Improved TMA feedback through enhanced Marking Guides

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Executive Summary

There is agreement that student experiences in the first year at university are crucial to motivation and retention and that effective feedback must play a key part in those experiences. At the Open University (OU) the style and nature of feedback is usually determined by centrally-produced, standardised Marking Guides distributed to all tutors on a module. This Project investigated the tutors’ attitudes towards assignment feedback and how the Marking Guides influence that feedback on a Level 1 Technology module; T175 Networked Living. Additionally a thematic analysis of over 10 000 messages posted to the tutors’ discussion forum was carried out. And finally the Marking Guides themselves were analysed for the type of feedback comment they are most likely to support.

The survey indicated that most tutors are providing retrospective feedback relating to the assignment just completed with a strong focus on the actual marks achieved. But this contrasted with their aspiration to provide feedback that would enable students to close the gap between actual and ideal performance in future work.

Respondents also stated that they repeat elements of their feedback up to three times in a number of different places. The Marking Guide analysis showed that the main focus of the advice to tutors is once again retrospective with the distribution of marks sometimes detailed to a granularity of 1%.
Aims and scope

Aims

The main aims of the Project were:

1. To investigate ways of constructing TMA marking guides for Level 1 courses in order to facilitate the tutor in providing feedback comments (both retrospective and future-altering), at a variety of depths, in ways that students find most useful.

2. To investigate ways of constructing TMA questions in new topic assessment areas in order to facilitate the tutor in providing feedback comments (both retrospective and future-altering), at a variety of depths, in ways that students find most useful.

Specific goals

The goals of the Project represent the path towards the Aims given above. They were to

1. carry out a literature survey;

2. construct a survey on the use of current Marking Guides and survey all current T175 tutors;

3. analyse the survey results in terms of the aims;

4. From the analysis, to evolve a conceptual framework for discussing assignment feedback;

5. publish the results as a means of provoking discussion, feedback and suggestions;

6. analyse existing marking schemes in terms of Aim 1 - but acknowledging that the results would almost certainly have implications for Aim 2;

7. form an initial assessment of the degree to which the structure of TMAs, and the specific questions contained in them, would affected by the need for better feedback;

8. To present initial findings from the analysis in (6), again in order to stimulate discussion and raise awareness;

9. To move towards publication of this analysis.
Activities

Overall approach

Although the end product of this project (provision of better feedback on assignments) is aimed at students, the initial focus was on Marking Guides, which are used by tutors. Having conducted a literature review, it became apparent that there had been very little research into the views and practices of lecturers concerning feedback on assignments, in either traditional or distance HE, and no data was found specifically relating to OU tutors. The main steps were therefore to

- explore current tutor practice by means of telephone interviews, a survey and thematic analysis of discussion forum messages;
- develop a conceptual framework of feedback;
- analyse current Marking Guides;
- develop new Marking Guide templates

Planned activities

The planned activities can be divided into four phases.

Phase 1

This initial phase consisted of a literature review covering both work around feedback and also assessment. Additionally a fact finding mission was carried out within the OU to find out what other research had been done or was being done in the area of assessment and feedback.

Phase 2

The next phase was to set up the survey. Initial telephone interviews were conducted with 3 T175 tutors (2 established and one new) in order to inform the survey questions. Then the survey was drafted and trial runs conducted with 3 tutors. The survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and the details circulated to all 140 current T175 tutors by email.

Phase 3

Here the survey responses were collated, analysed and the results presented in publications.
Phase 4

A preliminary analysis of T175 Marking Guides was undertaken

Future work

This should comprise a complete analysis of T175 Marking Guides; a comparative analysis of other Level 1 Marking Guides; the development of new Marking Guide templates; and the publication and dissemination of Phase 4 and future work.

Data and evidence gathered

The following data and evidence was gathered during the course of the project:

- Relevant publications found in literature review.
- Relevant publications from conferences attended, internal OU resources and other CETL publications
- Transcripts of three telephone interviews
- Responses of T175 tutors to survey on TMA feedback provision and Marking Guide use. 63 out of 140 current tutors responded fully and a further 7 partially.
- Thematic analysis of over 10 000 messages posted on the T175 tutors’ discussion forum
- Current Marking Guides from courses T175, M150, (M366, T324, T320)
Findings

Assignment Feedback

In order to facilitate discussion of feedback, a four-category taxonomy was developed. By combining classifications due to Brown and Glover (2006) and Walker (2009), feedback comments were divided into retrospective-on-content; future-altering-on-content; retrospective-on-skills; and future-altering-on-skills as illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: A possible taxonomy of feedback](image)

Many commentators have also warned of the danger of marking using an ‘ideal minus’ model which focuses on how far below an ideal standard a student has fallen, rather than a ‘threshold plus’ model, which centres on student success and possibilities for building on it (Nicol 2008). In the same paper Nicol comments that feedback should ‘… encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem’.

