

# Introducing patchwork assessment to a social psychology module: The utility of feedback

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*Patchwork text assessment offers an alternative to traditional forms of assessment that are often focused on single assessment outcomes. Embedded within patchwork text assessment is formative assessment whereby short pieces of work, or patches, are shared with staff or peers for feedback which students can reflect upon and use to amend their work prior to summative submission. Written in the style of patchwork text, an overview of the process of implementing this form of assessment is presented, focusing on the formative feedback process. Patches 1 to 4 outline the background to the patchwork text assessment approach and its implementation on a social psychology module. The process of feedback is evaluated in patch 5 by examining the effect of feedback on students' grades and by giving consideration to student views of the feedback process. The implementation of this assessment strategy, including the successes and challenges faced as a result of the feedback process, are then reflected upon. Students viewed staff feedback but not peer feedback positively, while staff found the process labour intensive and beneficial to some students only. It is concluded that patchwork text assessment is not suited to modules with a small staff to student ratio.*

**Keywords:** Patchwork text; assessment; formative feedback; peer feedback.

**I**N SEPTEMBER 2010 a patchwork text assessment on a core second year BSc(Hons) Psychology social psychology module was introduced at the University of Wolverhampton. The patchwork text assessment, according to Winter (2003, p.112) can be defined as such:

‘The essence of a patchwork is that it consists of a variety of small sections, each of which is complete in itself, and that the overall unity of these component sections, although planned in advance, is finalised retrospectively, when they are ‘stitched together.’

The small sections of work, or ‘patches’, are often shared with others. Sharing the patches with either peers or teaching staff allows for formative feedback on that work to be gained which students can reflect upon and use to amend their work prior to summative submission.

The current study is an evaluation of and reflection upon the introduction of a patchwork text assessment, focusing specifically on the feedback process embedded in this type

of assessment. The paper is presented in the loose format of a patchwork text and consists of a series of small sections relating to the implementation of patchwork text assessment on a social psychology module which are stitched together in a final commentary regarding the process and the lessons learned.

## ***Patch 1: Assessment strategies***

Traditional forms of assessment such as the exam and essay bring with them the danger that students’ learning becomes focused on the topic of assessment only, with other areas covered on a module deemed as secondary, or worse, unnecessary. Arguably, the student essay may encourage ‘surface learning’ (Winter, 2003), may be allowing plagiarism (Brunsden, 2007a), and may encourage knowledge reproduction rather than critical thinking (Winter, 2003).

The patchwork text assessment is an innovative coursework assignment format (Winter, 2003) which offers an alternative to this single assessment focused outcome.

Fostering a more holistic approach to modules, students are encouraged to reflect upon their growing knowledge of the area being studied. Patchwork text assessment allows a range of innovative tasks, or 'patches', to be used. 'Patches' are short, discrete pieces which are later 'stitched' together in a reflective commentary (Brunsdon, 2007b; Ovens, 2003; Winter, 2003) where the relationship between the separate pieces (patches) is reviewed, and how they stand together in relation to the course is considered. Patchwork text assessment capitalises upon learning being a gradual process and is facilitated by ongoing feedback and evaluation. Patches are 'shared' – students receive formative feedback on their patches which they are encouraged to reflect upon. In light of feedback the patches can be revised and edited prior to the summative assessment of their work (Brunsdon, 2007a). It is argued by many that this approach overcomes some of the problems associated with more traditional forms of assessment (Brunsdon, 2007a, b; Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012; Winter, 2003).

### ***Patch 2: 'Learning Works'***

In 2010 the University of Wolverhampton implemented the 'Learning Works' programme whereby the entire undergraduate provision was reviewed. Central to this process was the move from a 15 to a 20 credit programme, with students now completing 6 x 20 credit modules each year rather than 8 x 15 credit modules. This change led to the introduction of year-long 20 credit modules running alongside semester-based 20 credit modules: year-long modules, as with semester-based modules, were 12 weeks in duration but were spread over a year rather than being delivered over 12 consecutive weeks. Assessment weeks for year-long modules were also different to those for semester-based modules to ensure that not all assessments were 'bunched' at the end of semesters.

