

Helping students understand essay marking criteria and feedback

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to look at the effectiveness of combining a variety of teaching and learning methods in an attempt to facilitate students' understanding of assessment criteria. Fifty-three psychology students were asked to complete the mismatch exercise (Norton et al., 2002), and a booklet entitled Your Assignment results and how to improve them (Neville, 2005). In addition, students constructed an essay feedback sheet to be used as part of the formative assessment for a developmental psychology course. Results showed significant disagreement between students and lecturers on the mismatch exercise; and large variability in student marking of sample essays. Overall, students reported that they found the exercises stimulating and engaging. The findings of the present paper suggest that engaging students in the assessment process prior to the construction and submission of assignments may result in motivated, self-regulating students with a clear understanding of assessment criteria.

RECENTLY THERE HAS been a great deal of research and commentary on different forms of assessment (e.g. Newstead, 2002; Edgerton & McKechnie, 2002; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). However, even though new forms of assessment have been introduced, essay writing remains a common feature in many psychology undergraduate programmes. There is little doubt that writing and marking essays is a time-consuming process both for students and lecturers, and this is an important issue given increasing student numbers and widening participation within HE. Norton, Brunas-Wagstaff & Lockley (1999) report that third-year psychology students spend an average of 29 hours in preparing an essay for submission. Likewise, psychology lecturers spend anything from 15 to 45 minutes in marking first-year essays (Norton, 1990).

The inclusion of essay writing in degree programmes appears to be beneficial to students' success. Students tend to perform significantly better in coursework essays than they do in timed, unseen exams (Bridges *et al.*, 2002; Murdan, 2005) and are less likely to fail modules that are assessed by written coursework only (Gibbs and Lucas, 1997). However, this level of success cannot be gen-

eralised to all students. Better quality essays have been associated with those students who possess a good understanding of the assessment criteria (Harrington *et al.*, 2003) but many students now enter university with very little understanding of what is required of them when writing an essay (Hartley & Chesworth, 2000) putting them at a clear disadvantage. If institutions continue to assess learning through written essays, then students should be provided with the opportunity to learn essay writing skills and to practice them within their degree programme as such skills cannot be gained from descriptions of criteria alone (Harrington & Elander, 2003). This is especially relevant given widening participation within Higher Education. Students come from diverse educational backgrounds (O'Connor, 2003; Coogan & Pawson, 2006), and one could argue that we are failing students if we make the assumption that they all enter university with the necessary skills required to write good essays.

The constructivist approach to learning and teaching places emphasis on the student as an active construer of his/her own knowledge (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Nicol, 1997). Within higher education a central argument

under this approach is that feedback should be viewed as a means of empowering students as self-regulated learners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Although students may monitor their learning by the achievement of internally set goals, students can also assess their progress externally by comparing their performance to specific targets and criteria, and the performance of other students. The importance of external goals is recognised by tutors as they dedicate 'considerable time and intellectual effort to devising assessment criteria' (Woolfe, 2003, p. 479). However, assessment criteria is only beneficial to students if they can understand the criteria and are able to utilise them to translate received feedback into action. Therefore for students to become self-regulated learners, they should be given the opportunity to gain knowledge of marking criteria through tutor-led interventions (Woolfe, 2003; Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003).

Although there is evidence that students engage in self-directed learning during the production of assignments, the literature regarding students' engagement in reflection upon receipt of their marks is rather mixed. Gibbs and colleagues have suggested that most Open University students are interested only in their marks, not the tutor's feedback (Gibbs, Holmes & Segal, 2002). Contrary to the findings of Biggs (1999), research by Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002); & Hyland (2000) found that students did read tutor's comments, although to varying degrees.

The inconsistency in the literature regarding whether or not students read lecturers' comments may result from variability in one or many factors (e.g. rapidity of feedback, lecturer's handwriting, student motivation, etc.). However, there is broad agreement that students can only make use of feedback comments if they: (a) are able to read the comments (b) understand and internalise the comments and (c) are able to map the comments (either explicitly or intuitively) onto previous and future

pieces of work (Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000). Norton *et al.* (2002) suggested that students are often passive towards feedback because they receive it towards the end of a module when it appears to mean very little to them in the way of progress. If students are active construers and mediators of meaning, rather than passive recipients of information, then they have to engage with feedback in a meaningful way (e.g. Boud, 2000; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001) so that it can be used to improve performance in future assignments. Rust, Price & O'Donovan (2003) showed that when students are given the opportunity to use and develop an understanding of assessment, they can transfer their understanding across modules and demonstrate significant improvements in essay writing up to a year following intervention.

