An investigation of undergraduate psychology students' perception of and engagement with feedback across the three years of study

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Abstract

The topic of students' perception of feedback and what they do with the feedback they receive has gained increasing attention in the educational literature recently in an attempt to identify areas which require educators' attention. However, research in this area has typically been narrow as these findings fail to reveal students relationship with feedback at the start of their undergraduate degree and how this alters as they progress throughout their degree. To address this issue we conducted a large-scale cross-sectional empirical investigation in which the majority of first, second and third year students responded to a comprehensive 45 item survey measuring their views on a number of issues relating to feedback, including but not limited to: whether they are happy with the amount and type of feedback they receive, how they use the feedback to improve and areas which they feel require improvement. Findings generally revealed a positive picture with most students reporting they attended to the feedback they received and used it as a learning resource to improve future work. These positive findings were balanced by some suboptimal practices with feedback preventing students from fully engaging with this important learning tool. Data analysis indicated across year consistency in areas that students are less positive about; suggesting areas of perceived weaknesses identified by students early on in their degree remain an issue for them for the remainder of their course. This dissatisfaction was especially prominent in the third year group who consistently responded more negatively than their first and second year counterparts. We recommend addressing the issues highlighted in our study should be the focus of any approach undertaken by institutions to improve the feedback model they employ

1. Introduction

Feedback has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of student achievement in an influential synthesis of over 500 meta-analyses (Hattie, 1999). The importance of feedback can be best understood when we consider it in the context of other influential factors on achievement. Hattie found that feedback was nearly twice as influential as student's socioeconomic background and slightly more influential than student's prior cognitive abilities, both of which are considered to be strong predictors of achievement (Sirin, 2005). Therefore, most educational institutions will provide feedback on students' performance

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when their work has been assessed in an attempt to highlight points students successfully managed and areas in which they need to improve. The importance of providing feedback is not a contentious issue, and so the literature interested in the pedagogical value of feedback focuses on the efficiency of different types of feedback (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996).

However, there is less agreement in the literature about whether students' value feedback or whether they actually attend to the feedback they receive. There is wide spread cynicism in academia that students are not interested in receiving feedback, only in their grades. Carless (2006) investigated lecturer's perceptions of what students do with feedback. The main theme to emerge was that staff believed students are too grade-oriented and not interested in learning from feedback comments or are only interested in feedback comments which provide them with "correct" answers.

Emanuel & Adams (2006) in an attempt to explain the roots of such cynical perceptions, propose that the adoption of a 'customer service' model by a growing number of universities affects students' expectations of the institution in which they are enrolled. Within this context students are seen as "instrumental consumers of education, driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark and as such desire feedback which simply provides them with correct answers" (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002, p.53). Writing constructive feedback comments is a time consuming process and if academic staff embrace such cynical views they may be less willing to invest the time and effort needed to provide personally tailored feedback to individual students which encourages a deep approach to learning.

Higgins, Hartley and Skelton's (2002) findings challenged this notion of a consumer model. They found that students' relationship with feedback is actually more complex than simply wanting to be fed the correct answers. Whilst students were keen to obtain their grades they also desired feedback which would help them engage with their subject in a more meaningful way, prompting the authors to label students "conscientious consumers".

These inconsistent findings appear puzzling but can perhaps be explained by Carless (2006) who found a remarkable disparity in students and lecturers evaluation of provided feedback on a number of issues including how detailed the feedback comments were and whether the comments were useful. Unsurprisingly, lecturers felt feedback comments were more detailed and helpful than students did. What was surprising was the extent of the disagreement. For example, 38.4% of lecturers reported students were often given detailed feedback which helped them improve their next assignment, whilst only 10.6% of students responded in the same way. In addition to this research has shown students struggle to understand their tutor's feedback comments and receive little guidance on how to interpret feedback (Weaver, 2006)

perhaps explaining findings that students do not spend as much time processing feedback comments as tutors would like them to (Carless, 2006).

Literature such as this is has started to build a picture of students' perception of and satisfaction with the feedback they receive and what they do with the feedback after receiving it. The picture appears rather negative from the perspective of students. For example, Weaver found that 75% of design and 86% of business students felt feedback was too uninformative or brief to be helpful. If students perceive feedback to be unhelpful this could potentially explain why they spend a short period of time reflecting on the comments. However, confidence in such findings is an issue due to low response rates to administered questionnaires (in this case a response rate of 8%) or small sample sizes which may not necessarily represent the opinions of the majority of students.