In psychology we saw the Learning Works programme as an exciting opportunity to

overhaul our undergraduate courses and decided to completely restructure our courses, whilst still following the core BPS curriculum. The eventual course structure in psychology entailed four semester-based modules and two year-long modules per academic year. The second year social psychology module was allocated as a year-long module which we decided to structure into blocks so that students had three weeks of lectures and then three weeks 'off' (in reality these three 'off' weeks were inter-linked with the other year-long module students took in their second year). Over the course of the academic year the students had four blocks of social psychology which were organised thematically.

The social psychology module team realised that the assessment strategy for a year-long module had to be well designed in order to keep the students motivated over the year and also attending lectures. Traditional forms of assessment, such as the essay, were not felt to be suitable here. Winter (2003) observes that when using the standard essay, where the set questions are often single topic based rather than eclectic, covering the module content as a whole, students often focus upon earlier topics covered in the module, meaning that attendance at later sessions in the module drops off (to maximise time available to do essay) precisely when the overall structure of course content may start to become clearer. The patchwork text assessment in contrast seemed an ideal approach to keeping students engaged with the module throughout the year.

### ***Patch 3: Implementing patchwork text assessment***

Approaches to patchwork text assessment are diverse. As Ovens (2003) outlines, the implementation of patchwork text assessment varies considerably in terms of practical choices. For example, how many patches are desirable? How much and what kind of choice should the student be given over their content? What constitutes the final integrative piece of assessment? It is

recognised that the interpretation and implementation of patchwork text assessment presented here are likely to be very different to those of others.

The module team decided to assign a patch to each of the four thematic blocks on the module. Patches were short pieces of work that encouraged the students to apply the theory and research covered in each thematic block to a real-world problem. The patches, in brief, were as follows:

- Pro- and anti-social behaviour: Give an evidence-based explanation of behaviour reported in a (tutor supplied) news article relating to an incidence of either pro- or anti-social behaviour.
- Attitudes and attitude change: Design an advert or health promotion leaflet and accompany with an evidence-based rationale.
- Relationships and attraction: Construct a fictional dating profile, accompanied with an evidence-based rationale.
- Language and communication: Present an evidence-based analysis of a (tutor supplied) news article on netspeak in cyberspace.

Students were encouraged to complete the patches in the three-week period between teaching blocks; completion of the work within three weeks was 'rewarded' with formative feedback on the work within a further two weeks of submission prior to moving on to the next block of the module. Such timely feedback is important in helping students with their summative assessment and fostering the students' confidence in their work (Jones, 2009). Once formative feedback had been provided, students could take this into account, revise their work, and submit for summative assessment, indicating briefly how they had addressed feedback in their revised work. An end of module summative assessment required students to submit a minimum of three (out of four) final patches (assessment one) and an accompanying reflective commentary (assessment two) guided by a set question whereby students were asked to reflect upon

the patch they felt had the potential to make the most valuable contribution to the 'real-world'. Students' ability to identify and evaluate relevant theory and research were key criteria for assigning grades.

#### ***Patch 4: The feedback process***

According to Jones (2009) formative assessment is useful to student learning as it helps the student to consolidate and reflect upon their learning. It provides an opportunity to identify any gaps they have in their knowledge and any skills that need developing. Providing comments about errors and suggestions for improvement rather than simply guiding them towards the 'right' answer encourages students to focus on the task (Bangert-Drowns, Kulick & Morgan, 1991). Jones (2009) argues that such facilitative feedback (Black & William, 1998; Schute, 2007) is particularly important for 'lower achieving' students as the focus is moved away from the negative aspects of their work. Facilitative feedback was given on this module via a feedback checklist that indicated areas for improvement, or areas of merit, and contained facilitative links on how to improve on issues raised (e.g. to referencing styles or critical analysis). Further general comments were also provided.

