grade students at the end of a topic, usually after the teaching episode has concluded.

The purpose of summative feedback is to see how well students have learned what they were supposed to learn and provide a final grade for the assessment or topic (Biggs 1999; Brown, Lake & Matters 2011; Hornby 2003). Summative feedback is also used at times to 'justify' the award of a particular grade to an assessment piece (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Li & Barnard 2011).

Despite academics agreeing on the importance of feedback for learning, they often miss the opportunity to provide effective feedback, particularly in the form of written feedback on assignments. Some academics lack the knowledge and skills required, or view the provision of comments on student assignments as merely 'marking', 'grading' or 'correcting' (Orrell 2006) rather than an opportunity to positively influence learning.

In addition, some academics are sceptical about whether students actually read the feedback they spend considerable time writing, leading them to ask if all their efforts are worthwhile (Bailey 2009; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Glover & Brown 2006; Orrell 2006). Other academics are unable to discern the difference between formative and summative feedback, or contend that assessment costs are overtaking teaching costs, and that lecturers are spending a disproportionately large amount of their time marking (Gibbs & Simpson 2005). Some lecturers argue that written feedback does not work at all and that students are most interested in their grade and pay little attention to the educational value of written comments (Bailey 2009; Ferguson 2011; Rae and Cochrane 2008; Weaver 2006; Winter & Dye 2004).

The view that students are not fully engaged with written feedback is supported by recent studies that have reported a significant number of students fail to collect their essays at all Carless 2006; Ferguson 2011; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Rae & Cochrane 2008), with some students stating 'it's too late to do anything about it now anyway so why bother' (Brooks 2012, p 3). Ferguson (2011) found that that less than half of university students collect formative feedback, suggesting that students may not always find feedback useful. Maclellen (2001) supports this view, reporting in a survey of 130 students that 30% stated feedback never improves their understanding. Other students have been noted to collect their assignments, but merely glance at the mark on the bottom and discard it ignoring all the written feedback (Gibbs & Simpson 2005). Third year students were noted as particularly likely only to look at the grade rather than read the feedback on the essay (Gibbs & Simpson 2005).

We know that in order to be effective, feedback must be timely and acted upon by students. However this becomes difficult with modular curriculum and end-loaded assessments where students often think once they submit a final assignment in the topic that the learning is over and don't bother collecting their papers (Bailey 2009; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Glover & Brown 2006; Rae and Cochrane 2008; Weaver 2006). Increasing class sizes also mean lecturers

often have less time to write feedback comments (Bailey 2009; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). These increased marking volumes also can result in feedback being provided too slowly, further reducing its effectiveness (Glover & Brown 2006).

In their thematic review of the literature, Parboteeah & Anwar (2009) argue that students want feedback at any and every stage of learning, but the authors do not specify one form of feedback being more effective than another. We know that feedback quality is more important than quantity (Bruno & Santos 2010), but there is limited research on exactly how much and what type of feedback students want and need. It is also unclear whether we should automatically provide written feedback on all assignments, regardless of whether they are formative or summative (Glover & Brown 2006).

Certainly the amount of time lecturers spend on providing written feedback could potentially be reduced simply by giving less feedback, or not writing any comments at all (Glover & Brown 2006). It has also been proposed that the grade itself is a form of feedback (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Li & Barnard 2011; Winter & Dye 2004) and it could be surmised that for some students, the grade is the only feedback they want and need on certain assessment pieces (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Winter & Dye 2004). However, from what we already know about the benefits of effective written feedback these options cannot be implemented without further investigation. Further research is therefore required in order to make recommendations that are educationally sound regarding the provision of effective feedback that is acted upon and contributes to student learning (Glover & Brown 2006), and efficient feedback that utilises teaching and learning resources appropriately.

The recommendation to increase student engagement in the feedback process is supported by a number of studies (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Glover & Brown 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Walker 2009; Weaver 2006; Winter & Dye 2004). The literature tells us that a very effective way to engage students with the feedback process is to ask the students what they would like feedback on (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). This became the catalyst for the topic review activity described below.

## Aim

This topic review activity aimed to address the following questions:

- 1) What percentage of students would want the opportunity to choose the type of written feedback they receive on essays?
- 2) If given a choice would students choose to receive written feedback on a summative essay, and if so, how much?
- 3) How would requests for different amounts/types of written feedback affect the time taken to mark an assignment?

## Outline of the topic review activity

A “Feedback Preference” handout was constructed asking students their preference for written feedback on their final, summative assignment in one topic in the Bachelor of Nursing program at Flinders University. Three separate feedback options were offered to students:

1. The grade, plus written feedback / comments throughout the assignment and on the marking guide
2. The grade, plus written feedback / comments on the marking guide only and not throughout the assignment
3. The grade only (no written feedback / comments)

Space was also provided for students to write additional comments if they chose. The “Feedback Preference” handout was distributed in class by those tutorial lecturers who chose to participate in the activity. Students were informed that taking part was voluntary and that if they chose not to complete the handout, the default written feedback provided would be option 1. Students were also informed that any paper receiving a fail grade would receive option 1 feedback in order to explain where assessment requirements had not been met and where improvements could have been made. This decision was made in light of evidence that tells us feedback is sometimes necessary to ‘justify’ the award of a particular grade to an assessment piece (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Li & Barnard 2011).