Low response rates to questionnaires are widely recognised as the biggest threat to validity when employing this method because we can't assume the respondents who participated represent the views of non-respondents (Stoop, 2005). However, the golden standard of a 70% response rate is rarely met in survey research. This can potentially lead to skewed findings if respondents differ systematically to non-respondents. In the case of perception of feedback, it's possible those students most willing to respond are the ones who are unhappy with the quantity and quality of feedback they receive, thus leading to the negative findings which dominate the research literature.

Another key issue yet to be explored is how students' perception of feedback changes throughout the course of their degree. Students' expectations may become more aligned with lecturers over time resulting in final year students perceiving feedback differently to first year students. Additionally, those who are further on in their degree have access to more feedback and have more experience with feedback, thus allowing them to decode and apply feedback more effectively (Carless, 2006). Alternatively, tutors may differ in the type and quantity of feedback they provide depending on year of study. Rowe and Wood (2008) found that some students felt that feedback was more comprehensive in the final year of study compared to the first and second year. Therefore, research is needed to identify similarities and differences in students' experiences with feedback across the years of study.

The literature highlights three key questions which require further clarification and where responses would benefit from a large, representative sample. This article draws on the following selected items from a large-scale questionnaire survey investigating issues relating to feedback:

• Do students read feedback comments, including those comments in the script and the

summary box on the front of the assignment?

• How constructive do students find the feedback comments? Does it help them improve?

• To what extent do students reflect on and use feedback to improve? Are they pro-active in the strategy they employ when using feedback?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

442 undergraduate psychology students (331 female, 105 male, 6 gender not noted) from Keele University completed the questionnaire. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 39 years with a mean of 20.23 year (SD = 2.83). The sample consisted of 190 first year (79% of registered students), 125 second year (69%), and 127 third year (75%) respondents.

2.2 Material and procedure

A comprehensive questionnaire was constructed to document students' relationship with feedback including their expectations, engagement, motivation and ability to apply received feedback, as well as their perceptions regarding its purpose, effectiveness and quality. Questionnaire items were developed based on a review of the literature and issues third year students identified during a focus group session.

This resulted in a 45 item survey in which participants responded to each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and one open-ended question which invited participants to write about any further views they had about feedback. In order to decrease response bias, a mixture of positively and negatively phrased questions was included. The questionnaire was administered during core teaching sessions to ensure a high response rate and to minimise issues associated with self-selecting samples.

3. Results

Reponses to the Likert scale items were analysed in terms of the percentage frequency of responses, as a function of year of study. From within the large pool of results three areas have been chosen as the focus of this report.

3.1 To what extent do students read the feedback that they receive?

Almost all students (98%) reported that they read the mark that they receive for assessments, and very high proportions also read both the in script comments made by the marker (91%) and the overall comments made in the summary box on the front of the assignment (84%). Students reported attending slightly more to feedback relating to their ability to interpret and understand the science (77%) compared to that on referencing and grammar (68%).