An additional obstacle for students is that they often fail to understand the academic discourse used in assessment criteria and feedback (Hounsell, 1987; Crème & Lea, 1997; Hounsell, 1987; Chanock, 2000). In an attempt to facilitate students' understanding of essay marking criteria Norton *et al.* (2002) constructed an Essay Feedback Checklist (EFC). The EFC is a tool that consists of nine generic criteria (e.g. 'Addressed the question throughout the essay') for which students were asked to provide, before submitting their essay, a confidence rating indicating whether they felt they had met each of the criteria. During the marking process tutors also completed an EFC for each student, as well as giving an overall mark. Overall, Norton *et al.* (2002) found that this was an effective tool in helping students gain understanding of assessment criteria.

However, Norton *et al.* (2002) noted that there were a number of significant mismatches between final year psychology students' and tutors' ratings on assessment criteria. The authors suggest that this may indicate that the written explanations of the assessment criteria may have a limited effect on student understanding. This suggestion is

supported by Higgins *et al.* (2002) who found that, without discussion, only 33 per cent of students in their sample claimed to understand the assessment criteria.

Recently, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have derived, from the literature on formative assessment and a self-regulation model originally published by Butler and Winne (1995), seven feedback principles that support and develop self-regulation in students. These authors suggest that good feedback practice (a) helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards); (b) facilitates the development of assessment in learning; (c) delivers high quality information to students about their learning; (d) encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning; (e) encourages positive and motivational beliefs and self-esteem; (f) provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; and (g) provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

The present study

The present research attempted to structure a programme driven to assist students' understanding of the essay assessment of a third-year psychology course. The issue of helping to clarify what good performance is was explicitly addressed in the essay marking exercise booklet *Your Assignment results and how to improve them* (Neville, 2005) and through student construction of the essay feedback sheet. The facilitation of self-assessment in learning was covered within Neville's (2005) booklet by requiring students to reflect upon their previous work. The entire package offered high quality information to students using a variety of different teaching methodologies. Furthermore, the programme encouraged dialogue between peers as well as encouraging dialogue between the lecturer and the students. Again, a primary objective of the programme was to motivate students and support them in closing the gap between current and desired performance. Finally, a

focus group examining the construction and implementation of the essay feedback sheet was included to provide information to teachers.

Given the overwhelming evidence documenting the various difficulties that students encounter in understanding essay marking criteria and feedback it was hoped that by providing them with a series of exercises, including model essays, the mismatch exercise (Norton, 2002), and the Neville (2005) booklet, they would become actively engaged in the process and hence develop a greater understanding of both essay marking criteria and effective use of feedback. To meet this end, the current programme employed a variety of different methodologies; group discussion, reflective practice and peer assessment. In addition, the current research addressed the following questions:

1. Did students find the mismatch exercise useful?
2. Did students find *Your Assignment results and how to improve them* beneficial?
3. Did students feel that they gained a greater understanding of the language used in academic discourse?
4. What aspects of the research did students feel should be offered to other psychology students?
5. What was the student opinion on constructing their own essay feedback sheet based on a module's learning outcomes?

In order to investigate the above questions it was decided to carry out a study with a cohort of third-year psychology students taking an optional module in developmental psychology. The programme, designed to facilitate students' understanding of marking criteria, was intentionally embedded within this module rather than running the programme as a separate process. As the current research was conducted in discrete stages the method and results section of each stage of the study are presented individually.

Students (N = 53)		Lecturers (N = 5)	
Criterion	Rank	Criterion	Rank
Answer the question	1st	Answer the question	1st
Relevant information	2nd	Understanding	2nd
Argument	3rd	Argument	3rd
Structure/organisation	4th	Relevant information	4th
Understanding	5th	Evaluation	5th
Evaluation	6th	Content/knowledge	6th
Content/knowledge	7th	Structure/organisation	7th
Wide reading	8th	Presentation/style	8th
Presentation/style	9th	Wide reading	9th
English/spelling	10th	English/spelling	10th

Table 1: A table showing the most frequently occurring rank for each criterion as a factor of participant group in the mismatch exercise.

