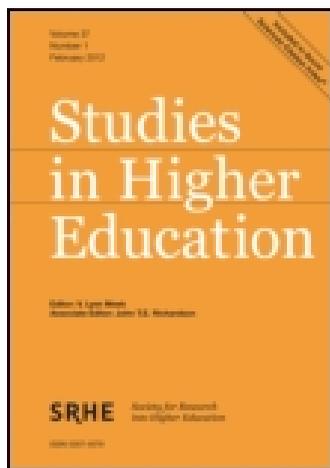


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Can dialogue help to improve feedback on examinations?

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Student dissatisfaction with feedback is widely acknowledged in Higher Education. This has resulted in investigations that have offered suggestions for improving student satisfaction levels. This article examines one area of student concern by focusing on the feedback that students receive on examinations. The article reports the findings of student surveys and focus groups with regard to attitudes towards and experience of examinations. In addition, the article reviews the findings of an exemplar exercise that is highlighted as a particular way of enhancing feedback practices on examinations. The research findings are the product of a three-year study into student experience of feedback that paid particular attention to the case of dialogue as a means of improving the student experience. Analysis of the findings emphasise the need to tackle the feedback deficit on examinations and in turn lead to a number of recommendations for creating a model of dialogic exam feedback.

Keywords: assessment; dialogue; examination; exemplars; feedback

Introduction

By all accounts feedback is of central importance to student learning. Existing research emphasises the importance of feedback for learning, development, reflection and improvement of future work (Hounsell 2003; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). In particular, a number of large-scale student surveys have consistently shown that assessment and feedback are the areas in which student satisfaction is lowest (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2011; National Union of Students 2011). Recent research has paid specific attention to the process of student engagement rather than just the mechanics of feedback. This is in part because research has found that feedback mechanisms as they currently operate often result in miscommunication that restricts students' ability to learn from the feedback they receive on assessed and formative work (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012a). One finding of this research is that students are both unaware that feedback is intended to aid future development and progress, and unable to act upon the feedback provided (Lea and Street 1998; Crisp 2007; Duncan 2007; Burke 2009). Students also seem frequently unable to 'decode' the academic language used by their tutors especially when receiving written feedback (Chanock 2000; Weaver 2006; Nicol 2008). Taking these debates further, Price, Handley, and Millar have commented that 'a new perspective

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on the feedback process, focused on the process of *engagement* rather than the technicalities of feedback, needs to be explored' (2011, 880).

In examining the linkage between feedback and student learning, Orsmond and Merry (2011) have noted the lack of alignment between the feedback provided by tutors and its utilisation by students. As they reflected in their study, '[t]he lack of feedback dialogue means that students never become fully aware of the potential contribution of feedback to their learning and tutors never fully appreciate how their feedback is being used' (Orsmond and Merry 2011, 134). This discordance between tutor and student views on the role of feedback was similarly highlighted by Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2002). In an attempt to encourage greater student engagement with feedback, a number of academics have emphasised the need to engage students in a dialogue (Sadler 1989; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006; Hounsell et al. 2008; Blair, Curtis, and McGinty [Shields] 2012). The core of this argument is that there is a need to move away from a 'transmission' model of feedback where the tutor communicates the message and the student simply receives it. Such a monologic process inevitably restricts students' ability to engage and improve future work and does not reflect the reality of communication being a two-way process. In an effort to move away from this system, scholars have emphasised the significance of a more constructivist and dialogic style of feedback delivery (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Rust, O'Donovan, and Price 2005; Nicol and Milligan 2006; Carless et al. 2011). For this to be effective, dialogic feedback needs to be a collaborative process that 'encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning' (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006, 205).