The characteristics necessary for feedback to be effective have been extensively discussed, notably by Nicol in his seven principles of good feedback practice (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and in Gibbs’ analysis of conditions under which feedback supports learning (Gibbs 2004).
These models of marking and feedback were the building blocks upon which the survey questions and Marking Guides analysis were based, in order to attempt to establish whether these fundamental principles and conditions are being successfully deployed in the assessment and marking regime of T175.

**Survey results**

**The tutors**

Survey results revealed that of the respondents:

- 91% had been an OU tutor for five years or more,
- 29% with more than 10 years experience and
- over 85% had worked on four or more presentations of T175.

This wealth of experience of Technology teaching of Level 1 students and of distance education in general provides for a rich exchange of knowledge and ideas, and this was very evident in the analysis of the forum messages. The feedback submitted may thus largely depend on styles derived from the tutors’ own backgrounds, from their initial training, as well as from the guidance presented in the MGs. However, theories of student learning have moved on in the last ten years.

**Tutors’ methods**

Survey responses indicated that:

- 88% download the MG within the two weeks prior to the TMA submission date;
- 64% read the document one week or less before they start marking;
- More than half (54%) of the tutors reported that they include a supplementary document along with the commented student’s script and the summary PT3;
- Of these, 60% use a standardised template that they fill in for each student;
- Others use a variety of methods, including drawing on a bank of comments from previous presentations and/or from a bank built up during earlier marking of each TMA.

It is fairly clear, then, that tutors do not view the document as a source of information for future-altering feedback during the pre-assignment study phase, but as a short-term tool for retrospective assessment of the TMA in hand. The course team appear to be losing an
opportunity to communicate more general, future-altering guidance on the formative aspects of the TMA, and of the whole module.

A few other conclusions may be drawn from tutors’ replies:

- The use of templates may encourage tutors to provide rather standardised comments.
- For weaker students, templates may entail a long table of negative comment, as the tutor fills in each available space with a criticism.
- Inclusion of an additional document may lead to confusion on the part of the student as to where to find feedback. Students are likely to find too much feedback, in too many places, confusing and demotivating. There was, however, some recognition of this in tutors’ comments:
  - Tutors reported that the templates are frequently focussed on expected content and the part mark achieved, a clear case of ‘ideal minus’ feedback, promoting too strong an emphasis on performance, as measured purely by marks.

**Tutors’ feedback comments**

When asked about their feedback comments tutors responded as follows:

- Only 6% of tutors thought that their ‘homemade’ additional document (often a template) was the feedback component most likely to help the student improve next time;
- All bar one tutor reported that they provide comments about the content of students’ answers, either on the script, or on both the script and the PT3, or even on these two and an additional document;
- 35% of respondents admitted to duplication or even triplication of the same feedback;
- 85% of tutors stated that they include part marks in their feedback, in addition to the part marks information they insert into the PT3;
- 17% admitted that the marks information in their comments duplicated that on the PT3.

It seems that tutors are offering a mass of advice in a number of places, and that home-made templates are not seen as a useful form of future-altering feedback. Moreover, there is a danger that students may simply become bored, or just assume that all comments on the script
are repeated elsewhere, hence missing valuable feedback. The concentration on marks and content alone encourages feedback that is almost exclusively retrospective-on-content, in the taxonomy suggested above. And although 71% of respondents who believed that their on-script comments were the most effective future-altering aspect of their feedback, 60% stated that the primary aim of the their comments on the PT3 was to improve the grade on the next TMA. So it seems that although tutors see providing future-altering feedback as a primary aim, they are not clear about where it is best placed. Perhaps the plethora of tutor comments arises from, or causes, a confusion of aims.

The Seven Principles - Tutors and the Marking guides

A number of survey questions aimed to investigate how tutors’ viewed their feedback in the light of Nicol’s seven principles of effective feedback (Nicol, D.J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D 2004). Tutors were also asked how well the MGs helped them with aspects of feedback listed by Nicol. Listed below in order of increasing level of value for promoting learner self-regulation, the seven principles are

1. help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitate the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. deliver high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

Presented with this list of principles and asked to rate them in the order which most closely matched the tutor’s own aspirations when marking TMAs, 31% chose the principle ‘deliver high-quality information to students about their learning (e.g. strengths and weaknesses)’ as their primary aim, a future-altering principle third lowest in terms of value for promoting self-regulation on Nicol’s list. The full set of responses is shown in Figure 2.

