

## Sink or Swim? Improving Student Learning through Feedback and Self-Assessment

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This paper identifies a number of problems with the mechanism by which teachers give feedback to students and reports the findings of a unique self-assessment activity aimed at countering these problems. The activity, based on the principles of Learning-Oriented Assessment (Carless, 2007), involved tutors providing written feedback but withholding grades on assignments submitted by a cohort of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year History students. Giving consideration to supplied assessment criteria and grade descriptors as well as the feedback they received, the students were then required to award themselves a grade and write a 100-word justification, which was submitted to the tutor. Analysis of the grades awarded by the students and tutors, and an evaluation of the exercise administered by an anonymous and non-compulsory questionnaire, revealed a high degree of grade agreement, and that students became much more motivated to read and heed the feedback they received. Moreover, the students reported gaining a greater understanding of the assessment criteria, the work required to attain a particular grade, and the means for improving their written work. Drawing particularly on the research of David Carless and David Boud, the paper concludes by discussing options for improving the feedback mechanism, such as the use of self-assessment rubrics.

### Introduction and Rationale

It comes as a surprise to many students – and evidently some teachers – that assessment tasks can be a means to promote learning rather than just blunt instruments to measure student performance. In order to facilitate learning, David Carless (2007) suggests that curriculum designers and teachers devise assessment activities (both formative and summative) that adhere to three core principles of Learning-Oriented Assessment:

1. Assessment tasks should stimulate the kind of learning that is sought (that is, they should be related to the course's key concepts and subject matter);
2. Assessment should involve students actively engaging with assessment criteria, notions of quality, and their own and/or peers' performance; and
3. Teacher feedback concerning student performance should be timely and forward-looking so as to support current and future student learning.

For these things to occur, students need to have a sound understanding of the criteria by which they are being assessed (either by their teacher, a peer, or themselves). Basically, they need to understand the characteristics of “good” and “poor” performance (be this an essay, report, or recital, etc.) and what it means to receive a particular grade (for example, a “High Distinction” or a “Credit”). Second, feedback needs to be provided in a form that enables the student to judge or acknowledge their level of performance and also indicate how the student can improve. Carless (2006), Hattie, Biggs and Purdie (1996), Black and Wiliam (1998), Hattie and Jaeger (1998), Ramsden (2003), and Housell (2003), in particular, provide strong cases for

why teacher-provided feedback on classroom and assessment tasks is central to student learning.

Regretfully, neither of these crucial elements in the learning process can be assumed to be taking place. My own observations, supported by published research in the field and a survey that I conducted among my students, suggest that even 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year university students are generally unsure about assessment criteria and the characteristics of “High Distinction” or “Credit” standard performances (see O'Donovan, Price & Rust, 2001; Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003). Moreover, many fail to receive adequate feedback from their teachers or peers, or make the effort to heed the advice that they do receive (Bailey, 2009; Housell, 2003; Mutch, 2003; Salter, 2008). For example, I administered an anonymous and non-compulsory self-completed questionnaire concerning feedback to students in my upper level Australian History course in second semester 2008, from which I received 73 responses (85.9% of the student cohort). The students (in their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year at university) were asked to reflect on the provision, and their use, of feedback in courses that they had previously undertaken in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Four students (5.6% of the respondents) stated that they had failed to retrieve marked assignments from their tutors on at least five occasions during their time at university, while 17 students (23.6%) indicated that this was the case on 3 – 4 occasions (see Figure 1). Adopting a different methodology, Winter and Dye (2004) reported a similar trend. In their survey of academic staff at the University of Wolverhampton, 46% of their respondents professed that at least 20% of student assignments remain unclaimed at the end of semester.

When asked in my survey to nominate if they always read the comments that were provided on their assignments (including notes in the margins), 21.9% of the students answered in the negative. This suggests that a significant proportion of students are not giving themselves the opportunity to learn from the written feedback they are receiving from their tutors. Furthermore, it suggests that teachers are wasting a good deal of their time by providing written comments on these assignments.