When asked how long they spent reading feedback on essays and lab reports students most frequently reported spending 5-10-minutes (55%). Thirty-three percent reported spending more than 10 minute and 12% less than 5 minutes. This trend was consistent across the two assignments types and also across year groups (Figure 1). Two factors that students report to increase the amount of time that they spend looking at feedback are when they receive a low mark (73% agree) or when they receive a mark which they do not agree with (64% agree).
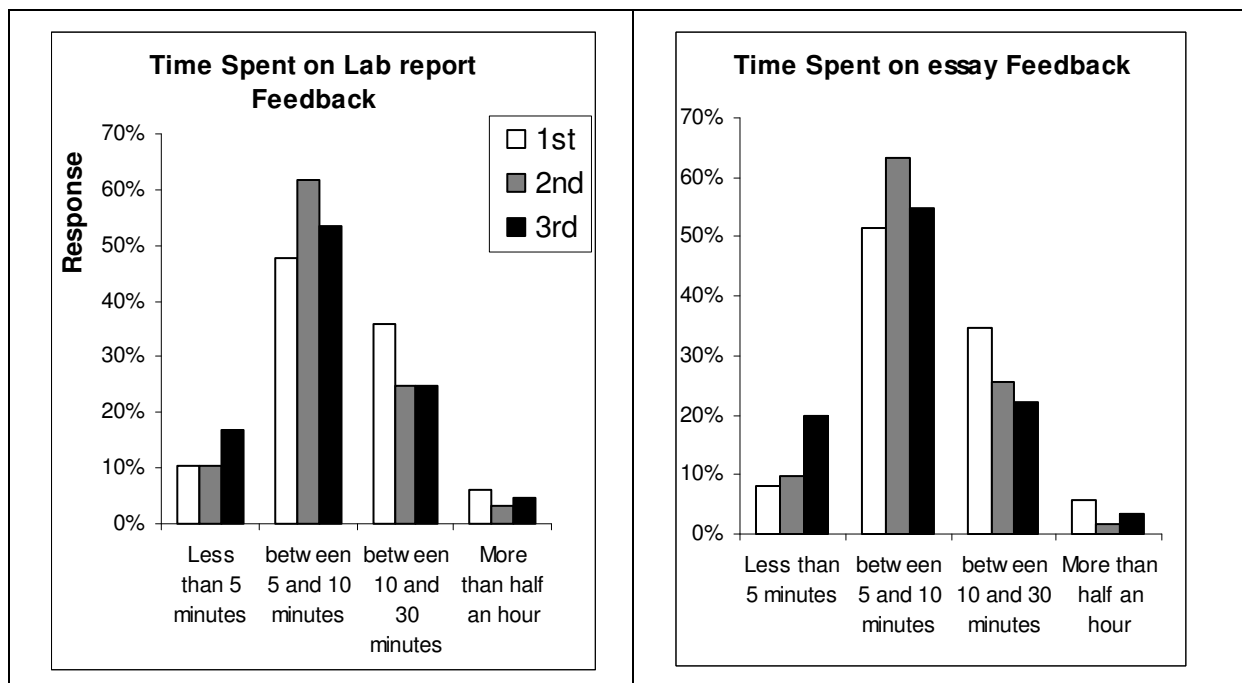

Figure 1. Time spent reading assessment feedback comments across the three years of study

3.2 How Constructive do students find the feedback that they receive?

Across all year groups approximately 70% of students are generally satisfied with the feedback that they receive. Most reported that it helps them to improve (81%), and only a small portion (15%) indicated that they found the feedback difficult to understand.

However analysis of additional items that probed perceptions of the content of feedback and whether this was sufficiently detailed to help them to improve revealed areas of discontentment in this aspect of feedback. Over half the students (54%) felt the feedback

does not include examples of how to improve work (Figure 2). Whist a substantial portion (59%) agreed the feedback included examples of 'good and bad' bits in their work, 20% clearly disagreed that this was the case. The third year students were notably the least content with this aspect of feedback. Furthermore a small portion also reported a negative emotional response to reading feedback. Thirteen percent reported that they found feedback comments upsetting and 16% reported never enjoying reading feedback. These findings were consistent across all three year groups.