STAGE 1

1.1 Method

1.1.1 Participants

All of the 53 final-year psychology students studying on an optional module titled *Children’s understanding of the world around them* elected to take part in the research study. The assessment for this option consisted of a six-page, single-spaced essay, and the assignment was worth 100 per cent of the overall mark for this option. All students were told that although participation in the evaluation phase of the research was voluntary, they were expected to attend workshop sessions. Informed consent was obtained for those students participating in the evaluation phase of the research. Furthermore, students were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time. All students were notified that the findings of the current research project would be placed on Blackboard (an eLearning Portal) and an e-mail notifying students of when the findings were available was sent to all students regardless of whether or not they elected to take part in the evaluation phase of the study. Five psychology lecturers (mean age = 38:9, range 31:0 – 60:0; 3 females and

2 males) presently teaching on the undergraduate psychology programme also participated in the mismatch exercise. All lecturers had at least five years’ teaching experience (i.e. 5 years; 6 years; 11 years; 15 years and 22 years) and all had experience of teaching on a variety of psychology modules using various forms of assessment.

1.1.2 Procedure

Students attended three workshops on essay writing skills for four weeks prior to the submission deadline of their assignment. In the first workshop students were presented with the ‘Mismatch exercise’ (Norton *et al.*, 2002). This exercise required students to consider ten criteria (as shown in Table 1), and to rank them in the order of the importance that they thought their lecturer would put them. Students initially carried out this exercise individually before working in groups of three or four. Students discussed their rankings within groups and were asked to reach a consensus regarding the ranking of the criteria. This exercise was also carried out individually by five lecturers within the Psychology Department at Northumbria University. Following the small group exer-

N = 53 Essay Title	Class mark								
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
	2:2	2:2	2:2	2:1	2:1	2:1	1st	1st	1st
Essay A (low 2:2)	7%	65%	18%	10%					
Essay B (middle 2:1)	10%		15%	10%	20%	30%	15%		
Essay C (high 1 st)			12%	16%	45%	12%	15%		

Table 2: A table showing the percentage of students selecting class marks for three sample essays.

cise, each group of students was invited to read out their group rankings to the other student groups. Both individual rankings and group rankings were recorded.

1.2 Results

Analyses of individual data showed a significant difference between students' and lecturers' rankings for the following items: understanding, Mann-Whitney $U = 7.50$, $p < 0.001$; relevant information, Mann-Whitney $U = 4.0$, $p < 0.001$; evaluation, Mann-Whitney $U = 52.5$, $p < 0.05$; structure/organisation, Mann-Whitney $U = 37.0$, $p < 0.01$; presentation/style, Mann-Whitney $U = 45.5$, $p < 0.01$; wide reading, Mann-Whitney $U = 68.5$, $p < 0.05$. No further comparisons were significant.

Given the nature of the study it was also decided to record the most frequently occurring rank for each of the criteria. The data were collapsed across groups for both students and lecturers. A summary of these data can be seen in Table 1.

Overall the results of the present study closely mimic those reported in Norton (1990) and Norton *et al.* (2002). While both students and lecturers rank answering the question as the most important criterion, it is clear (see table 2) that lecturers emphasise the importance of a deep approach (i.e. understanding) and students tend to focus on a surface approach (i.e. relevant information).

STAGE 2

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Procedure

After having discussed the relative impor-

tance of the criteria used by Norton *et al.* (2002) each student was asked to mark three sample essays using the same criteria as in the mismatch exercise. All the essays were developmental psychology essays that addressed topics already covered within the course the students were taking. The essays had been written by the course lecturer and had been independently judged by one internal and two external lecturers as being representative of the following grades; Essay A (low 2:2), Essay B (medium 2:1), and Essay C (high 1st). Students were free to use either dichotomous or analytic scales, and were asked to produce a decision regarding the overall class mark of each essay using their chosen scale. Students could either produce a percentage score or alternatively select an overall class. However, in the case of producing an overall class mark, students were asked to state whether essays were at the low, medium, or high range of each class (i.e. a low 2:2, or a high 2:1). Finally, students were asked to write two positive and two negative comments about each essay.

Following data collection students were provided with the marks awarded by lecturers for each essay. Students were also provided with a summary of lecturers' marks and comments for each of the criterion used in assessment. One week later, students attended a seminar in which the findings of this exercise were discussed.