Or are they? One of the reasons given by students for their failure to retrieve marked assignments was that the general standard of written feedback was poor and thus it was not worth their effort. This feeling was quite pervasive among my students who reflected on courses they had previously taken. Nearly 7% said they had “often” (that is, on at least 5 occasions during their university career) received no written feedback on work that they had submitted for assessment (excluding exams). Approximately 36% said this occurred “sometimes”; that is, they had received no feedback on 3 – 4 occasions (see Figure 2). The extent of written feedback they did receive was modest: 57.5% of students reported that they generally received feedback consisting of 5 sentences or less (including margin comments), where a phrase of 6 words was taken to be the equivalent of a “sentence” (see Figure 3). While quantity of feedback should not be confused with quality (and accepting that some tutors provide verbal feedback in addition to written comments when they return essays), this would appear to be a very poor return on the students’ effort, especially since History students are required to produce sophisticated arguments in 2,000-3,500 word (or 10-15 page) papers. Such findings suggest that the experience of one of my colleagues, who remembers receiving a graded essay with the single comment “Not unintelligent,” and a “tick” at the bottom of her concluding paragraph, is not uncommon. It is little wonder that some students ignore the feedback process entirely. Conversely, given the proportion of students who report failing to retrieve assignments or who do not read written feedback, teachers might feel justified in offering the bare minimum. The problem thus becomes self-perpetuating.

Determined to break the cycle and frustrated that in the past I had spent many hours of my time writing detailed comments on student essays that were sometimes never retrieved or possibly never read, I implemented an activity based on the principles of Learning-Oriented Assessment that encouraged – indeed, demanded – my students engage with written feedback, and which aimed to improve their understanding of the assessment process so that they could critique their own work with greater competency and assurance. This paper outlines the nature of that activity and reports the findings of an evaluation that I

conducted to determine whether it did indeed (a) encourage students to read and take heed of written feedback on their assessed assignments; and (b) gain a greater understanding of the requirements of academic essay writing and the level of performance required to receive a particular grade. It also relates some of the other unanticipated beneficial learning outcomes resulting from the activity. The paper concludes with a discussion concerning why some students fail to engage with feedback (or at least why they perceive it differently from academic staff) and suggestions for ways in which educators can further assist students develop their capacity for self-critique.

### **A Learning-Oriented Assessment Task**

One of the assessment tasks in my upper level Australian History course requires students to write and submit a 2,500 word research essay on a topic provided by me or of their own choosing. I generally aim to grade and write detailed comments on the individual essays within two weeks, after which time I personally return them to students during tutorial, along with verbal feedback of a general nature for the group. On the last occasion I taught the course (Semester Two, 2008), my tutor and I returned the essays with written and verbal feedback but withheld the grades. Needless to say, this caused some consternation. Our students were then required to re-read their essays, consider our written comments, consult again the assessment criteria and grade descriptors that we provided (and which outlined the desired characteristics of an academic History essay), and award themselves a grade. This was to be submitted to us, with a 100-word justification (most students wrote more), the following week. We informed the students that we had recorded a grade for their essays and that should the tutor and student grades differ, and should the student make a good case in their justification statement, we would consider revising our assessment. Prior to all of this happening, and in order to achieve a level of consistency in our own system of grading and feedback, three essays were selected for the tutor and I to both assess and then discuss our rationale for awarding particular grades and comments.

Features of this exercise – namely the withholding of grades and the provision of feedback prior to the students’ self-assessments – are similar to a method employed by Taras (1999, 2001, 2003). I chose to withhold the grades so that the students would be obliged to engage with the feedback. Taras (2001) was more concerned that the provision of grades would interfere with the students’ abilities to self-assess. She contends that when students receive a grade in which they have emotional investment, they are less receptive to feedback. Taras additionally argues that since learners are limited by their own knowledge and expertise,

Figure 1  
Number of Occasions that Students Reported Failing to Retrieve Marked Assignments

