PTAS Project Report (for SMALL PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title
How is good feedback expressed? A corpus analysis of feedback provided by Edinburgh University Students' Association Teaching Awards (Best Feedback) Nominees.

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What did we do?
We undertook a pilot study to test a methodology for exploring dialogic and meta-discursive elements evident in feedback given by tutors nominated by students for a 'Best Feedback' award in order to enhance best practice guidance. We emailed all 2017 'Best Feedback' nominees and asked them to provide examples of feedback they had given. The analytical approach was derived from Hyatt's categorisation of feedback types based on a corpus of master in education dissertations (Hyatt 2005). We used the grant to employ a research assistant via the Careers Service Internship Scheme.

What did you find out?
Table 1 shows the assessment formats and their respective programmes included in the analysis. There were forty items of feedback data provided by nine Best Feedback Nominees 2017, out of a group of a possible 105 available nominees. Four nominees provided one item of feedback, two nominees provided three items of feedback, and two nominees provided seven examples of their feedback with one providing sixteen items of feedback. Whilst there were feedback examples from across a diverse range of university departments, the variance in items supplied by the nominees meant that a more comprehensive pattern in feedback styles could only be observed in three of the nominees. Nevertheless, as a small exploratory study, there were still interesting findings arising through analysis that would merit more substantive investigation.

Table 1: Courses and assessment formats analysed

Type of course	Type of assessment
MSc in International Business & Emerging Markets	Formative Feedback from Group Presentations for Group Reports
BSc in Physics	Honours Research Project
MA in Social Policy	Post Graduate Essay
BA in Sociology	First Year Sociology Essay
MSc in Digital Education	Draft Synoptic assignment
MA (Hons) Sustainable Development	Blog
BEng Chemical Engineering	Group project comprising technical drawings and report
MSc Clinical Education	Dissertation
Online LLM in Medical Law & Ethics	Portfolio of up to 10 posts on eScript online discussion platform

We had intended to send out a reminder email in case of a low response rate; however in light of the richness of the data, interesting questions raised, and variety of the examples supplied we decided there was more to be gained from spending more time analysing the material available.

Summary of Findings
- Assessment formats are increasingly diverse: tutors were nominated for providing feedback on a diverse range of assessment formats from traditional dissertations to Blogs.
- Feedback is situated: the feedback items provided indicated that the way feedback was framed, was shaped by the interrelated factors of academic discipline, the subject being assessed and the form of assessment.
- Feedback is dynamic: in addition to the notion of feedback on a current submission and feedforward to assist in the production of future work, we propose the concept of 'cumulative feedback'. It was evident in some pieces of work that the tutor had knowledge of previous work submitted by the student (either formative or summative) and this was incorporated into comments offered. The capacity to do this clearly depends on non-anonymisation of assignment submissions.
- Assessment format structures feedback: Hyatt's taxonomy was developed from analysis of a corpus of traditional text based dissertation feedback comments. Although some of the categories of feedback comment are transferable, we noted the lack of available labels to apply to some aspects of assessment and feedback taking place in a digital environment. For example; there were comments on the visual aesthetics of presentation in some digital formats, a concern that in-text comments in a PDF document could appear terse; and feedback was sometimes in the form of a reflection on a student's reflection in a blog or discussion board (which for now, we are calling 'dialogic reflection').
- Feedback is affective: all examples provided made use of what Hyatt (2005) called 'phatic' comments (where the purpose is maintaining a good relationship) and what Hyland (2000) referred to as 'hedging' (a reluctance to express commitment to a position through the use of words like 'might and 'possibly'). An issue worthy of further investigation is whether students (particularly international students) share the tutors understanding of the message behind the 'hedge'.

Feasibility
This pilot study provided us with information about the feasibility of the study design. For similar projects in the future, our advice is as follows:
- There is variation in feedback formats used across the university; future research should consider the extent to which this matters in relation to the research questions being asked.
- The use of anonymised marking is not universal, and this may vary by assignment type (formative or summative). Screening and anonymisation of examples before being passed to a research assistant for processing is important.
- Some staff supplied one feedback example and others as many as nine, whether this matters in relation to the questions being asked needs consideration at the design stage.
- The participant information sheet stated the research *had* been given ethical approval; some respondents were never the less unsure if they should seek students' permission before supplying an example of feedback. We recommend future projects cover this issue in more detail in the participant information sheet.

How did you disseminate your findings?

A [Teaching Matters blog](#) has been posted, and a paper is in preparation for submission to Teaching in Higher Education; key points emerging from the project will also be disseminated via the MSc Clinical Education Twitter feed. We are in discussion with EUSA about further dissemination, possibly along the lines of the EUSA Good Teaching report. Future learning and teaching conferences, and the Experienced Teachers Network will also be explored as outlets for the findings.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

The findings of the project have the potential to contribute to efforts to develop the assessment literacy of staff and students by contributing to the development of a vocabulary of feedback comments and making transparent dialogic and meta-discursive aspects of feedback. Our pilot confirms the utility of Hyatt's taxonomy of feedback types and suggests the need to extend this to take account of digital and innovative assessment formats.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The findings of this project are transferable across programmes and disciplines; as noted above we will seek opportunities to share the outcomes as they arise.