Despite formative feedback opportunities being provided not all students may take advantage or benefit from these (Schute, 2007; Smith & Gorard, 2005). Crisp (2007) notes that formative feedback is often only obtained by a student *after* the module in question has been completed. Whilst the opportunity to engage in formative feedback was entirely optional on this module, the patchwork text assessment encourages students to attend to feedback throughout the module. Whether students address the feedback provided is of course another matter. Although some students do value feedback and do take this into account regardless for others the focus is only on the mark attained (Smith & Gorard, 2005). Here, feedback may only be attended to if

the student is motivated to achieve a better grade than the one gained. Given this, providing feedback can often feel like a thankless task for academic staff especially when no improvement is seen as a result of previous feedback (Crisp, 2007).

The provision of formative feedback by academic staff can be extremely resource intensive (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011). On this module it was decided to use a variety of approaches. In semester one module staff provided feedback on patches one and two via the aforementioned feedback checklist. In semester two the onus on feedback became more student led; patch three used peer feedback and patch four used self-assessment, both via the checklists. It was felt that by semester two students had sufficient experience of the patches and the feedback process to engage in and benefit from these alternate approaches to feedback. It was also deemed valuable to their learning experience. As Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue, developing the ability to assess and critique one's own and others' work is one of the keys to self-regulated learning and sustainable assessment.

#### ***Patch 5: Evaluating the feedback process***

Throughout the implementation of the patchwork text assessment, the focus was on the utility of the feedback process. The method and results of evaluating this process are reported below.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

Participants were 121 students enrolled in a second-year social psychology module. This was a core module for undergraduate psychology students on their BPS-accredited course.

#### ***Design***

A between-subjects design was used to determine the effect of feedback upon grades; the grades awarded for the patches of those

students who demonstrated engagement with feedback were compared with those who had not. The University of Wolverhampton grading scheme ranges from A16 to F0, with D5 being a pass. Grades A, B, C and D equate to first class, upper second, lower second and third class grades respectively. For purposes of analysis, the numerical value of grades are used (A grade=values 16–14; B grade=values 13–11; C grade=values 10–8; D grade=values 7–5; fail=values 4–0).

In their summative submission students indicated how they had amended work in the light of feedback; engagement with feedback was established according to the presence or absence of a feedback statement. Quantitative and qualitative descriptive data was also used to ascertain students' perceptions of feedback.

#### ***Materials and procedure***

Throughout the year the module leader kept records of which students submitted patches for formative feedback. These records were accessed at the end of the year and compared to assessment data regarding the grading for the patches assessment. The grades attained on the reflective portfolio were not included in the analysis.

At the end of the module, some students (N=29) also completed module evaluation forms which were based upon the National Student Survey and included four questions regarding feedback:

1. Feedback on my work has been prompt.
2. I have received detailed comments on my work.
3. Feedback has helped me clarify things I did not understand.
4. Feedback on my work has helped me improve my final submitted work.

Further qualitative comments were included on the module evaluation form. Those relating to feedback were extracted for inclusion in this study. Student comments collated throughout the module are also included.

## Findings

### *Did students use feedback?*

Out of the 121 students who completed the patches assessment, 50 (41 per cent) did not show engagement with feedback and 71 (59 per cent) did. There was a demonstrable difference in the assessment results between those who did and did not engage with feedback ( $t(119)=-4.31, p<.0005$ ). Students who showed engagement with feedback had higher grades ( $M=12.87, SD=2.37$ ) than those who did not show engagement with feedback ( $M=10.80, SD=2.91$ ). The difference here is equivalent to a high 2:1 classification for students who did use feedback and high 2:2 classification for students who did not use feedback.

### *Students views of the feedback process*

As can be seen from Table 1, a majority (86.21 per cent) of the students responding to the module evaluation agreed that feedback had been prompt. 79.31 per cent of students agreed that the feedback received contained detailed comments regarding their work and 75.86 per cent felt that this feedback had helped them clarify things they did not understand. 65.52 per cent agreed that the feedback received had helped them

to improve their work for the final submission.

The qualitative comments on the module evaluation indicated that student perceptions of the feedback process were incredibly positive overall.