2.2 Results

The data were collated and the percentage of students selecting each grade was calculated. Perhaps the most interesting finding in this

phase of the study regards the variability in the grades awarded for each essay. As clearly shown in Table 2, most students awarded a medium 2:2 class mark to Essay A (low 2:2), although 18 per cent of students awarded the essay a high 2:2 and 10 per cent of students awarded the essay a middle 2:1. However, despite this variability, the majority of students awarded Essay A, a 2:2 class mark. The marking for Essays B and C were considerably more varied. For essay B (low 2:1) the marks ranged from high 2:2 to middle 1st. It is notable that 30 per cent of students awarded Essay B a low first class mark; while 45 per cent of students awarded Essay C (high 1st) a medium 2:1. Inspection of Table 2, clearly demonstrates that whilst most students were able to correctly identify the weakest essay (Essay A) many students were not able to clearly distinguish between Essay B and Essay C. For essay A (low 2:2) and Essay B (middle 2:1) the majority of students tended to be slightly generous in their marking. In contrast, the reverse pattern is shown for Essay C, with the majority of students showing a tendency to award a lower mark compared to independent assessors.

Inspection of the qualitative data showed that most students produced at least one generic feedback comment for each essay. For Essay A and Essay B most students referred to the fact that the author had attempted to answer the question. Initially this was rather encouraging, especially as 'answering the question' was rated as the most important criterion by both lecturers and students on the mismatch exercise. Hence, we were particularly interested to see if any students made reference to the level of understanding shown by the authors in any of the essays; given that 'understanding' was rated as the second most important criterion by lecturers and only the fifth most important criterion by students. Unfortunately, a thorough search through all the feedback comments revealed that only eight out of the fifty three students taking part in this exercise commented on the author's level of understanding; and all these comments were

directed to Essay A (the low 2:2 essay). Overall these comments tended to be negative; for example, 'The student does not really understand all the points he is making', 'Some of the things stated don't appear to be correct,' and 'The student seems rather confused.' The other main feedback comment produced for Essay A was 'A good attempt' or 'A good try'.

Turning attention to Essay C (high 1st class), the overwhelming comment was that 'the author is stating his/her own opinion'. Moreover, many students were reluctant to reward the author of the 1st class essay for adopting a particular stance following critical evaluation throughout the text. Students thought that by favouring a particular stance, based on empirical evidence, that the author was expressing his/her own view. Furthermore, the majority of students taking part in this exercise thought that the author had *not* answered the question, as shown by the following comments: 'Needs to focus on the question', 'Simply saying their own thing, not answering the question set'. These qualitative comments are reflected in the fact that many students (85%) judged this essay not to be worthy of a 1st class mark.

Conversely, 45 per cent students awarded the author of Essay B (the essay that had been previously assessed by lecturers as being representative of a middle 2:1 mark) with a 1st class mark on the basis that the author remained very neutral in the debate, answered the question, and cited the relevant studies; as demonstrated by comments such as 'The author produced a balanced argument that answered the question', 'A good debate focussing on addressing the question, 'A thorough review of the literature'.

Overall, the qualitative data presented here suggest that student's judge 'Answering the question', 'Relevant information', and 'Argument' as most important marking criteria. These correspond to the students' rankings on the mismatch exercise (see Table1).

STAGE 3

3.1 Method

3.1 Procedure

In the final stage of the current research project students were asked to individually work through the booklet *Your assignment results and how to improve them*. Students were asked to reflect upon their own work, and think about what changes could be made to improve performance bearing in mind the previously completed exercises covered in this series of workshops. Finally, students were asked to construct an essay feedback sheet for the current module. They were told that this feedback sheet would be used by the lecturer to record both the mark and feedback for the essay assignment. For this exercise the following key criteria were provided: focus on topic, understanding, analysis, structure, use of evidence, style and presentation, and sources. These criteria were drawn from the learning outcomes of the current module. The lecturer demonstrated to students how these key criteria were determined from the module content. Construction of the feedback sheet was performed in groups of three or four and students were asked to reach a majority view regarding the structure, style and presentation of the feedback sheet. Following the construction of feedback, each group presented their feedback sheet in a poster format. To help students engage with the session, all students were asked to produce two positive and two negative comments about each feedback sheet. This information was handed to the authors of the poster. Finally, students voted for the feedback sheet they wished to be used for their essay feedback.

Two weeks after completing the final exercise students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of the five research questions with a space for students to write general comments about each exercise. Following receipt of their marked assignments a sample of students (N = 15), drawn randomly from the course population, were invited to

attend a focus group to discuss the research project.

3.2 Results

There was a clear consensus regarding the most popular feedback sheet (85 per cent student agreement). Discussion provided further evidence regarding students' choice. The following were deemed, by students, to be important.