But while these approaches have identified the need to go beyond just providing 'more of the same' feedback, the fact of the matter is that there is also a need to focus on those areas of assessment where there is presently a dearth of feedback. This specifically applies to examinations, which is particularly problematic given that student performance in examinations tends to be lower than that of coursework (Bridges et al. 2002; Simonite 2003). Where focus has been attached to improving feedback practice, the tendency has been to target the mechanics of coursework feedback, such as making feedback legible and comprehensible to students, encouraging feedback forward and shifting from transmission to dialogic feedback. Focus has additionally been attached to the use of exemplars, not least as a means of clarifying to students the standards that are expected of them (Sadler 1987, 1989, 2010). Exemplars have been used to assist clarification on coursework across a wide range of subject disciplines, from biology (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2002) to sports studies (Bloxham and West 2004) and law (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2011). Although exams have often been excluded from these efforts to reshape feedback practice, a number of recent studies have sought to tackle this lacuna of practice. The work of Payne and Brown (2011) has, for example, highlighted that students who received the marking criteria in advance of the exam performed better than those who did not receive this information. Although a key part of this study was the focus on dialogue within module delivery, other studies have demonstrated the benefit of exemplars to clarify student understanding through the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE). In their study, Handley and Williams (2011) used the de-identified coursework of a previous cohort of students to provide a resource that students could access through the module VLE, with student responses indicating that they found this to be a positive experience. As the authors themselves note, the significance of this work rests in the fact that '... if students cannot grasp the meaning of assessment criteria/standards,

feedback intended to guide them on achieving those standards may be incomprehensible and therefore ineffectual' (Handley and Williams 2011, 96). In a somewhat similar vein, Scoles, Huxham, and McArthur (2012) also used the VLE to create an exemplar bank, albeit with a greater focus being attached to tracking student use of exemplars. But despite the value of these studies, less emphasis was attached to engaging students in a dialogue about examination practice as a means of enhancing feedback. This appears to be partly influenced by the design of the exercise, with no students having used the online discussion forum that Handley and Williams (2011) created to support the exercise.

In reflecting on these points it is our view that research evidence indicates that a significant proportion of university work continues to be assessed by exams without formative feedback of any kind, whether monologic or dialogic (Hounsell et al. 2008). In an era of rising tuition fees and correspondingly rising student expectations, this arrangement is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term. In analysing these issues, this article argues that there is a need to tackle the mechanics and practice of exam feedback through the adoption of a student-tutor and student-student dialogue around feedback exemplars in advance of sitting exams. In making this argument we acknowledge that there are many procedural obstacles to improving exam feedback. The article proceeds as follows. First, it sets out the research area and method of investigation. Second, it reviews and contextualises existing practice in exam feedback. Third, it analyses student attitudes towards exam feedback. Fourth, from our analysis we explore the case for making exam feedback dialogic. Fifth, we outline potential ways in which exam feedback can be made dialogic, most notably through the use of exemplar exercises. Finally, we present our concluding argument.

The study and research method

To understand students' experiences of feedback, this study examined the manner of their engagement with feedback and sought to identify areas for improvement from the discipline perspective of History and Politics. The central theme that underpinned the research was the recognition of students' dissatisfaction and poor engagement with current feedback processes. These assumptions were reflected in the project research questions:

- How to replace the simple 'transmission' model of feedback with a model of feedback linked directly to learning and reflection?
- How to implement practical strategies for encouraging dialogue between staff and students around feedback to promote student learning and to enhance student motivations?

To investigate these issues, three phases of data collection were conducted across three academic departments in three UK universities (two post-1992 universities and a pre-1992 university). The departments were chosen to provide a comparison between research and teaching intensive as well as between single and joint honours. The first area of work was a pilot study, which acted as a reconnaissance stage of our project to obtain an understanding of lecturers' and students' views on feedback through the use of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This data enabled us to understand commonalities and disjunctures between attitudes towards feedback approaches from both groups. This data informed the second area of work, which

included a more extensive investigation of student and lecturer views regarding feedback practice through a similar approach of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Informed by this data, in our third area of work we sought to investigate specific aspects of feedback practice and to trial intervention strategies to enhance feedback.

The data for this article is gathered from an additional questionnaire survey that we undertook on exam feedback practice in spring 2011. This research was conducted with a first (level 4) and second (level 5) year undergraduate module from the same degree programme in the Humanities subject area. We intentionally conducted the research before the annual examinations commenced in May. This was to find out what the feedback expectations of the first years were on examinations given that they had only received feedback on coursework so far at university. At the same time, we also wanted to compare the expectations of the second year students given their experience of exams the previous year.