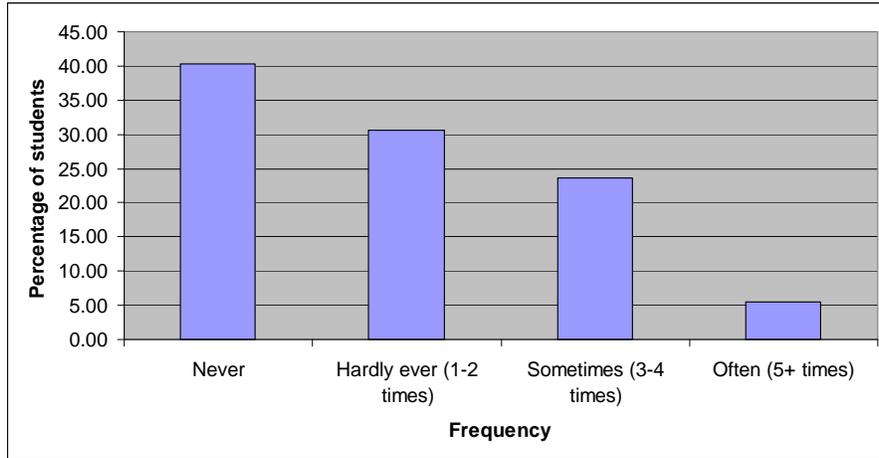


Figure 2  
Number of Occasions that Students Reported Receiving No Written Feedback on Assessed Work

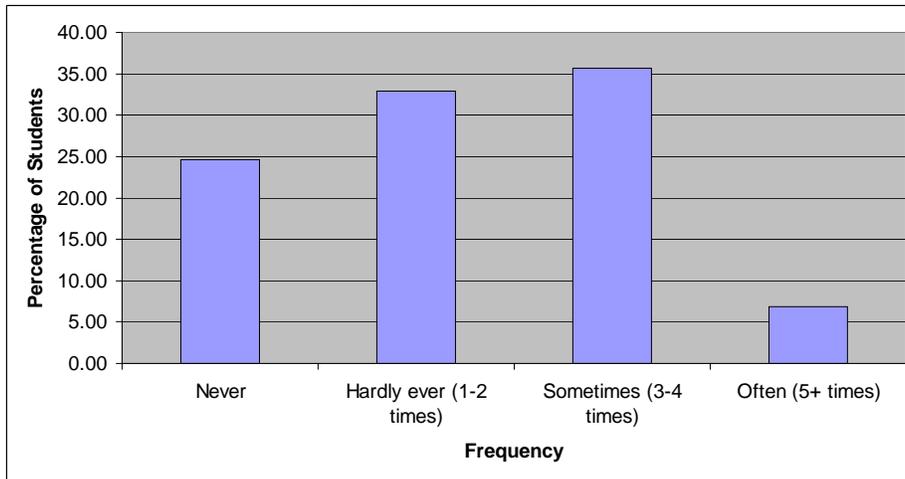
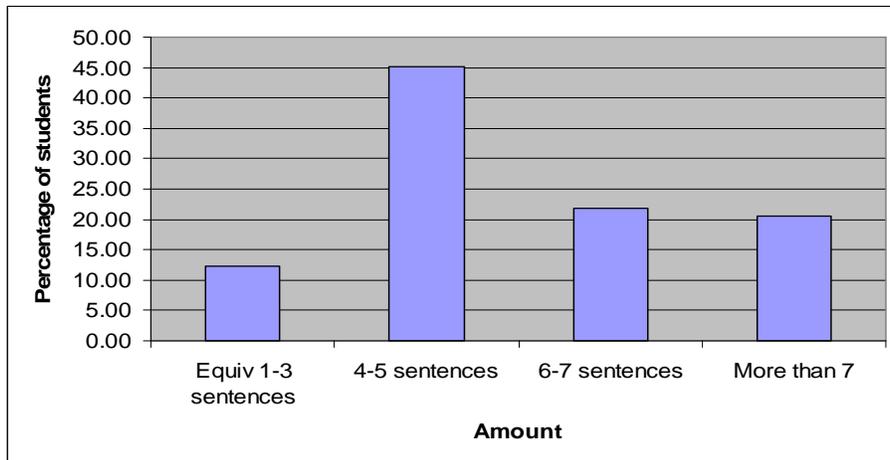