However, when asked which of Nicol’s seven principles the MGs most helped them to fulfil, a massive 63% put ‘clarify to students what good performance is’ (e.g. the expected standard for the assignment); a retrospective feedback principle, and the least valuable for self-
regulation. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the MGs are seen as primarily supporting retrospective comments rather than future-altering comments.

Figure 2: Tutor aspirations compared to Nicol’s principles of effective feedback.

Further comments on the Marking Guides

Finally, tutors were asked to choose from a list of possible additional features they would like to see in the MGs. Responses were:

- Over 57% requested model answers for calculations, with model answers for prose questions coming a close second;

- More than 30% of respondents requested ‘Suggestions for comments to include on the PT3’;

And what the most pressing marking problems there were that MGs did not adequately address:

- Over 65% of respondents chose ‘Helping students who lack written English skills’

- A further 45+% chose both ‘Helping students who lack numeracy skills’ and ‘Helping students whose first language is not English’

Overall, what these responses most underline is the deficiencies in the MGs for T175. But it is not clear how useful model answers are to students and, moreover, without additional clarification they represent purely retrospective feedback. English language usage appears to be a very particular problem in OU Level 1 modules; Swann, (2009) confirms that 1 in 10 new Level 1 OU students do not have English as a first language. And again, correcting
Grammar and language without extensive additional teaching and feedback, represents more retrospective feedback.

**Marking Guides Analysis**

Historically, the MGs were designed to meet the challenge of standardising marking across tutors, with feedback left to the skill and judgement of the markers. There is no doubt that current MGs are geared overwhelmingly to ‘ideal minus’ conceptions, presenting checklists of points for tutors to look for, and sometimes detailing the awarding of marks down to 1% granularity. The subsequent marking, for weaker students especially, may be de-motivating, and encourage all students to think purely in terms of performance, rather than learning. Consistency of marking across a large-population module has been partly purchased at the expense of effective future-altering feedback.

Having developed the taxonomy of feedback mentioned above, an analysis of four marking Guides across one presentation was undertaken. The Marking Guides maintain an established format across TMAs and presentations so the results of this analysis can be taken to represent the norm for T175. The advice offered to tutors in each cluster of marks (ranging from 1 to about 10 marks) was classified according to what type of feedback comment it supported. The results are shown in Figure 3, below.

![Figure 3: Analysis of feedback opportunities of four T175 MGs (1 presentation)](image-url)

As can be seen from the chart the vast majority of advice in the MGs is centred on the assignment in hand; retrospective on content and skills (RC and RS). Future-altering-on-skills advice to tutors does feature in these MGs but will need to be much more prevalent if the MGs are to be of real help to tutors in providing future-altering feedback to their students.

**Recommendations for future Marking Guides**

When asked, the vast majority of tutors stated that the current MGs are about the right length: roughly nine pages. Any changes should not therefore increase this, if possible. In order to make space for more future-altering feedback advice the current MGs need to be made shorter. Two possible actions are available here:

- Extract some of the information that is either repeated from question to question within a MG or repeated from TMA to TMA. All of this information, which relates to items such as how to deal with word counts, could then be issued once at the start of the presentation and only very briefly referred to in subsequent MGs, if necessary.

- Reduce the granularity of the marks information. By awarding marks in larger chunks, the amount of detailed content description required should be reduced. This may also help to address the problem of tutor feedback focussing too closely on marks lost – the ideal minus model. Additionally, the necessity to specify marks details down to 1% will be removed, perhaps drawing tutors away from the perceived need to give part marks information more than once.

Having made space for more future-altering feedback advice, the problem remains as to how best to present this. Plainly tutors would not wish to be asked to write more feedback and anyway it is apparent that much duplication of effort is taking place. It is noticeable that what future-altering advice there is, in the current MGs, is not clearly signposted; similarly, tutors’ feedback is frequently not grouped into retrospective and future-altering. Possible approaches here therefore are to either split the advice for each question into two parts (future-altering and retrospective) or split the MG into two parts, grouping the two different types of advice into each part. The beneficial effects of this could be

- To more clearly signpost future-altering advice for tutors. This may help them to clearly distinguish between retrospective and future-altering feedback in the returned eTMA.
To allow tutors to draw a line between the highly marks oriented, ideal minus, retrospective feedback comments by placing them only within the script and the future-altering self-regulating feedback which can be placed in the Summary PT3.

To encourage the student to recognise feedback that most helps them improve next time. He/she can read all the advice on receipt of the returned TMA but need only read the main future-altering advice on the Summary PT3 again before writing the next assignment.