For the first year class, 17 out of 24 students completed the questionnaire, providing a response rate of 71%. For the second year class, 17 out of 39 students completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 44%. Although the student cohorts were relatively small, they nonetheless offer an important insight into this area. In addition, two focus groups and an exemplar exercise were undertaken with the second year students. While the questionnaires were distributed and analysed through the use of Survey Monkey, the qualitative data from the focus groups was analysed to allow us to draw out particular themes. The aim of this area of work was to:

- (1) Improve student satisfaction with feedback from exams;
- (2) Improve students' understanding of the assessment criteria and marking process for exams;
- (3) Improve students' ability to make judgments of quality and apply these to their own work.

The status quo: current practice in examinations and feedback

Within the Humanities and Social Sciences it continues to be the case that assessment by unseen exam is a key component of course design. This is despite the fact that there has been a move to introduce a wider range of assessment methods, including presentations, placements, book reviews, and simulations, to name but a few (Goldsmith and Goldsmith 2010; Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012b). A move towards a greater variety of assessment instruments has been influenced by a concern that exams have a tendency towards reinforcing a surface learning approach that focuses students towards the completion of the assignment task rather than a deep approach which encourages students to develop stronger critical analytical skills (Marton and Säljö 1997). A regular criticism of unseen exams is that they often favour some students more than others, as technique plays a key role in knowing how to answer a question. This is a point that the British actor and novelist, Stephen Fry, makes in his autobiography (2010, 85):

To do well at exams ... it is better to know one big thing than lots of smaller things. A point of view, a single way of thinking that encompasses all elements of a subject, allows essays more or less to write themselves. The way to pass exams is to cheat. I

cheated all the way through my three years at Cambridge. Which is not to say that I looked at the work of the student next to me, or that I brought in outside material from which to crib. I cheated by knowing in advance exactly what I was going to write before the invigilator bid us turn over the question sheets and started the clock. I had a theory of Shakespearean tragic and comic forms ... Its virtue was that it answered any questions and yet always appeared to be specific.

Fry's reflection demonstrates the very weaknesses of unseen exams, where success is more about skill and technique rather than deep understanding of the subject. Yet despite the criticism that has been levied at unseen exams for such acknowledged weaknesses, the fact of the matter is that they nonetheless continue to play a key part of module assessment and course design. In our own survey, all of the students had at least three exams in their year of study, with them typically accounting for 40–50% of the assessment component for each module. The end result is that staff continue to value unseen exams as a form of assessment. Familiarity with the format, low plagiarism risk and the perception of a 'level playing field' provided by exams may account for their continuing popularity. Such arguments in favour of unseen exams are not just the preserve of academic staff. Instead, there is a view among some students that an examination can be a favourable form of assessment, if not least because they are time limited in the way that an essay is not.

The majority of students in our survey did not express a strong antipathy to exams *per se*. We asked our respondents to indicate whether they liked exams, thought they were ok, thought they were stressful, or hated them. As outlined in Table 1, what was particularly noticeable from the survey was that by far the majority of all first year students thought exams to be 'OK' (64.7%), as opposed to only 29.4% of second year students. The fact that there was a far more even distribution of views across the second year group of students as opposed to the first year students suggests that there has taken place a levelling of experience on exams in the case of the second year students.

We wanted to look in more detail about student perceptions and experience of exams. Our assumption was that just as first year students could have a more enthusiastic view of exams given that they had yet to take any university exams, that the experience of second year students would be reflected in a more muted response. Further qualitative research showed that across both years of study, student attitudes were in fact characterised more by a general acceptance or resignation toward the continued use of exams, perhaps reflecting the test-oriented style into which many students are socialised at school. For example, one student commented that 'exams are just something that everyone has to do'. For some students, exams appeared merely to be the signoff point of a course: 'an exam is simply to bookend a course, it is the coursework which counts'. However, students did express strong reservations as to whether exams could meaningfully assess the kinds of knowledge and skills they themselves regarded as important. A number of students tended to regard exams and an associated learning

Table 1. Student views on examinations.