## Ethical Considerations

This project was implemented as a topic review activity within one topic at Flinders University School of Nursing and Midwifery, and as such ethical approval was not required. However as with any topic review activity, the Flinders University principles

and procedures on research ethics were adhered to, particularly in relation to ethical codes and legal regulations to ensure the absence or minimisation of harm, trauma, anxiety or discomfort of human participants (SBREC 2007). We have not named the year the activity took place nor the topic title in order to preserve anonymity of staff and students, and the findings presented below are deliberately broad in order to meet ethical requirements.

Topic lecturers were given the option of taking part in the activity. If they chose to take part, they distributed the “Feedback Preference” handouts during one of their tutorial classes. Students were assured that taking part was voluntary and their option choice would not affect their grade or progression through the topic in any way. The default feedback options described above were implemented to ensure students who chose not to take part were provided with the usual feedback option for the topic (option 1). It is important to note that students received written feedback on their first assignment in the topic which was a formative assessment. Our decision to automatically provide feedback on the first, formative assignment and to make feedback on the second summative assignment optional was supported by previous research that reported students find feedback on formative assessments more useful than feedback on final assignments (Carless 2006).

## Outcomes from the topic review activity

The nursing topic reviewed in this activity comprised 20 classes with a total 395 students. The “Feedback Preference” handout was distributed in 13 of the 20 classes. A total of 248 students returned completed handouts from a possible total of 273 students in those classes (90.8% response rate). Feedback preferences are presented below in table 1.

**Table: 1 Written feedback preference chosen by students (n = 248)**

Feedback Preference	Number (%)
Option 1 – The grade plus written feedback / comments throughout the assignment and on the marking guide	181 (73%)
Option 2 – The grade plus written feedback / comments on the marking guide only and not throughout the assignment	65 (26%)
Option 3 – The grade only (no written feedback / comments)	2(1%)

## Student feedback

In addition to completing the preference options, some students wrote comments on the form such as: 'thank you for asking us', 'thank you for acknowledging we are adult learners and giving us a choice' and 'thanks, I really appreciate it!'. These responses are similar to a student comment reported by (Carless 2006, p 231) which stated, 'no tutor has ever asked us what kind of feedback we would like. This is an important topic; please share your findings with other lecturers'.

Topic lecturers reported many positive verbal comments from students in class about the activity. Some students stated this was the first time they had ever been asked about the type of feedback they wanted, and said they were very glad to be asked. Other students wanted to know which option was easiest to mark or which option would provide them with the highest possible mark. Students were told that no version was "easier" or "better" or would be marked differently in terms of grade allocation, and that we were interested in student preferences rather than lecturer preferences.

## Lecturer feedback

Due to the fact that this was a topic review activity and not a research project, we are not able to provide percentage of students with English as a second language who completed the feedback preference forms. However verbal feedback from lecturers both informally and at the final topic meeting indicated a higher percentage of students with English as a second language (ESL) had requested Option 1 than students for whom English was a first language. There may be several reasons for this observation. Students with ESL have been shown to greatly value written feedback from lectures and consistently rate it as more important than oral feedback from lecturers or peer feedback (Hyland 1998). Furthermore, in some countries (for example, countries of Confucian culture) teachers are often viewed as the final authority to which students must show a high level of respect (Wang & Li 2011). Conversely, a study of 1740 students and 460 tutors undertaken in Hong Kong found that tutors believed feedback was more useful than students did (Carless 2006). Further research is needed to determine feedback preferences of different cultural groups.

Written feedback can be a very time-consuming activity, with some lecturers devoting many hours to providing feedback that is often ignored or misunderstood (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Glover & Brown 2006). It has been suggested that an effective way to address heavy marking workloads is to re-

examine how we provide feedback in order to ensure our practices are efficient (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). As a result of asking students about their feedback preferences in the current activity lecturers reported notable time efficiencies, taking considerably less time to mark assignments using Option 2 and Option 3 than Option 1 (approximately 25 – 40 minutes versus 45 – 60 minutes respectively). Some lecturers found it difficult to mark papers without making any comments about where students needed to improve content and structure. However, other lecturers found it easier to concentrate on content rather than structure when they were not required to write comments throughout the assignment. Further research is needed to investigate the relationship between the time taken to 'mark' an assignment versus the time taken to provide written feedback with a focus on future learning, and when each of these options is appropriate.