Figure 3  
Average Extent of Written Feedback Including Margin Comments



they require the assistance of tutors to inform their self-assessment. A survey of students that she undertook ( $n = 34$ ) revealed that they overwhelmingly preferred to have this assistance before assessing themselves (Taras, 2003). My exercise differed from Taras's approach in that I provided substantial feedback (as opposed to 'minimal' feedback, such as just underlying problematic passages) and required students to submit 100-word statements that engaged with the assessment criteria and justified their grade. My course was also much shorter in duration, which meant that I did not have the opportunity to incorporate a practice exercise or peer assessment component, which are elements of Taras's approach (see Taras, 2003). I am aware that some teachers ask their students to complete and submit a self-assessment rubric when they submit their assignment, but I could see little benefit in this apart from forcing students to read the assessment criteria prior to submission. Most students, I imagine, would profess that they had complied with the criteria and had done their utmost to achieve the highest grade. Student feedback collected by Taras (2003) confirms this suspicion. She notes that self-assessment prior to tutor feedback could even have a detrimental effect, in that students could be misled into believing that their engagement with a rubric had allowed them to remedy and eliminate errors and so distort their expectations of the grade to be awarded (Taras, 2003).

At the conclusion of my feedback-and-self-assessment activity, I collected data concerning the degree of grade agreement between the tutors and students, analysed the statements in which the students rationalised their self-assessed grades, and administered an anonymous and non-compulsory questionnaire about the students' experience of the activity and their perception of what they had learned through the process. A total of 85 essays were graded and self-assessed (providing the basis for analysis of the degree of grade agreement and the students' justification statements), while 73 students completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 85.9%). In quoting from some of the anonymous questionnaire responses below, I refer to them by number (#1 – #73).

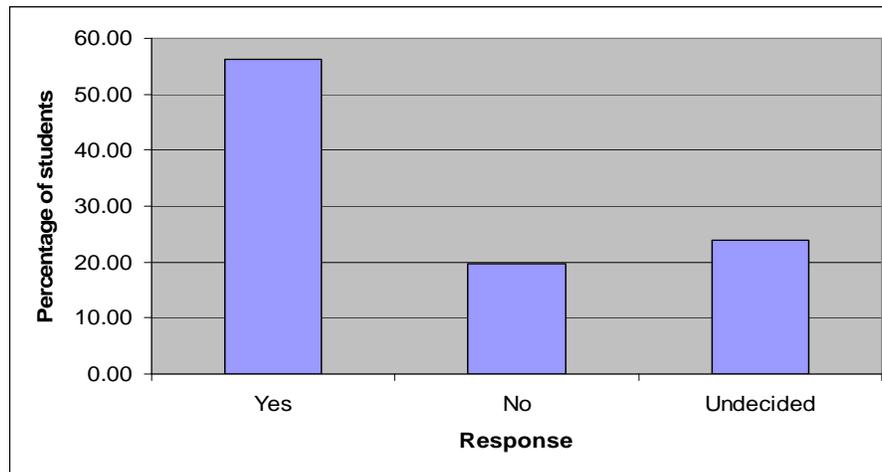
### Results

Analysis of the degree of grade agreement between academic staff and the students, and the possible reasons for discrepancies, is very interesting but is not the focus of this particular paper – I have written and presented on this topic elsewhere (Sendziuk 2009a, Sendziuk 2009b). In summary, I can report that nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of students concurred with the grades awarded by their tutor. Of the students who disagreed, almost half (48.3%) over-estimated their

performance while the remainder (51.7%) underestimated their performance. The majority of those who over-estimated their performance awarded themselves a "Credit" grade when the tutor deemed their essay to be of "Pass" standard. Given that very few students who meet the submission deadline fail History assignments, it is perhaps inevitable that students would not wish to award themselves the "lowest" grade. The pattern was reversed at the other end of the scale. The majority (53.3%) of students who under-estimated their grades were deemed to have written a "High Distinction" essay by their tutor; modesty perhaps prevented these students from acknowledging this. In the anonymous questionnaire, 36.1% of students admitted to deliberately under- or over-estimating their grades, which lends some credence to the above hypotheses. Various studies have also found that high achieving students generally perform at a high level precisely because they are so self-critical and set exacting standards, and are thus prone to underestimate their achievements when self-assessing. Kruger and Dunning (1999) suggest they underestimate their performance because they assume other students are of a similar standard and thus do not consider themselves above average. There are, of course, other reasons for the students' under- and over-estimation of grades, just as there are other explanations for why the staff and students sometimes differed in their opinion of the essay quality. I touch on this topic below but, as noted, such analysis is the subject of a different paper. Those interested in this theme should also consult Boud and Falchikov (1989), Falchikov and Boud (1989), Boekaerts (1991), and Kruger and Dunning (1999).