Response	1 st year	2 nd year
I like exams	5.9%	17.6%
Exams are ok	64.7%	29.4%
I find exams stressful	17.6%	29.4%
I hate exams	11.8%	23.5%

style of memorisation as inappropriate to the discursive, contested knowledge involved in the study of social sciences and humanities: 'I find exams awkward in expressing my knowledge whereas coursework allows me time to express myself as well as I could'; 'I don't think exams are a good test of your skills where an exam is basically a memory test'; 'I feel exams are not entirely relevant and coursework in the form of essay is more relevant'.

The mismatch between the continued practice of using exams and student views corroborate the conclusions of McDowell and Sambell (1999) who found that '[students] believed that examinations largely tested memory or poor [surface] learning and were inappropriate ways of assessing genuine abilities and knowledge ... it is a common student perception and they act on it' (McDowell and Sambell 1999, 121). If this is correct, it suggests that exams may damage student engagement and encourage dissatisfaction with assessment regimes as well as having a negative impact on student grade performance (Bridges et al. 2002; Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003). Yet in many ways it is not surprising that students express concern about the 'relevance' and 'value' of exams given that they rarely get the same level of feedback on exams as they do on other assessments, such as essays. Where exams take place at the end of a year of study, it is often the case that few students are provided with the ability to engage with their exam scripts. There are a number of reasons for this (Scoles, Huxham, and McArthur 2012, 2). This includes the practice of many exams taking place after teaching has finished and hence when students are less likely to collect feedback. There is also a custom and practice among many academic staff to mark exam scripts with minimal notes on the work that could aid the provision of such feedback, not least because of time pressures to complete marking for assessment boards. Such structural factors also relate to the fact that the long gap between exams – often a whole calendar year – means that even if students were to get feedback on their exams, the effectiveness of this would be limited in their ability to apply the feedback from past work given the time gap (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Sadler 1989; Yorke 2003).

In looking at the issue of feedback, we wanted to see if there was a distinction between the expectation of first year students and the experience of second year students, and whether a degree of socialisation of feedback experience had already taken place for first year students. Although 52.9% of first year students commented that they expected to receive written or verbal feedback on their exam performance, it was surprising that some 47.1% noted that they did not expect to receive feedback on their exam other than their mark. This contrasted with second year students, of whom 88.2% noted that they did not expect to receive feedback on their exam other than their mark, while 11.8% said that they might sometimes expect to get written or verbal feedback. Such statistics indicate that student expectations are not being met, which in turn is one of the main causes of dissatisfaction as noted in the National Student Survey (NSS).

These findings suggest that while first year students have a more hopeful view of exam feedback, the reality is that for the most part students only receive feedback in the form of written grades. Such findings corroborate the research of others that a norm of giving no written or verbal feedback on exams is established across courses and across institutions (Brown 2007). In the 2011 National Union of Students (NUS) Student Experience Report, of the 3863 students that took part in the survey, some 56% noted that written grades are the most common form of receiving exam feedback. Of the remaining students, 10% of students noted that they received verbal feedback, 13% noted that they received written feedback, 27% noted that they received online

feedback – which we could assume is merely confirmation of their grade, and 5% said that they did not receive any feedback at all (National Union of Students 2011, 38). In analysing this data, it is worth pointing out that the modular structure of most degree programmes makes these figures especially significant since these results suggest that a majority of students do not receive written or verbal exam feedback on their modules. Those second year students in our survey who responded that they ‘sometimes’ received written or verbal feedback on exams (11.8%) might still receive no exam feedback on the vast majority of the modules they study. Furthermore, given that only 52.9% of the first year students that we surveyed expected to receive written or verbal exam feedback, this suggests that this norm is embedded in student perceptions as well as academic practice. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews conducted with students’ further support the idea of a norm of no feedback on exams. As one student said: ‘[exam feedback] is presented as something which is a luxury that you shouldn’t expect and you should be grateful if you get it’. Yet very often students expressed a wish for more developmental feedback.