Figure 2. How constructive feedback comments are perceived to be across the three years of study
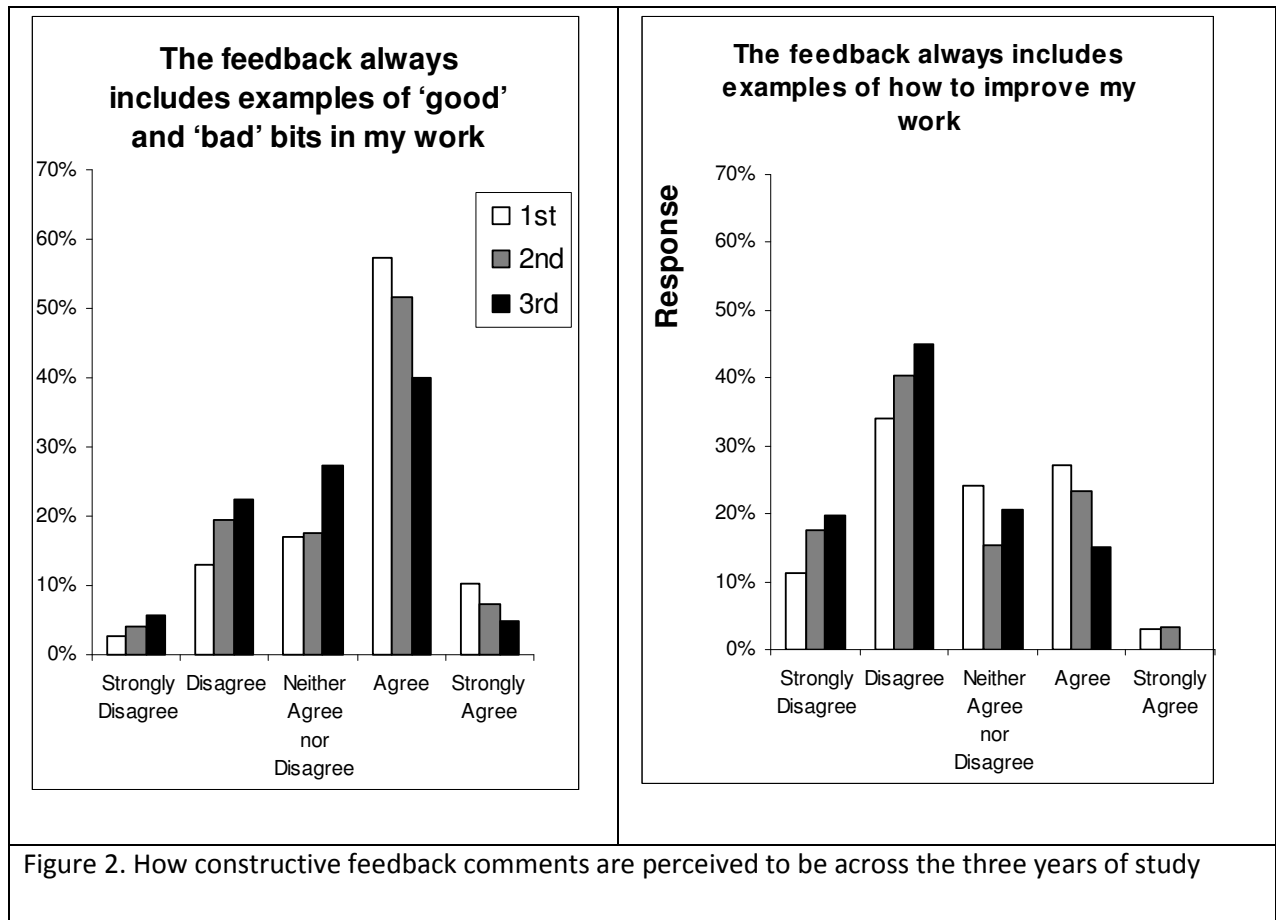
3.3 To what extent do students reflect on and use feedback received for improvement?

The majority of students report reflecting on their feedback (63% agree) by noting what they need to improve and addressing these areas in future assignments (65% agree). Furthermore, 62% reported that they note what they have done well on so that they can repeat this in future assignments. These findings are consistent across all three year groups and further supported by 62% of students reporting that they keep records of their feedback and refer to these again in the future.

However, when a more applied question was asked about whether students refer to previous feedback when preparing new assignments, the picture was not so positive, or as consistent. While 58% of first year students reported doing this, only 23% of third year students did; this is illustrated in figure 4. Similarly, for those who it applied too, only a small portion (30%) of students reported reviewing feedback received over the years to improve on their future work.

4. Discussion

The objective of the current study was to gain an accurate and complete representation of students' views on different aspects of feedback as a function of year of study. Here we present findings relating to three key aspects; (1) to what extent do students read the feedback they receive, (2) how constructive do students find the feedback that they receive and (3) to what extent do students reflect on and use feedback received for improvement. Students' responses to all three aspects were overall very encouraging. In addition to noting the mark received, 91% of students also attend to the comments on the scripts, and 84% to the comments in the summary box. Thus in terms of reading feedback, the data reveals very high proportions of students' review all aspects of provided feedback.

We also examined the extent to which students reflect on and apply the feedback after this initial processing. A promisingly large number of students reported proactively engaging with the feedback at later stages, with 65% noting what they have done well, and 62% what they need to improve on in future assignments. These two aspects that measure student driven engagement with the feedback process reveal an encouraging pro-active practise with feedback. The final aspect examined relates to students' perceived constructiveness of the feedback itself. As the trend in engagement levels would predict, most students viewed feedback as a useful aid in improving their work and reported being generally satisfied.