Here, I am interested in whether this exercise encouraged students to take greater note of the comments provided by their tutors and whether they gained greater understanding of the requirements of academic essay writing and the assessment criteria. Based on students' perceptions of the task that were expressed in the questionnaire, and the statements they made in justifying their grades, I can only conclude it to have been extremely successful on both counts. When asked if the activity had given the student a better understanding of what was required in writing an academic essay, 53.3% answered in the affirmative while 19.7% disagreed. The remainder were undecided (see Figure 4). Unfortunately in the questionnaire I did not inquire as to why some students disagreed with this proposition. More than 73% of the students agreed that the task had given them a better understanding of the generic grade descriptors that the tutor used when assessing the quality of the essay. Less than 10% of the students felt this was not the case, while the remainder were undecided.

Figure 4  
Responses to the Question “Has the Self-Assessment Task Given You a Better Understanding of What is Required in Writing an Academic Essay?”



It was heartening to find that 61.6% of students felt that the activity encouraged them to take more notice of their tutor’s written feedback than they otherwise would. Of these students, some noted that they were effectively forced to read the feedback in order to comply with the task (which is not necessarily a bad thing when the learning outcome is so desirable) but others genuinely appreciated the opportunity to engage with the feedback and saw merit in continuing to do so. One student reported, “It was really helpful in evaluating the pros and cons of my essay” (#68), while another admitted “I actually read the criticism rather than shunning it” (#70). This latter comment reveals one of the other benefits of this particular self-assessment task: it compelled the students to face the consequences of their actions. If they knew they had put little effort into the assignment and would be criticised accordingly, they could not simply ignore the feedback or fail to retrieve the essay from their tutor.

While 45 students (61.6%) felt that this particular self-assessment activity encouraged them to take more notice of their tutor’s written feedback than they otherwise would, this still left 28 students who did not. But when asked to explain why they felt this way, all but one noted it was because they already took keen interest in the feedback that they received: “I always read the comments. It’s impossible to improve if you don’t” (#44). I suspect that one student who offered the following opinion in a conversation with me fell into this category: “I don’t know why you’re trying to save students from themselves. Let them sink or swim. If they choose to ignore your advice, let them suffer the consequences.”

The statements made by the students in justifying their self-assessed grades offer further proof that they

were reading and engaging with the feedback provided by their tutors and the assessment criteria. They were clearly enhancing their skills in critiquing their own work, which is essential for improving their performance at university and is a key requirement for life-long learning (Boud 1995b; Hounsell, 2003). The following extracts are representative of the statements written by the students:

I think my essay is a high-distinction essay trapped in a distinction-essay’s body. If we focus on the first half of the essay, all of the high-distinction attributes are achieved. For example there is evidence of wide, independent research and insight beyond the surface of the topic. As noted, it is also well articulated and follows the conventions of academic essay-writing extremely well. Things fall apart a little bit in the last part of the essay ... The argument is a bit watery and doesn’t touch on some important points related to the topic.

– A student who wrote an agreed “Distinction” standard essay

In terms of my research for this essay, I think I read beyond the core texts and materials, using quite a few primary sources and documents such as newspaper articles. However in order to improve this mark I would have perhaps tried to explore more aspects of these documents and also analysed and evaluated their context and value more closely ... In evaluating this essay I realised there were many things that I could have included to improve it.

– A student who wrote an agreed “Credit” standard essay

The comment you gave about not giving enough time to examine the counter argument in this essay is definitely a key problem in my essay ... To tell you the truth this is not exactly the best piece of writing I have done, the style I wrote it in could have been a lot smoother, especially the placement of paragraphs. Although my research is definitely inadequate in many cases, I have definitely felt that I gained a better knowledge of communism in Australia in the 1950s ... [I]t could have been much stronger, if a little more thought, time and research had been put into its construction.