Student attitudes towards feedback

Research on tutors’ perceptions of feedback often reports that they remain somewhat sceptical about students’ level of engagement with feedback. Many tutors report that feedback is often not collected by students and there is a common perception that students are really only concerned with the grade they receive rather than studying detailed feedback in order to improve in future (MacDonald 1991; Mutch 2003; Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2005; Carless 2006; Weaver 2006). The evidence from our own research contradicts such a viewpoint, a position that is also shared by the findings of others. Students appeared frustrated by this lack of feedback: ‘in the exams, we never really get feedback from the exams and it would be nice to get to know what we have done wrong instead to just getting a mark for the exam from the actual board. Then you’ve got the opportunity to get the exam papers back but you don’t get the opportunity to sit down and talk to anyone about it’. Our research found that students clearly wanted to receive feedback. 76.5% of first year students and 88.2% of second year students reported that they would like more exam feedback. This compared to just 23.5% of first year students and 11.8% of second year students who were only interested in passing or failing the assessment.

Our findings are borne out by the work of others in this area. The NUS survey points out that some 88% of the students who receive either no feedback or only written grade feedback on their exams said that they would in fact like more feedback (NUS 2011, 38). Brown (2007) similarly found high levels of demand for exam feedback. McDowell and Sambell also found that ‘students judge assessment favourably when it incorporates the provision of feedback on their personal level of achievement and indications about how to improve’ (1999, 117) and that exams were not conducive to this. While these studies support the existence of student demand for more and better feedback on exams, one possible area of concern is with regard to the ability of students and tutors to understand the purposes of feedback (Orsmond and Merry 2011). This particularly applies to informing future performance. For example, of the students who received more than just written grade exam feedback in the NUS survey, just over half (52%) said that the feedback provided was helpful. More significantly, 38% of students said the feedback was not helpful (NUS 2011, 38). The combined figures across the two years of our survey indicate that only 56% of students believed that lecturers

'frequently' expected them to use written feedback to improve future assignments (including other forms of assessment besides exams), while the figure for verbal feedback was only 39%. Such findings support the evidence of other researchers who have noted that the feedback provided by tutors tends to be focused on the content of the marked assignment rather than taking a more holistic approach towards future assignments (Glover and Brown 2006; Orrell 2006; Orsmond and Merry 2011).

In our survey, the qualitative data collected in interviews and focus groups suggested that a variety of reasons underlay the demand for more feedback on exams, including but not exclusive to the improvement of future work. Some saw feedback as being central to obtaining diagnosis about their performance in the manner of self-assessment (Sadler 1989; Boud 1995): 'It's unfair to receive a mark, but don't get your paper back to see [w]here you went wrong'; 'Like any graded work it would be nice to receive an idea of where I went wrong or indeed right!' But many other students also viewed feedback as being central to improving future performance: 'With feedback from previous exams you may be better prepared in the next year's exams'; 'Feedback is the basis for improving my grades so I would take any chance to get more feedback especially with exams'.

A further issue identified by the qualitative research was that students lacked confidence in the robustness of exam marking. The students interviewed repeatedly expressed the belief that luck and subjective judgement play a large part in the award of exam marks: 'well, you often have this perception it's about luck'; 'there is an awful lot of luck or randomness in the system'. This clearly has implications for feedback since students' difficulty in interpreting their grades contributes to this lack of trust. This may be part of the explanation for student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback. Since students do not generally understand the process of exam marking and moderation, and are not usually offered feedback justifying or explaining the marks awarded, they do not believe the system to be robust. One related finding with worrying implications was that students did not feel that their level of preparation was necessarily reflected in the mark awarded – 'sometimes I come out of exams thinking I did well only to get a bad mark later'.