Students wanted the feedback sheet to be broken down according to each criterion (e.g. answering the question, focus on the topic). Students also expressed a strong interest in receiving a mark or rating for each criterion. Second, for each criterion, students included words and phrases that they thought were particularly important to receive lecturers' feedback on. For example, under the criterion 'Focus on topic', students listed the following phrases: Question answered, relevant material used, essential issues covered, and originality. The inclusion of these comments was to ensure that the lecturer addressed specific issues by highlighting the appropriate comment and to ensure that students would not encounter any difficulty in reading the lecturer's handwriting. Finally, they stressed that not all criteria carried equal weight and constructed the feedback sheet with criteria appearing in a descending order of importance.

An analysis of the student questionnaire found 90 per cent of students found the 'mismatch exercise' (Norton, 2002) very useful. Students commented that, apart from comparing marks with other students, they had never really thought about the marking process. Other frequently occurring comments consisted of 'It was fun to mark other people's essays', and 'I had to really think about each criterion'. The remaining 10 per cent of students were neutral to the usefulness of the exercise. All students found the Neville (2005) booklet very useful. Frequently occurring comments were 'Wow that is just like me', 'I never really knew how to go about getting a better mark' and 'I found the whole thing really helpful'.

Overall, 73 per cent of students reported a greater understanding of the language used in academic discourse, with 27 per cent of students reporting little or no gain. Inspection of the qualitative data drawn from the focus group suggested that although students reported some gain on this factor, many students thought that it would take quite a long time to really assimilate their new found understanding. In addition, students reported that they enjoyed the entire experience and thought that all aspects of the research project should be offered to psychology students, although nearly all thought it should be offered earlier in the degree scheme.

Student opinion on constructing the essay feedback sheet was rather mixed; with the majority of students reporting the exercise as very difficult (76 per cent). However, even though students regarded the initial exercise as challenging, the majority reported that it had helped them focus on both the content and structure of their own essay (93 per cent).

One week after the receipt of feedback and marks, a focus group consisting of students ($N = 15$), one lecturer, and one teaching assistant met to discuss the effectiveness of the project. Overall students were very happy with the research project and the essay feedback that they received. They reported that the majority of students clearly understood the *meaning* of the lecturer's feedback, and realised how to apply that feedback to future work. However, many students expressed a wish to receive handwritten comments regarding issues raised by the lecturer. In particular students wanted to receive commentary relating to the two 'best' aspects and the two worst aspects of their essays.

Discussion

The findings of the current research suggest that the learning and teaching exercises employed in the current piece of research were effective in facilitating students' understanding of marking criteria. The cur-

rent methodology employed a variety of existing tools, and integrated them into a learning programme that ultimately required students to produce an essay feedback sheet. Within the course of the programme students had the opportunity to engage in reflective practice, group activities, marking exercises, and the construction of both a poster and a feedback sheet. This approach allowed students to play a central role in the learning programme and thus empower students as self-regulated learners (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002) whilst providing the opportunity to discuss issues both within small groups and with a lecturer (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001).

In Stage 1 of the project, students completed the mismatch exercise (Norton *et al.*, 2002). From this task, major significant differences were identified between students and lecturers ratings of understanding (a deep approach to learning) and relevant information (a surface approach to learning). Lecturers emphasised the importance of the deep approach whereas students tended to favour a surface approach. These findings lend support to Rust, Price & O'Donovan's (2003) claim that students have difficulty in applying 'invisible criteria' (pp 159) related to deep learning processes. More importantly, the current findings map on to the results of an earlier study by Norton (1990) who found that first year students also tend to emphasise the importance of content whereas tutors believe that argument is more important. This crucial mismatch between lecturers and third year psychology students' ratings is particularly interesting and raises a number of specific questions, for example, 'Why are third year students still showing evidence of a surface approach to learning?' 'What kind of intervention is required for students to develop an understanding of marking criteria?'

In the present study, the rankings assigned by lecturers and students differed on some important criterion; namely, structure and organisation, relevant information and understanding. This suggests that students adopt a surface approach to writing essays

