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Effective teacher education practice: the impact of written assessment feedback for distance learners

Black and Wiliam (1998) define assessment as “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (p. 2). Feedback to students, whether oral or written, is a crucial aspect of assessment, and must be considered within a broader teaching framework (Gipps, 1994). Assessment feedback must give students not only an indication of their achievements, but also, crucially, information and guidance from which they can learn (Brown, 1999; Ding, 1998; Higgins, 2004). Thus feedback also has an important motivational function (Hyland, 2000).

This project contributes to research on the role of written assessment feedback. It identifies barriers that may undermine the potential effectiveness of written feedback, and reports on what kind of written feedback is likely to be most effective in engaging students with learning.

Aims of the project

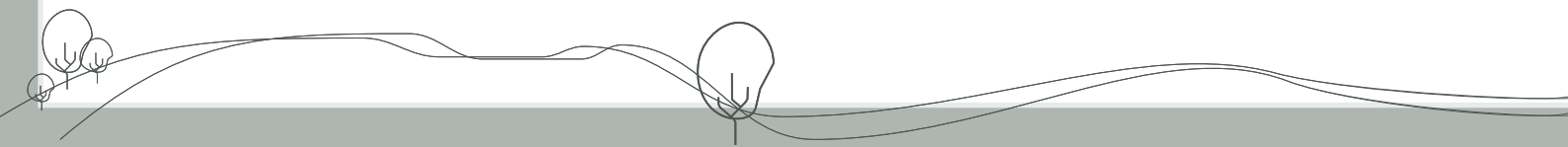
The aims of this research were to:

- add to current knowledge about tertiary teaching and learning, particularly assessment practice in tertiary distance education;
- enhance the links between educational research and distance teaching practices; and
- strengthen research capability among lecturers in early childhood teacher education.

Specific objectives were to:

- examine students’ views on how the extent and immediacy of feedback support their study and/or extend their learning;

- identify the characteristics and methods of the feedback that students find most effective in supporting their study and/or extending their learning;
- examine whether students’ progress and retention are linked to students’ views on effective feedback; and
- involve early childhood education lecturers in the research process, to enhance their appreciation of evidence-based teaching practices and to build their research capability.





Research questions

The research questions were:

- How do the extent and timing of assessment feedback to distance learners support study and extend learning?
- What is the nature of the feedback that students find most effective in motivating continued study and/or extending their learning?
- Why is this particular kind of feedback most effective?
- Is there a link between the characteristics of students (for example, their level of study or on-job experience) and their perceptions of the effectiveness of different feedback strategies for supporting study and/or extending their learning?

Participants

This study explored how a cohort of students enrolled in The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education), Level 7, perceived the role of written assessment feedback.

The programme is a 3-year, full-time, degree-level course that encourages students to be reflective and self-motivated. Students can live anywhere in New Zealand. The programme takes a blended approach to teaching and learning, characterised by a mix of written work completed by distance, locally completed practicum and home-centre requirements, and face-to-face regional workshops.

Criteria for inclusion in the research were that students had to be enrolled in The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) and have received feedback from at least five assignments. The purpose of these criteria was to ensure that participants had received enough feedback to be able to comment knowledgeably on the experience.

Methodology

The key methodology used in the project was survey research, which is particularly useful for finding out something (including thoughts, values, and attitudes) about or from a particular group of people. It is widely used in educational research (Fowler, 1993; Keeves, 1997; Neuman, 1997; Seale, 2004; Williams, 2003). According to Denscombe (2003), survey research includes the characteristics of "wide and inclusive coverage", research that is undertaken "at a specific point in time", and "empirical research" (p. 6).

The methods included:

- a postal questionnaire sent to all students enrolled in the programme who had completed at least five assignments (237 were sent out and 125 were returned with permission forms—a 53 percent return rate);
- three focus-group interviews (the three groups were: urban students; provincial students; and students of Māori descent); and

- analysis of student records (course completion dates and grades).

Students could participate in any or all of these aspects of the research, or decline to do so. The research was approved by the Joint Ethics Committee (which represents The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, the Wellington Institute of Technology, and Whitireia Polytechnic) in March 2005.

Data analysis

Sections of qualitative data from the questionnaire were analysed, using thematic analysis, by three of the research team, each of whom searched for emerging categories from the data. The three researchers collaborated to ensure that labelling and categorisation were consistent. One researcher analysed the focus group data, also using thematic analysis. Two researchers together reviewed questionnaires from students who identified as Māori, in order to consider issues of particular relevance to this group. The full research team provided feedback and discussion on the themes for each set of data.

Two variables were constructed from the questionnaires and academic records:

- "pace", the speed at which students worked through the courses—slow, medium, or fast; and
- "achievement", which reflected the students' grades—high, medium, or low.

Statistical analysis of these variables showed acceptable dispersal across the pace and achievement categories for each year group. The variables were useful for cross-tabulating against other survey responses.

Limitations

The limitations of this research project were:

- The perspectives of rural students, Māori students, and students with languages other than English could have been explored further.
- The number of Year 2 students was disproportionate, although the use of percentages meant that their results did not bias findings.
- Minimal attendance at two of the three focus groups meant that urban–provincial and Māori–non-Māori comparisons could not be treated robustly.
- The sample (125 questionnaires) was statistically small.