Students often struggled to reconcile the marks they received with their own assessment of performance in exams due to the lack of feedback. Such a finding concurs with the work of O'Donovan, Price, and Rust (2004) who have stressed the need for students to be provided with tacit knowledge so as to ensure that they have the skill, knowledge and ability to understand what is required of them. In this context, the absence of feedback only deepens the mystery surrounding the process of awarding examination marks and decreases students' confidence in the value of this form of assessment. Students explicitly connected this problem to the idea of formally appealing against examination marks. This should give cause for concern in the current more consumer-oriented climate, while the strong demand from students may in itself provide reason to develop exam feedback processes. Even considered separately from the current HE environment and its emphasis on customer satisfaction, these findings do suggest that improving exam feedback is an important element in attempts to encourage better student engagement and 'rescue' the exam as a valuable form of assessment which is judged more favourably by students.

Why make exam feedback dialogic?

The findings that we have presented, combined with other research in this area, provides considerable evidence of student dissatisfaction with current practice in the

field of assessment and feedback. The trends identified by the large-scale National Student Survey and NUS student experience surveys are echoed in our own research (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012a, 2012b; Blair, Curtis, and McGinty [Shields] 2012; Blair et al. 2012). Weaknesses in the provision of feedback are especially marked where traditional unseen exams are used for assessment. The disjuncture between student demand for exam feedback and the lack of provision is likely to become a problem as expectations of responsiveness rise. There are two possible responses to this dilemma. First, exams might be regarded as irredeemably flawed and as such they should be removed from the repertoire of assessment tools for good. It is certainly worth thinking carefully about whether there really are sound pedagogic reasons for the retention of exams. If the advantages of exams are primarily a matter of greater convenience or efficiency, they may be difficult to sustain as students come to demand more in return for the increased costs of undertaking Higher Education. If the time and cost advantages of exams are partly or solely a function of the fact that they typically involve giving little or no feedback then we might conclude that lecturers would be better off scrapping exams altogether rather than trying to graft on feedback and dialogue.

However, such a conclusion may be premature. Current feedback practices in relation to exams could be improved while retaining exams as a form of assessment. As Brown suggests, 'it is not the exam *per se*, as a mode of assessment, that is causing students a problem, but more so the lack of feedback from it which inhibits their development' (2007, 44). The problem for exams is the expectation of no provision of written or verbal feedback that has been built up over years of experience for both tutors and students. Hence the task at hand is not necessarily about how to replace or scrap exams entirely but how to make them work for learning by establishing a norm of feedback on examinations. The research conducted by a number of scholars of teaching and learning and borne out by our own findings further suggests that exam feedback should be dialogic so as to create opportunities for discussion about feedback among all parties to the process. Creating opportunities for dialogue extends the prospect of a number of desirable educational goals. This kind of approach to feedback generates more transparent, and arguably fairer, assessment where students are better able to comprehend assessment criteria. It should further help to improve confidence in the marking system by demystifying the process and providing justifications and explanations for marks awarded. As the number of opportunities for dialogue increases, the surface learning approach students associate with examinations can increasingly be challenged which has potential to improve both performance and motivation. Carless et al. (2011, 405) further argue that dialogic feedback and the use of formative exemplar exercises can function as 'scaffolding', thereby encouraging students through practice to develop capacities to self-regulate their own learning. Enabling students to become self-reliant and independent learners who are capable of evaluating their own performance must be a key goal of any assessment exercise and of the university experience in general.

How to make exam feedback dialogic

Even if the principle of dialogic feedback is accepted, there remain a number of issues regarding the best strategies to implement it. Exams often present specific obstacles to the pursuit of more dialogic feedback, especially in terms of delivering feedback in a timely manner. While these issues present reasonable grounds for caution, it is possible

to identify a number of general practices that may help to embed a more dialogic approach to feedback.