– A student who wrote an agreed “Credit” standard essay

The exercise was not a complete success. A few students evidently still had difficulty in comprehending the feedback they received or aligning their performance with the assessment criteria. One student who awarded herself a High Distinction (opposed to the high Credit conferred by her tutor) wrote:

From the marker’s comments, it appears that my originality was not supported by expert opinion, which was a downfall that does not damage the argument too much. Evaluative skills were clear and reasonably developed, for both sides of the argument were considered in depth and weighed against one another. The marker of this essay did not encounter many issues with expression, suggesting that this area was highly developed.

The student assumed her failure to cite authoritative sources (“expert opinion”) was only a minor problem when the opposite is true (the student actually hardly cited any sources at all), and the tutor’s reluctance to correct every grammatical error was taken by the student to mean that her English expression was “highly developed.” The discordance arose, in part, because the tutor’s comments were ambiguously phrased, the provided assessment criteria did not adequately prioritise the most important elements of academic History essay writing (such as comprehensive research and the incorporation of scholarly arguments), and the student’s misunderstanding that the tutor’s unwillingness to correct every mistake or comment on every aspect of essay writing meant they were of a “High Distinction” standard.

The student mentioned above was disappointed when she learned of the grade awarded by her tutor, but the submission of her statement enabled her tutor to explain his rationale and the reasons for the discrepancy in the assessments. Indeed, one of the benefits of this activity was to alert tutors to students who felt aggrieved by the feedback they received so that the tutor could initiate dialogue. For example, in his

justification statement, a student who reluctantly awarded himself a “Pass” wrote:

I was disheartened to see that what I thought was an honest attempt at researching and presenting my findings, was read by you as actually being a thin argument based on simple sources which would indicate that I didn’t try hard enough to research my topic, which wasn’t the case. You also seem to think that I’ve wasted my time in my essay not addressing the question, but I honestly thought that you were supposed to assume the audience is intelligent but uninformed and that’s why I gave a brief account of what happened [during the Gallipoli campaign] ... It wasn’t for my lack of trying that my essay was bad and I would have initially expected a Credit grade based on my efforts but after reading your comments I can see that I cannot expect anything greater than a Pass grade at best.

This provided the tutor with an opportunity to affirm the student’s honest effort, but also to reiterate the essay’s major problems (namely, the student’s main sources of information were promotional websites rather than academic texts and journal articles, the essay was considerably under-length and took much too long to begin addressing the actual question. Insufficient attention was thus paid to developing an argument.). The student was again encouraged to consider the assessment criteria rather than relying on effort exerted as the key performance indicator. It is interesting to note that Taras (2003) reported that her student cohort also frequently cited “time and effort invested” as a key performance indicator in their self-assessments, despite these being excluded from the assessment criteria.

Given the opportunities to initiate dialogue, and given the general nature of the student self-reflections and the data yielded from the questionnaire, I am confident that this activity imparted a greater understanding of assessment criteria and the requirements of academic essay writing, and encouraged the students to meaningfully engage with the feedback they received. The assessment task became an opportunity for students to learn. If this constitutes helping them to “swim” instead of sink, I am very happy to continue doing so.

### **Improving the Feedback Process**

The self-assessment activity described above is based on the premise that teacher-provided feedback is central to student learning, but that feedback in itself is redundant unless students engage with it and act upon it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Yet, in the excitement of

getting students to read our comments, we must not overlook the qualities of feedback that make it useful. In order to be effective, written feedback needs to be comprehensible (and legible) and timely (Bailey, 2009; Carless, 2006; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Ideally feedback should be offered in iterative cycles so that refinement and improvement is possible over the duration of a course or unit of study, in much the same manner that academics utilise peer-provided feedback to refine academic papers that they compose (Hounsell, 2006; Taras, 2006). In the case of my course, I employed the self-assessment activity half-way through a twelve-week unit of study, and in the first of two essay-based assessment tasks, so the students had the opportunity to act on their tutor's comments. I was unable to measure if this did improve the quality of the second set of essays as they were written under different (exam-like) conditions, and were thus assessed by different criteria. Had I the opportunity to teach the same students again, such an evaluation might be possible.