The return rate was 53 percent. Although this was acceptable, it does mean that almost half of the students eligible to comment did not do so.

Summary of findings

Students' reasons for study were influenced by changes in government regulations, but the primary motivation was career.

Students increased their pace of study (number of courses studied within a semester) between Year 1 and Year 3.

Students increased their level of achievement (improved their grades) between Year 1 and Year 3.

Higher achievers moved through the courses more quickly.

The fast-paced, high-achieving students valued the technical aspects of written feedback the most. Some students found that the focus of the written feedback was too technical.

Students found both technical and “global feedback” informative. Year 1 students particularly valued a broad range of feedback.

Students expected and valued feedback that reflected their level in the programme, with more support in Year 1 and more challenge in Year 3.

Consistency in some aspects was appreciated (for example, in being positive).

Reflection was considered to have programme-wide relevance, and related to both the students’ personal learning and concurrent teaching.

Students wanted prompt turnaround of scripts with assessment feedback and consistency in the way they were marked.

Most students (76 percent) read feedback carefully; feedback was read more carefully by older students.

If feedback was not understood, half the students would contact the marker. A fifth would contact regional lecturers. Some students expected to be independent and were reluctant to call.

Feedback with programme-wide relevance was appreciated; students found it useful for other courses.

Students considered that the primary purpose of assessment feedback was to improve their work. The next most important purpose was to motivate them in their study. Positive comments were motivating.

Students wanted clear justification of their grade and knowledge of how to improve their work. They were frustrated by a low mark that was accompanied by only positive comments. Most (81 percent) found grades motivating when accompanied by justification. Grades alone were not the prime motivator.

Relationships with regional lecturers and student colleagues were important. Students preferred to receive assessment feedback from lecturers they had met: “It’s like having a photo to go with the name and the comments are more real”.

There was no discernable difference between the issues discussed by rural students, Māori students, and the overall group. However, the focus groups for the sub-cohorts were small.

Building capability and capacity

Reason and Heron (1986) proposed a model of co-operative, or participatory, research that differs from traditional positivist research in several aspects. We recognise that such research:

has a double objective; it aims to produce knowledge and action directly useful to people, and also to empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge. (Shortall, 2003, p. 225)

This approach was relevant to the two main purposes of our study: to understand more about student perceptions of assessment feedback; and to enhance our wider team research culture and capability and grow and empower our institution through the research process.

We focused on *student perception* of the role of assessment feedback as important for us to understand. Understanding the construct “assessment feedback” has limited meaning and purpose unless its relevance for students is understood:

The methodologies that in orthodox research would be called research design, data gathering, data analysis and so on are on secondary to the emergent processes of collaboration and dialogue that empower, motivate, increase self-esteem and develop community solidarity. (Reason, 1994, p. 329)

The emancipatory purpose of participatory research means that it does not merely describe, understand, and explain. This study was also intended to improve:

- practice;
- understanding of a practice by its practitioners; and
- the situation in which the practice takes place.

The participatory approach used in this study offers possibilities for positive action by colleagues, the student participants and other students, and our institution. Babbie (2001, p. 288) states, “Once people see themselves as researchers, they automatically regain power over knowledge.” Such empowerment will influence our understanding of assessment feedback, our teaching, and our growth as researchers. We anticipate that growing a research culture will also change and develop power structures, processes, and outcomes.

Recommendations

For more effective written feedback to students, we recommend:

- that written feedback be seen as an integral part of the teaching process;
- the use of justified comments and grades, so that students see what they could have done better or differently—justified feedback empowers and motivates students;
- robust criteria for marking, as consistency between markers helps students use feedback globally;
- timely turnaround;
- open lines of communication, so that the student can access support at need; and
- further consideration of ways of supporting and engaging with Māori students, and how assessment feedback can align with tikanga Māori.



Students' relationships with The Open Polytechnic and its staff are crucial, should be valued, and warrant further research. This study could be replicated with a "pure" distance programme to see whether these relationships are equally important to students who do not have face-to-face support. The students in this study have access to a course forum, but rarely use it. Students who have electronic support and relationships may feel differently about the need for face-to-face interaction. Replication could also be useful with cohorts of Māori, Pasifika, and international students.

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During their involvement in this TLRI project **Trish Murphy**, **Angela Edlin** and **Jenny McClew** worked as regional lecturers for The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, lecturing in early childhood education in the Auckland area. Trish, Angela, and Jenny now mentor and support teachers towards full registration through their enterprise, Teacher Registration Services.

At the time this study began **Liz Everiss** was Manager, Centre for Education Studies, at The Open Polytechnic of

New Zealand. She currently works at the Ministry of Education. Liz has extensive experience in policy-related work for the early childhood sector and has recently worked in teacher education. She has researched and published in the area of home-based care.

Valerie Margrain was the leader of this project during most of 2005. At that time she was a senior lecturer at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, lecturing in early childhood education. Valerie now works at The Ministry of

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Anne Meade is an education consultant, specialising in research and writing. Anne was the Director of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research from 1992 to 1998, and a Fulbright Senior Scholar in 1999. She is currently co-ordinator for the early childhood education centres of innovation.