

# RELEASING ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK BEFORE MARKS

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## KEYWORDS

Assessment feedback,  
qualitative commentary,  
quantitative marks

## SUMMARY

Students do not engage effectively enough with their qualitative commentary which means that developmental points are not taken on board. Current research argues that the gap could be negated if students were enabled to approach the commentary in a more meaningful manner. The feedback for my first assessment was therefore released in two stages: commentary first, followed by reflection on the VLE, followed by release of the quantitative marks and grades.

## CONTEXT

The context for this initiative came from research presented by Dr Alex Buckley of Strathclyde University at the Learning and Teaching Academy event [Transforming Assessment](#) in November 2017. His research was an evaluation of the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) project and he argued that there is still a large gap between what students expect from their feedback and how markers think students should act on that feedback. In order to encourage students to reflect on the content of their feedback rather than just the grade achieved, this initiative trialled releasing feedback in two phases.

## WHAT, WHERE?

This initiative was trialled in semester two 2017/18 within two modules from the Humanities, Education and Gaelic Subject Network: level 8 Comparing Political Systems and level 9 Devolution, Federalism and Territorial Politics. The level 8 assessment was a 1500 word essay and the level 9 a 3500 word case study. The assessment detail was released at the beginning of the module in order that students could familiarise themselves with it.

The students were advised at the beginning of the module that their feedback would be released in two phases: the comments first, followed by the numerical grade. They would also be required to submit a piece of reflective writing on the VLE discussion forum (after the comments, but before the grade) focussing on the comments made, and discussing how they would address these in their future assignments. They would contribute to two threads; one reflecting on strengths, one on feedforward points. Students were not required to comment on each other but placing the discussion in a public forum was intended to encourage students to engage meaningfully with the comments.

I encouraged them to talk to me about any anxieties they had regarding this and regularly reinforced the reasons why I was doing this trial. I finished each scheduled VC teaching session 15 minutes early to give students time to talk to me about course-wide and related issues and this is where much of the assessment discussion took place.



## WHY?

I did this because students are making the same academic writing skills over and over. I point them to the [Essential Student Skills](#) webpages but have no way of knowing that they have read feedback and will make that commitment. I wondered whether, by posting up a reflection, they would recognise that they were engaging with their feedback in a more meaningful way. I also wanted students to see how much effort goes into feedback and how carefully those words are chosen. According to research (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005; Gibbs, 2009; Jessop *et al.*, 2012) qualitative feedback is often misunderstood or ignored at the expense of the quantitative grade so I wanted my students to see how much investment lecturers put into the feedback process in the hope that this would reinforce the importance of meaningful engagement.

## CONSIDERATIONS?

The considerations were numerous: wording the feedback so that there was no hint at the marks; ensuring that whole sentences could be cut and pasted if the student wanted to include them in their reflection; being extra careful that my comments were supportive and constructive. I had to think carefully about the logistics of marking the students' work using a feedback sheet that would not reveal the marks allocated. I considered, for ease when releasing the quantitative marks, to just fill in the marking grid but turn the marks into white font so that all I had to do was restore the black text and upload to the Grade Centre. However I realised that I would only need one student to figure this out and the trial would be ruined. In the end I made two copies of each essay, once I had marked them, and labelled them in my folder as 'for discussion board' and 'ready to be released'. This was time consuming in the first trial but will take less time this session I think.

The other major consideration was whether students would engage with the process. Despite having talked about the trial at the start of the module, at each VC and in the specific assessment-specific VC sessions, I still had a number of students who emailed me in the few days before the deadline saying that they were extremely anxious and that it was unfair to put them through the stress of making their feedback public. My original plan had been to make it mandatory and enforce engagement by saying I wouldn't release the grades until everyone had posted to the VLE but I realised early in the process that this would not work, and actually would be unfair on those students who genuinely could not bring themselves to go public. So I reassured those students who emailed me that I would not force them to take part but would encourage them to wait and see the kinds of feedback that other students were posting up and maybe see how they felt after that. In the end all of the students on the module engaged with the process.

It was also a tight turnaround to get comments done in nine days, then get to second marker so everything was done within the required three weeks. This will change this year in order to create a more manageable timescale.

## WHAT WILL MAKE IT EVEN BETTER?

The students who told me they were anxious about sharing their strengths and weaknesses in public were a big part of my evaluation because I felt that these were the greatest anomaly: they were conscientious enough to care about their feedback in a meaningful way but could not engage with that feedback on a public platform, therefore were possibly not able to discuss this feedback with their PAT or Study Bar either. I felt that laying the foundations early enough and reinforcing them throughout would be enough to allay those fears but clearly it wasn't.

This session I will add three extra elements to my approach: I will *sell* last session's students' experiences as a more relatable context for this cohort, advising them that the feedback was overall positive in the end; secondly I will show the students what my feedback will look like. I think showing them how I am wording my feedback so that they can cut-and-paste comments as they wish, and reassuring them that my feedback is supportive and developmental, will all help this time around; and finally I will add a folder to my VLE space that contains the pedagogical research that has informed this approach. I will encourage and enable students to engage with this as I am now more aware of the importance of context.

## REFERENCES

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**If you wish to submit your own case study, or have any questions about this resource please contact:**

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