In order to optimise the feedback process, educators also need to be aware that students are generally dissatisfied when the comments they receive lack specific advice for improvement (Bailey, 2009; Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001), are difficult to interpret (Chanock, 2000), or exclusively focused on the student's shortcomings rather than also acknowledging their achievements. High achieving students can become especially frustrated when their desire for feedback (particularly in regards to refining their arguments or prose style) is ignored because tutors deem that they either do not need the assistance or that less capable students warrant their attention more. Furthermore, James (2000), Yorke (2003) and Carless (2006), among others, note that teacher-provided feedback can have a negative impact on students' self-perception and confidence. They thus argue that in addition to carefully crafting feedback, teachers need to acknowledge the *psychology* of giving and receiving feedback. Boud (1991) remarks that these points stand for feedback provided by peers as well.

Carless's (2006) research is related to understanding how student and teacher perceptions of feedback differ, and it goes some way in explaining some of the discrepancies between the tutor and student assessments noted above and which I have also described elsewhere (Sendziuk 2009a). Carless acknowledges that many teachers report that students are disinterested in feedback (as opposed to just receiving a grade), but found this to be not entirely true for his students, as did I. He argues that students might become more interested in feedback and use it more effectively to improve their learning if teachers understand that feedback is a social process in which

elements such as discourse, power, and emotion effect how messages can be interpreted and heeded by students. In this context, *discourse* refers to the language (e.g., jargon) and even the handwriting in which the feedback is delivered. *Power* refers to the unequal relationship between students and the teacher, who has the authority to determine their fate, of which students are plainly aware and sometimes resent. Finally, given that students invest something of themselves in the assessment process, it is an *emotional* activity and likely to impact on the students sense of self-worth. Boud (1995a), Higgins, *et al.* (2001) and Ivanic, Clark, and Rimmershaw (2000) have also identified these features, which impede the ability of students to engage with feedback provided by their teachers. Accordingly, to improve the effectiveness of the feedback process, it is suggested that teachers:

- provide feedback using specific examples and language (and in handwriting) that is intelligible to students;
- provide students with annotated exemplars of quality assignments (Sadler, 2002);
- allow students some input into designing the assessment criteria or the nature of the assessment tasks, and/or provide an opportunity for the students to feed-back to the teacher (about the nature of the task or the student's own performance), so that students gain a degree of ownership or control over the assessment process (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2002; Carless, 2007);
- provide adequate advice for improvement and justification for a grade that is awarded in order to limit the possible emotional hurt of the student receiving a lower-than-expected grade; and
- provide an opportunity for student peer- or self-appraisal prior to receiving a grade by the teacher, thus making it possible for students to draw conclusions, regrettable or otherwise, for themselves (Falchikov, 2001, 2005; Liu & Carless, 2006; Taras, 2003).

Indeed, Boud (1995b) and Andrade and Boulay (2003) remind us that teachers need not be the sole source of feedback. This can be provided by the peers of students or the students themselves. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) propose that "imperfect" but prompt feedback from a fellow student may be more useful than more "perfect" feedback from a tutor four weeks later. In such cases, students need to be supported by clearly defined assessment criteria (as utilised in my activity) or self-assessment rubrics and instruction about how to use these tools.

### Self-Assessment Rubrics

The use of assessment rubrics (sometimes called “proformas”) is becoming increasingly popular in higher education. My colleagues at the University of Adelaide, in particular, are working very hard to develop assessment tasks and rubrics that align with a Research Skills Development Framework, which is itself based on the university’s desired Graduate Attributes (McEntee, 2009; Snelling and Karanicolas, 2008; University of Adelaide, 2009; Willison & O’Regan, 2006). In order to be effective, Andrade and Boulay (2003) argue that assessment rubrics should be written in language that students can understand, define and describe quality work in as concrete terms as possible (possibly using actual examples), refer to common weaknesses in students work and indicate how such weaknesses could be avoided, and be used by students to evaluate their works *in progress* and thereby guide revision and improvement. Baron and Keller (2003), however, caution against making rubrics too long and detailed, as this is off-putting or students..