*'The opportunity for formative feedback was a great feature of the module.'*

*'The use of feedback was great. As it has helped me improve my work.'*

*'Feedback was quick and detailed.'*

However, this positivity seemed to be limited to feedback provided from staff. The introduction of peer feedback was met with dismay from the students. The students became very possessive over their work (*'I don't want another student reading my work'*) and did not recognise the collaborative nature of the learning process (*'How can another student give me feedback?'*). These findings shall be discussed in the reflective commentary.

### *Reflective commentary*

The Learning Works programme offered an exciting opportunity to develop a new module structure and assessment strategy. In social psychology, a year-long module consisting of 12 teaching weeks spread out

**Table 1: Percentage of agreement on module evaluation questions regarding feedback.**

	Definitely Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Definitely Disagree
Feedback on my work has been prompt	48.28%	37.93%	13.79%	0.00%	3.45%
I have received detailed comments on my work	41.38%	37.93%	13.79%	6.90%	3.45%
Feedback has helped me clarify things I did not understand	41.38%	34.48%	17.24%	10.34%	0.00%
Feedback on my work has helped me improve my final submitted work	41.38%	24.14%	27.59%	6.90%	0.00%

over an academic year, the patchwork text assessment seemed an ideal way of maintaining student focus and motivation throughout the module.

The implementation of the patchwork text assessment met with varied success. The patches themselves were on the whole viewed positively by the students and allowed for their emerging knowledge to be applied:

*'The patch assessments have been a useful way of applying content of the lectures.'*

*'The patch assignments were really interesting and I enjoyed applying to real life scenarios and the varied activities.'*

The students also liked the 'safety net' that the patchwork process provided, with formative feedback allowing for amendments to be made to work prior to submission for summative, and thus graded, submissions. Students saw the feedback process as being prompt and useful. Thus, the timely formative feedback embedded in the patchwork approach did seem to afford students more confidence in their work (Jones, 2009).

It was heartening to see that almost 60 per cent of students engaged with the feedback that was provided to them. Whether it was engagement with feedback that actually led to the higher grades achieved by these students compared to the 40 per cent who did not engage with feedback cannot be answered, however. It may simply be the case that, although it is lower achieving students who stand to benefit most from formative feedback (Jones, 2009), it is only the students who are motivated to improve their work who attend to the feedback (Crisp, 2009; Smith & Gorrad, 2005) and these students may already be those who are higher achieving. Indeed, personal experience has shown that it is frequently the students who have achieved the higher grades on their work who seek further feedback on their work during staff office hours rather than those who achieve lower grades, unless this lower grade is an exception to the norm in their academic record. Further analysis examining individual student records regarding their academic achieve-

ment on other modules would need to be conducted to establish whether feedback did help students to achieve higher grades than usual on this module or whether they were already higher achieving. Preliminary findings indicate that the latter may be the case: students who used feedback on the social psychology module achieved similar grades on another second year, year-long module not using patchwork assessment, as did students who did not use feedback on the social psychology module (all  $p > .005$ ). However it still may be the case that feedback provided on the comparison module played a part in the students' performance there. Nevertheless, the percentage of students who reported that feedback had helped them improve their work on the social psychology module considered in this paper was similar to the percentage of students who attended to the feedback. This would indicate that some of the students did see their work as being improved by the facilitative nature of the feedback provided.

Formative feedback was also advantageous in that it removed the focus from grade attainment to feedback. It has already been established that for some students it is only the grade that is important (Smith & Gorard, 2005) and thus feedback is ignored or disregarded. The formative feedback gave no indication of grades and hence tentative assumptions can, therefore, be made that it was only those who were motivated to improve their work who did attend to the feedback. However, even amongst motivated students it proved difficult to fully shift their thinking from a grade focus to a feedback focus. Comments received both during the course of the feedback process and via the module evaluation forms indicated that an indicative grade was desirable on the formative work. This did mean that clarification of the role of the formative feedback process was needed with the argument about grade focus, whereby feedback is ignored when grades are provided, being presented to students.