All lecturers responded positively to the topic review activity. They were keen for students to be asked in more depth about their preferences in future years in order to engage them more with their feedback and to improve the teaching and learning experience for both staff and students. Implementing the activity stimulated scholarly discussion in the topic team meetings, and also among academic staff who were not involved in the topic. In these discussions, staff indicated that the activity caused them to reflect on and critically question the value of the written feedback they provide and whether current marking methods are meeting institutional needs more than the needs of students. Li and Barnard (2011) recently discussed institutional requirements in relation to feedback, and reported some lecturers felt they were often the target of criticism for ineffective feedback practices rather than focusing on institutional restrictions such as large class sizes, heavy workloads and end-loaded assessments. These views were also reported by some lecturers in the current activity.

Lecturers acknowledged that it can be difficult to amend the (sometimes poor) habits developed over many years and noted that change takes time. They stated that a raised awareness was the first important step towards positive change, and were keen to be involved in future practice development, education and research in this area. A positive attitude among academics towards improving feedback practices has been discussed in the literature previously. Similar to the lecturers in the current activity, Mutch (2003) reported that most academics in his study were trying their best to provide useful feedback to their students, often in difficult circumstances.

Designing appropriate assessment for learning was also discussed by participating lecturers as a way to improve feedback practices and in turn improve student learning. Similarly, Mutch (2006) concluded that the ability to provide effective feedback should be seen as a developmental activity not just for the individual but also at the level of module and program design. Attention therefore should be paid to increasing awareness, knowledge and understanding among lecturers of the theory and practice of effective feedback (Li and Barnard (2011). It is important to note however, it is not enough to simply provide individual academics with a 'repertoire of strategies' without creating and implementing institutional procedures to support effective feedback practices (Orrell 2006, p 454).

## Discussion and recommendations for future research

This topic review activity found that when asked about their written feedback preferences, more than 90% of students elected to state their choice by completing the "Feedback Preference" handout. While we could not locate any previous studies that reported numbers of students who had chosen to receive or not receive feedback, this finding, along with positive comments about being asked their preference, indicates that students were very interested in 'having a say' about the amount/type of written feedback they received on their assignment. The literature supports the act of asking students about feedback preferences and concludes that in order to engage them with their learning and to ensure feedback is effective, we should ask students the type of feedback they want and have students identify where they are having particular difficulties when they submit work (Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Glover & Brown 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

More than two thirds of students who chose a feedback preference in the topic review activity chose Option 1 - written feedback throughout their assignment and marking guide. No previous studies could be located for comparison that asked for student preferences on a specific assessment piece. This finding suggests that the majority of students wanted detailed written feedback on their work, but we cannot be sure of the motivation behind that choice. It is certainly an interesting finding given that in previous studies, many students are not fully engaged with written feedback on assignments and that a significant number of students fail to collect their essays at all (Brooks 2012; Carless 2006;

Ferguson 2011; Gibbs & Simpson 2005; Rae & Cochrane 2008). In addition, many students who do collect their assignments simply look at their mark and ignore the written feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2005). In the current activity, students may have thought lecturers wanted them to choose Option 1 and that by doing so they might gain a higher grade. Alternatively, students may have requested the maximum level of feedback to 'see how they went' but not necessarily to guide future learning. Further research is needed to determine the reasons behind this choice, and to explore this disconnect between many students asking for feedback that they then do not appear to read or use to enhance their learning.

Research to date has focused on whether written feedback is of good quality, but there is limited evidence on how it influences their learning and achievement (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The only way to determine if learning actually occurs is for the students to actively engage with written feedback (Rust 2002) and make some kind of response to complete the feedback loop. This is often one of the most forgotten aspects of formative assessment and can be very difficult with summative assessment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Further research is required to determine the amount and type of written feedback that students want, how it influences their learning, and how we can engage them with this feedback in order to enhance learning, all while making the best use of available teaching resources.

## Conclusion

The topic review activity described in this paper was undertaken following an academic debate about whether students should automatically receive written feedback on all assignments, and whether it is educationally sound to survey students about their feedback preference for certain (summative) assessments. The aims of this activity were to increase student engagement with the feedback process and to raise awareness amongst academic staff about effective and efficient feedback practices. It is important to note that because the activity was a topic review rather than a formal research project, the authors were limited in the data collected and findings that could be presented due to ethical considerations. However, this paper offers a valuable insight into feedback preferences among university students and has achieved its aim of raising awareness among academic staff members through dissemination of our findings to the school and discussions about future research and practice.

Our findings suggest that if given the choice, a large percentage of students would take the opportunity to elect the specific type and amount of written feedback they want on their assignments, and were very pleased to be asked their preferences. More research is required to determine the reasons behind student feedback choices and how the type and amount of written feedback affects the quality of student learning. As a result of this topic review activity, the authors are currently undertaking further research with the aims of engaging students in the feedback process. The study is investigating the type and amount of written feedback students want and need on assignments in order to enhance their learning, and aims to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of feedback practices among academic staff. A heightened awareness of how students use feedback can influence how lecturers construct and write feedback to ensure it is both effective and efficient. If feedback is effective it has the potential to enhance student learning, and if it is efficient it will maximise teaching and learning resources.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr Don Houston who led the Flinders University staff development session "Providing Usable Feedback" that prompted our discussions about written feedback.

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