These overall findings are relevant to some of the points covered in the introduction. Firstly, in the current study only 20% responded to the feedback not being useful, this is in stark contrast to the average 80% of respondents in Weaver's (2006) study. Similarly whereas Carless (2006) reported that only 10% of students find the feedback detailed enough to improve, in the current study a larger portion reported this to be the case (over 30% agreed it always includes examples of how to improve). Qualms relating to the potential misrepresentation of views in self-selecting small sample studies such as Weaver's (8 % response rate) were highlighted in the introduction. The discrepancy in findings across previous research studies and the current study validate such concerns, and demonstrate that

the overall perception and engagement of students is much better than that portrayed via unrepresentative samples.

This representative assessment of students' high level of overall engagement also implies the cynical view held by teachers is in fact inaccurate. In contrast to the view proposed by 'consumer models' we found that students not only attend to all feedback, but beyond this proactively utilise the received guidance to enhance their learning. As such the current perceptions and behaviours of students are more in line with Higgins, Hartley & Skelton's (2002) view of students as 'conscientious consumers' that engage with the subject matter and learning process in a non-superficial manner. Whilst we acknowledge the current reform in the educational system does leave the pedagogical process susceptible to a shift towards a consumer model, the findings from the current study provide strong evidence that this is currently not the case.

Although the current data depicts a generally reassuring positive stance regarding students' engagement with feedback, the employment of diverse and finer grained probing of their views in the current survey also uncovered some facets of the feedback process that could be improved. These findings can be collated into those that will benefit from student training and those that require departmental/ educator driven alterations.

From the students' perspective, we found that although students spend a healthy amount of time processing the feedback, they also spend more time when they received a low mark or one that they did not agree with. Whilst this trend is no doubt driven by the students' motivation to detect and analyse weaknesses with the intention to improve, it also implies students do not attend as thoroughly when they receive a mark they are content with. Such behavioural patterns restrict the full benefit of feedback, which is not only to identify weaknesses but to acknowledge strengths which can be replicated and built on in future assignments.

Similarly, although the response to whether they reflect on feedback was very positive, when questioned on the extent to which they actually practically apply feedback when preparing future assignments a deficiency in the process was highlighted. Contrary to Rowe and Wood's (2008) findings the senior students were the least and the junior were the most satisfied with the content of the feedback. For example approximately 40% of third years reported receiving comments concerning positive and negative points in their assignment feedback compared to 60% of first years. Forty-five percent of third years compared to 33% of first years disagreed that the feedback included examples of how to improve the work.

This overall dissatisfaction is reflected in the manner in which third years engage with feedback. This year group is the least likely to keep and refer to previous feedback when preparing future assignments, or to review previous feedback for consistent mistakes or improvements. This latter trend is of particular concern as final year students have received the greatest magnitude of feedback and therefore have the greatest opportunity to assimilate and build on the feedback they have received over the years in their final crucial year.

Finally, a facet of the feedback process that would benefit from educator driven modifications is the subtle areas of discontentment regarding the content of feedback. Whereas overall feedback was viewed as a useful resource for improving work, over half the students agreed not enough comments identifying strengths and weaknesses of the assessment were included, and that the content did not provide examples of how to improve the work. Having established students do in fact value and attend to feedback at a detailed level emphasizes the need for teachers to modify the provision of the feedback to accommodate these requirements.

The primary objective of the current study was to investigate if perception and engagement with feedback alters as a function of year of study. As outlined in the introduction it is logical to presume students' engagement and requirements from feedback may alter with experience of the process and also as they progress in their course. The recording and analysis of such views across all three years in the current study enabled an assessment of such assumptions. Overall it seems students start off responding and interacting well with feedback but this positive attitude is considerably diminished by the time they move to their final year of study. The pattern of findings suggests the decline in level of engagement and satisfaction across the years may be underlined by the perceived inappropriateness of the feedback provided to a third year student. This highlights a need to tailor the type and provision of feedback across the years of study. Whilst feedback content is appropriate and appreciated by first years, a conscious qualitative alteration in feedback provided to third years may be required to reinstate and maintain the engagement of students with the feedback process at the end of their degrees.

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