Despite the positive view that a majority of students took to the feedback process it must be noted that this view was generally limited to the feedback provided by the module team. As also found by Beaumont et al. (2011), on this module the students took a negative view of peer feedback, citing issues of trust, competency and plagiarism. Students, perhaps quite naturally, are concerned that their work may be plagiarised by others, although mechanisms are in place to prevent and deal with this should it arise. More importantly though it seems to be a lack of understanding of the process, purpose and role of feedback that is key here. The feedback process employed on this module was designed to gradually encourage students to become more self-regulated learners (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), being able to recognise strengths and weaknesses in the patches of other students and in turn learning more about their own patches (Race, 2001; Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012). Again, in relation to peer assessment the grade focus of feedback arose. Some students asked how other students could 'mark' their work. It would seem that students have difficulty differentiating between marking and feedback. Whilst of course marked work should contain accompanying feedback, not all feedback is provided in the context of marks. Such issues seem to be universal with students having very different views as to what constitutes feedback, and more specifically, quality feedback, (Beaumont et al., 2011; Schute, 2007).

Whilst it would seem that in terms of feedback, students only value this when it is tutor provided, this is often unsustainable in terms of resources (Beaumont et al., 2011; Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012). This was certainly the experience on this module. The idea behind the patchwork assessment process was sound; it provided a clear way of maintaining student motivation over a stretched out module and was a very student-centred approach. But the reality for the module staff was one of an overwhelming burden of a constant feedback cycle; no sooner had

feedback been provided on one patch it was nearing time to provide feedback on the next.

A more effective strategy is needed to make the formative feedback process on patchwork text assessment manageable. A larger module team or incorporation of the feedback process into the personal tutoring system would be one solution, although as suggested previously resources may not allow this option. In the absence of this the use of peer assessment remains the obvious solution, especially given the view that this can be a valuable learning experience for students (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Liu & Carless, 2006) and is a frequently used approach to the provision of feedback in patchwork text assessment (Winter, 2003). However, as Beaumont et al. (2011) acknowledge, teaching students how to perform peer assessment effectively can be a major challenge, one that needs incorporating into module design. Students are used to receiving tutor-based feedback, although they do not always understand or use this (Crisp, 2007; Schute, 2007; Smith & Gorard, 2005), but they are much less used to giving and receiving peer feedback. For this to be successful careful planning is therefore required prior to the commencement of the module with regards to the approach taken to peer feedback. Some suggestions for the implementation of a more successful strategy of peer feedback are proposed.

Firstly, anonymous and multiple peer feedback is beneficial. For instance, Vickerman (2009) advocates having more than one student providing feedback on work. This is advantageous as it allows students to gain more from the learning experience as they are able to make more meaningful comparisons across the work of their peers and to gain different perspectives on their own work. Such approaches can alleviate student concerns about the quality of the feedback being received (Orsmond, 2006).

Clear guidelines also need to be established in terms of how feedback should be given and what is expected here, with the

provision of exemplar material being useful (Beaumont et al., 2011). Whilst a guided approach was taken to peer feedback on the module under discussion, via the use of feedback checklists, this was perhaps undermined by the use of tutor based feedback prior to this. Therefore a single approach to formative feedback should be utilised to establish clear expectations regarding formative feedback from the start of the module. Embedding peer feedback more firmly into the module and building familiarity with feedback via structured tasks can help foster the collaborative nature of the process and can create the much needed environment of trust such an approach relies upon (Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner & Strijbos, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

In principle the ethos of patchwork text assessment is extremely worthy and it is of no doubt that the process of feedback embedded within this has the potential to be of incredible benefit to students, although it is acknowledged that the feedback process is not restricted to this type of assessment; indeed it may be that the extensive feedback approach used here was the key to success for some students rather than the patchwork assessment approach itself. Nevertheless, for patchwork text assessment and extensive

formative feedback to work, for staff and students alike, the assessment strategy and all of its components need to be manageable. On a core undergraduate module with over 100 students, patchwork text assessment may not be the most suitable approach, although strategies to make this more manageable have been proposed. However, this experience has indicated to us that patchwork text assessment is an approach suited to small, motivated, and coherent groups of students where workload of both staff and students can be more easily managed and the collaborative nature of the assessment more fully fostered with peer trust being established early on.

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