To reduce the amount of repeated feedback from tutors and remove the necessity to include additional feedback documents such as templates which are highly content centred, ideal minus style feedback and may be highly demotivating for weaker students as they represent a long list of ‘failures’.

**Unexpected opportunities**

In the last year a number of unanticipated potential and actual opportunities for dissemination and application of my project results have presented themselves. So far, these are:

1. The co-chair of TU100, the new flagship Level 1 course in the MCT Faculty, has asked me to work in collaboration with the CT, authors and Open-ELT on developing the assessment and Marking Guides for the first presentation of the course. This would be an ideal opportunity to put into practise some of the findings reported on here.

2. I have collaborated in the production of a new document for tutors ‘Correspondence Tuition in Computing and ICT’ during which I was able to discuss some of the ideas presented here and incorporate them into the document.

3. The author of the MCT Assessment Review has asked me to supply her with a copy of my findings in order to inform her future discussions. One of the Assessment Review findings was as follows:

   *There is a wealth of knowledge and expertise in the CETLs that is widely recognised by the UK and international academic community. However, this expertise resides with individuals or within specific course teams, rather than being shared across all MCT courses. This is partly because there is no mechanism in MCT to support transfer of knowledge….COLMSCT Fellows, in particular, have been involved in a number of excellent assessment projects, but this expertise has not been disseminated across the Faculty ..........A lot depends on an individual’s initiative, because there is no formal Faculty mechanism in place to facilitate the process. The University and*
the Faculty should encourage and support CETL Fellows to share their expertise, and also create the appropriate opportunities for them to do so.

I hope to use this comment in the Review to access opportunities for wider dissemination of my Project findings.

4. The MCT Faculty has just begun to formulate a Widening Participation Strategy which may include a number of opportunities to present these findings and influence the guidance that CTs offer to tutors. I have asked to be part of the teams representing T175 and TU100.

5. Since gaining some expertise, with COLMSCT, in Learning and Teaching research work and presenting at conferences I have joined the Technology and Education Research Group (TERG) and collaborated with Karen Kear on her Elluminate COLMSCT project both practically and in presenting the work at conferences.

Impact

Student experience

There is a large body of evidence in the literature (referred to above) that points to the type of feedback on assessment that is most effective in terms of student development and success. At Level 1, this is particularly important both for students in their path to becoming a successful and fulfilled learners, and for the University in developing self-regulating students that are retained. It is hoped that by applying these ideas from the start on the assessment, Marking Guides and feedback methods employed on the MCT Faculty flagship Level 1 course, TU100, the benefits will be seen by both students and University.

Teaching

Since starting this Project and discussing the results with many colleagues I have a much clearer idea about the different types of feedback and how my marking can be made more effective. I am hopeful that the impact on the whole assessment regime for TU100 will be influenced by the findings of this project. On attending the Science Learning and Teaching Conference 09 much interest was shown in my poster. It was evident that colleagues at full-time universities are struggling to mark work from ever larger student groups. It is therefore all the more essential that what feedback they give is effective and the results of this Project are relevant to that.
Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the encouragement, help and advice I have received in carrying out this project from Chris Dobbyn and Mirabelle Walker, both of the MCT Faculty, Open University.

List of Deliverables

1. Tutor survey results. File: COLMSCT Chetwynd T175 tutor survey.xls

2. Poster presented at SLTC09:


3. Presentation at Making Connections 09:


4. Presentation at EISTA09:


5. Presentation at 4th CETL Conference 09:


6. Paper: Submitted to Journal and awaiting decision on publication ‘Assessment, Feedback and Marking Guides in Distance Education’. Chetwynd, F. D. & Dobbyn, C. H.

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: A possible taxonomy of feedback

Figure 2: Tutors’ first-choice principle of feedback and MG support for principles

Figure 3: Analysis of feedback opportunities of four T175 MGs (1 presentation)
References


Swann, W. 2009 (w.s.swann@open.ac.uk), August 25 2009, Request to cite. E-mail to f.d.chetwynd@open.ac.uk


Appendices

Appendix A: Consolidated results of T175 tutor survey on feedback and Marking Guide use.

Appendix B: Poster: ‘Better feedback through enhanced marking guides’ Poster presentation in Proceedings of The 3rd Science Learning and Teaching Conference SLTC 2009

Appendix C: Presentation: ‘Effective Assignment Comments’ Presentation at Making Connections: Exploring Scholarship for the Digital Age conference, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 2-3 June 2009


Appendix E: Presentation: ‘Marking Guides and Effective Feedback’ Presentation at 4th Open CETL Conference: The CETLs: Celebrating Teaching and Learning, 15th and 16th December 2009