whilst lecturers are seeking evidence of deep learning approaches as demonstrated through understanding. Students understanding of criterion in terms of importance must be underpinned by an *understanding* of why some criteria are deemed as more important than others. Furthermore, students have to internalise this understanding in order to utilise this knowledge in the production and self-assessment of their own work and the work of others. The findings of Stage 2 showed that students found the process of utilising the assessment criteria from the mismatch exercise to mark sample essays very difficult, even though they had previously discussed the assessment criterion used in the 'mismatch exercise'. This is hardly surprising when one considers the work of Newstead (1996) who found that experienced external examiners demonstrate huge variability in marking a single essay. At Stage 2 of the current study most groups entered a lively debate regarding the exact meaning of these criteria, the relative importance of these criteria, and how to effectively judge the extent to which an essay had met these criteria. This stage of the programme proved very effective in requiring students to actually think both about the meaning of these criteria and how to actively use these criteria in the marking of essays. In actually using their marking criteria to mark the sample essays, the results clearly demonstrate that students were evidently able to identify one essay as belonging to the 2:2 class both by the class mark awarded and the feedback comments. However, students experienced far greater difficulty in distinguishing between the 2:1 and the 1st class essay. Many students felt that an author should not favour a particular view based on the evidence discussed. Rather, an author should simply present a balanced evaluation of the current literature. Further discussion revealed that favouring one view over another would simply amount to an expression of their own opinion. Students frequently commented upon how the author of Essay C (1st Class essay) had expressed his/her own views

and opinions. In reality the author of the essay had argued a particular stance and backed up their argument with a comprehensive evaluation of the literature in which alternative views were also discussed.

Overall, the findings of the first two stages suggest the programme was effective in meeting some of the seven principles of good feedback practice as suggested by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). First, the mismatch exercise (Norton *et al.*, 2002) helped students to identify the relative importance of assessment criteria. Second, by comparing the rankings of students and lecturers it helped students to clarify lecturers' expectations. This exercise also encouraged dialogue between students and the lecturer and provided useful information to the lecturer both on how final year psychology students judged the relative importance of marking criteria, and their understanding of what these criteria actually meant.

However, while the findings of these first two stages of the project are interesting they are also rather worrying. The results are worrying in that most of the third year psychology students used in the current study freely admitted that they were unsure about the actual meaning of the assessment criteria and thus unsure of exactly how to meet these criteria in a given piece of work. Through discussion many students revealed a basic understanding of the assessment criteria (i.e. they knew that answering the question was important), but often had difficulty in putting this understanding into practice when constructing a piece of work themselves, or when marking other people's work. Hence, the findings of this study suggest that actively engaging students in a process aimed at facilitating their knowledge and understanding of marking criteria may not always be sufficient to ensure that students are able to apply this knowledge to a subsequent piece of work; even when there is an explicit link between the pieces of work (but see Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003).

Finally, student groups were asked to construct an essay feedback sheet for the

module 'Children's understanding of the world around them'. Comments arising both from the questionnaire and the focus group revealed that students really enjoyed this stage of the project. This was mainly driven by the fact that students saw this part of the project as a chance to apply their knowledge and understanding to a product that would be used as part of their assessment process. Following the low level of confidence expressed in employing the criteria from the mismatch exercise (Norton *et al.*, 2002) to the marking of the sample essays, students expressed a relatively high level of confidence during this stage of the process, and this level of confidence was demonstrated in the quality of the work produced in terms of constructed feedback sheets. Students also expressed a high level of enthusiasm for improving the feedback sheet following receipt of their marks. Students attending the focus group reported that the majority of students taking part in the study commented on the effectiveness of the sheet. Many students wanted the lecturer to write additional comments for each section. In particular, where the comments were less favourable, they wanted suggestions about how to address issues raised by the lecturer. They also wanted overall comment about the entire assignment with reference to the best and worst parts of the assignment. The fact that many students suggested modifications to the feedback sheet is encouraging and shows a high level of involvement with the programme (but see Gibbs, Holmes and Segal, 2002).

In conclusion the findings of the current study clearly suggest that employing a learning programme that engages student participation through a series of varied exercises can enhance self-regulated learning. Overall students produced high quality essays with a relatively high number of First Class marks. However, the programme suffered from some shortcomings and limitations; namely, a control group was not specified for comparison so it was not possible to ascertain whether the positive results of the study

were specific to the cohort under investigation. In terms of delivery of the actual programme, it was not run until students were in their final year of study and many students expressed the view that they would have benefited from such a programme earlier in their degree scheme. Thirdly, the programme was only available to students enrolled on a final year developmental psychology option rather than a core module and given the small proportion of essay based assessment within the third year we were not able to investigate whether students were able to transfer their learning to other modules. Finally, the programme was run over an intensive three week period. One possibility is that the relatively short time course of the study did not provide students with enough time to assimilate the information presented. Hence, for third year students we are currently, in the process of extending the present series of workshops to run over a twelve week period. The specific issue of providing students with more learning opportunities relating to both essay writing and assessment skills earlier in their degree scheme has been addressed by three or four members of staff by producing an essay writing and assessment programme that spans all three years of the undergraduate degree scheme.

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