

# Encouraging student and staff dialogue when feeding back on written assignments

---

## LSIS Research

---



---

## Rachel Clarke

---

### Background

I have found that marking students' assignments can be extremely time consuming. I often find myself writing the same standardised comments on numerous pieces of work, only to discover that these are ignored or forgotten by the time students complete their next assignment. Consequently, I wanted to devise a system that would be more engaging for both myself and the students, whilst still providing detailed and informative feedback on their writing.

I decided that the best way to go about this was to try and create a more interactive method of providing written feedback, which would hopefully encourage myself and the students to engage in some form of dialogue about their work. Consequently, I encouraged the students to write questions about their work at the end of their essays with the intention of promoting a dialogue between the students and myself. I also provided the class with a list of comments that were generally applicable to their work. I conducted my research on two

A2 psychology classes from a large Sixth Form College. Both groups included students of varying academic ability and learning styles, enabling me to see how the methods were used by a range of students.

I found that the variety of new feedback methods provided the students with much more detailed feedback about the work they produced and they were much more engaged with the advice given. They also demonstrated a clear understanding of what was expected of them from future written work.

## Starting point

My research project was based on previous research on effect sizes, which found that the effect of feedback on assessment for learning was 0.81 (Hattie, 1996). This increased to 1.13 when feedback was highly specific (Marzano, 1998). I attempted to develop feedback that followed Sadler's (1989) goal, medal and mission framework, which involved students reflecting on their own work and producing their own individual targets to allow them to reach their goals. By encouraging both students and staff to take responsibility for reflective goal setting I hoped to apply Jerome Bruner's (1996) model that perceived learners as collaborative thinkers, highlighting the importance of shared dialogue and effort between staff and students.

Before I began the project, I initiated a class forum with both of my A2 psychology classes, where we discussed what feedback students would ideally like to be given when completing written assessments. Their main focus was on feedback to improve future work and they were keen to have comments regarding the positive aspects of their work alongside any areas that could be improved. The class welcomed class feedback sheets as they felt that these could provide detailed feedback and allow them to see common strengths and weaknesses within the class.

## Teaching and learning processes

To try to encourage more dialogue between students and staff I asked all students to write down specific questions they would like answered by their teacher at the end of their essays, such as 'Have I given enough examples?' 'Have I elaborated on my examples enough?' 'Do my paragraphs link well?'

In addition to these specific questions, students were also given a general class feedback sheet, which provided detailed feedback on the essays produced by the class. To clearly identify the relevant points, each comment was numbered and the essays were annotated with these numbers to demonstrate where each comment applied. These sheets also contained sections for target setting that required students to reflect on the general comments and answers to their questions. Furthermore, student's essays were annotated with colours to highlight good practice, with each colour representing a specific technique.

Other variations in providing feedback included groups devising questions and one-to-one oral feedback sessions. I also further developed the goal setting sheets and used them to gather comments from both students and staff, providing some very detailed feedback.

## Impact

The student feedback on these techniques was overwhelmingly positive especially regarding the use of different colours for highlighting good practice with different techniques. The students seemed to have a good understanding of what was required from them when completing work and they took a much more proactive approach to goal setting, relying on the teacher substantially less for guidance.

From a teaching perspective, I have found that the more interactive methods of giving feedback I developed have made the process of marking more enjoyable. By engaging with specific requests by the students I have found myself having to think a lot harder about the feedback that I give them, rather than falling back on standard criticisms and rewards. I have also found that often the questions asked by the students are areas that I had not necessarily considered when giving feedback and it has been useful to allow me to see what they were specifically concerned with. I also feel that the quality of feedback that I have provided is much higher as the general feedback sheets are much more detailed than anything I would write when annotating individual essays.

I plan to make use of both the general feedback sheets and specific questions from students next year as I feel that the approach offers students a

much greater range of advice, whilst still ensuring that their essays are being treated as unique pieces of work.

## Further reading

Bruner, J (1996) cited in Coffield, F. (2008) Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority. Learning and Skills Network  
[www.LSNeducation.org.uk](http://www.LSNeducation.org.uk)

Marzano (1998) cited in Petty, G. (2006) Evidence Based Teaching, Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes

Sadler (1989) cited in Petty, G. (2006) Evidence Based Teaching, Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes

## Contact

This study was carried out by Rachel Clarke at The 6th Form College, Farnborough. If you have any questions or comments, please email Rachel Clarke [rclarke@farnborough.ac.uk](mailto:rclarke@farnborough.ac.uk) or visit the college website to read the full report: <http://actionresearch.farnborough.ac.uk/Home/Index>

LSIS  
Friars House, Manor House Drive  
Coventry CV1 2TE  
t 024 7662 7900  
e [enquiriescoventry@lsis.org.uk](mailto:enquiriescoventry@lsis.org.uk)  
[www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk)

Registered in England and Wales Company no 06454450 Registered charity No 1123636 Registered office Friars House, Manor House Drive, Coventry CV1 2TE