While this is all sound advice, I have yet to find or devise an assessment rubric that offers the kind of feedback that I believe is ideal, and thus did not employ one in the activity described in this paper. Rubrics are useful for helping students identify their standard of performance and in stressing aspects of the assessment task that align with the objectives of the course or the university’s desired graduate attributes. But, by their nature, they are incapable of providing specific advice for improvement, except to reinforce the assessment criteria and trust that students themselves make the connection between their level of performance and what is required to move into the next “band.” In addition, the achievement statements that constitute assessment rubrics are generally phrased very blandly; they cannot offer enthusiastic praise (or even “praise” in any real sense) and thus tend to be uninspiring. When I myself have been assessed using a rubric, I found the feedback to be of such a generic nature that I was inclined to ignore it entirely. It certainly failed to communicate to me on a personal basis, or recognise the specific elements of the tasks I had performed (for example, the unique aspects of my argument). Bailey (2009) makes similar points based on his interviews with students. Still, with these reservations in mind, should educators choose to borrow or adopt the activity described in this paper, they may wish to experiment with self-, peer- or tutor-assessed rubrics.

Despite the enthusiasm of Boud and others for self-assessment practiced in its purest form – that is, as an activity in which students appraise their own performance before, or even without, receiving

feedback from their peers or teachers – I chose a different approach for this activity. Self-assessment in its purest form is very empowering for students (although Tan [2009] problematises this notion), yet my exercise was based, in part, on coercion: the students had to re-read their essays, consider their tutor’s feedback, consult the assessment criteria and write a 100-word statement justifying their self-awarded grade, before the tutor’s grade was revealed. I admire the project of empowering students, and strive to do this whenever I can, but my goal here was to remove their focus from the grade towards engaging with feedback. The fact that, in the questionnaire, nearly half of the respondents (48.6%) expressed their initial reluctance to undertake the exercise, and that one-quarter of these students said it was because they “just wanted my grade” (which was delayed by one week due to the process), indicates that had the students assessed themselves without their tutor’s input, some might have simply stopped at awarding themselves a grade rather than thinking deeply about what the grade meant. Moreover, it helped to mediate the effects of those who deliberately under- or over-estimated their result. For grade-focused students, and for those who admitted in the questionnaire that they frequently neglected to retrieve assignments or read written feedback, I suspect that no amount of cajoling, careful phrasing, or consideration of “power,” “discourse,” or “emotional well-being” is going to make them take notice of feedback unless the assessment activity is structured in a way that requires them to do so.

### Conclusion

The quality of the students’ 100-word self-reflections and the data yielded from the evaluation questionnaire strongly suggest that this particular self-assessment activity encouraged the students to meaningfully engage with the feedback they received, and facilitated a greater understanding of assessment criteria and the requirements of academic essay writing. In addition, it created an opportunity to initiate dialogue with students whose self-assessment statements revealed continued misunderstanding of the performance criteria or difficulties in critiquing their own work – a crucial requirement for improvement and life-long learning. The activity might be modified through the use of assessment rubrics and the provision of exemplars of quality assignments. One might also incorporate peer assessment (e.g., Davies, 2002), or invite students to participate in the process of devising the assessment criteria. However, the most important aspect of this particular assessment task should remain; namely, the primacy it places on the process of learning through feedback, rather than just measuring student performance.

It would be remiss not to point out one other, unexpected, benefit of this activity. I have observed that inexperienced tutors find assessing students incredibly stressful (as once did I), especially if they fear hurting students' feelings or awarding a grade that is not warranted. My tutor (who had been appointed for the first time) and I found the emphasis this exercise placed on the assessment criteria a great comfort, but more so the 100-word reflections of the students, who mostly agreed with the feedback that was provided, and who sometimes candidly admitted that they had prepared inadequately, rushed their writing, and gave an effort that was "half-arsed." For example, one wrote: "It was a bit of a shock to read the comments, I thought the essay was better, but they were pretty much correct," while another surmised: "It was rushed and therefore lacking. I had trouble starting the essay and hence realised too late that not all of the research I had done was appropriate." Such statements offer a fascinating glimpse into the minds of undergraduates, who sometimes have more modest goals, and less rigorous work habits, than academic staff, and thus can ease the anxieties of novice tutors. Furthermore, knowing that the students' self-assessments would partly depend on the tutor providing accurate and constructive comments gave us great incentive to approach this task very seriously. I can thus recommend this exercise as an excellent means of developing the skills of inexperienced tutors, and well worth the extra time involved in collecting and reviewing the students' self-appraisals, and attending to the odd student complaint about having to wait an extra week to receive their final grade.

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