In the first instance it is important to formalise feedback dialogues. A recurring theme in focus group discussion and interviews was that students are unaware of how to contact tutors and are unaware of norms of appropriateness surrounding this. Students repeatedly invoked the idea of chasing feedback in a very unstructured way, by ‘button-holing’ tutors before and after lectures for example. Students clearly find the existing channels of contact with tutors through office hours and/or tutorials difficult to navigate (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012a). As such, the office/surgery hours or tutorial model may be made less useful by their mostly informal structure and students’ lack of confidence in approaching tutors in this way. Instead of imploring students to make more use of the existing channels, tutors – rather than students – may have to take the lead in organising opportunities for dialogue. Tutors may need to consider an approach that uses more of the formally timetabled contact time to supply opportunities for dialogue around feedback. While this probably involves a trade-off in terms of reducing the amount of content tutors are able to deliver in formally timetabled sessions, it is worth considering whether trading off content for an organised focus on processes of assessment and feedback might not benefit students more overall.

A second issue is the timing of the feedback that is provided. Exam feedback can be considered to fall into two areas: individual feedback on a student’s own performance in an exam and generic feedback on previous years’ students’ performance to help improve the performance of following years’ cohorts. There is reason to believe that students would favour individual opportunities to receive feedback on exam performance after sitting exams (see, for example Huxham 2007). Furthermore, such an approach would have the advantage of providing a much clearer justification and explanation of the marks received by students. However, there are other considerations that might counsel against using this as the sole means of providing feedback. If the primary goal of feedback is understood as the improvement of future performance (‘feed-forward’), then provision of individual feedback on exams after the fact is inevitably of limited value. Since exams are typically used as summative, terminal assessments for a given module, students may not have any further opportunities to apply the feedback received to future performance. This is especially true for final year students who are likely to sit exams as the last act of a programme of study.

Race, Brown, and Smith (2005) recommend a two-stage approach including a formative phase with feedback used to direct towards an eventual summative grade. Within a two-stage process, the ‘feed-forward’ aspect is dealt with in the phase prior to submission, while the justification and explanation of grades awarded is covered by the provision of individual feedback accompanying exam marks. For example, the first phase might involve constructing an exemplar exercise such as the one described below, or giving generic feedback on past years’ cohorts’ performance in exams. These exercises could be built into the exam setting and marking process and into course handbooks and teaching schedules.

A third approach is the provision of exemplars. One way of creating a two-stage feedback process is to use exemplars to stimulate dialogue around feedback prior to sitting exams. While the demand for more exam feedback was clearly expressed by interviewees involved in our research, students acknowledged the practical difficulties of providing timely feedback for this assessment type. Since exams are typically taken at the end of a course of study, feedback accompanying final grades was of limited use in terms of improving future performance even if it was helpful in justifying or

explaining marks awarded. One potential solution is to attempt to create dialogues around the assessment and feedback process for exams in advance of sitting the exams. Through the use of exemplar or 'model' exam answers, students are able to discuss the process of marking exams and to achieve a greater understanding of the assessment criteria and standard of work expected. The use of exemplars as a kind of formative feedback was strongly supported by students in both the survey exercises and in interviews and focus groups: 'Go over what has been done in previous exams/ what to expect'; 'with feedback from previous exams may prepare you for exams better in the next year's exam'.

Exemplar exercises have potential to deliver a number of pedagogic objectives. In particular, they can help to clarify the assessment criteria, which as Sadler points out, frequently remain 'tacit, emergent and often unarticulated even in the minds of tutors (1989, 560). Active engagement with these criteria gives students a better chance of internalising the requirements of various assessment tasks and improving their performance as a result (Price and O'Donovan 2006; Nicol 2009). Huxham (2007) and Green (2007) reported highly positive student evaluations of exercises using model exam answers. While students in both cases still preferred to receive tailored, individual feedback on answers written by the students themselves, Huxham reports that delivering feedback through model answers had particular advantages over more personalised, individualised feedback. These advantages included speed of turnaround, thereby allowing students to assess the level of their own work against others and demonstrating application of marking criteria in practice. Furthermore, feedback on model answers was found to encourage a focus on evaluating the task rather than the individual, thus reducing personal criticism that can damage student engagement with feedback. Weaver (2006) found that personalised feedback often focused on correcting negative aspects of work, while students interviewed for our research frequently reported that strong work tends to receive little constructive feedback. In their study on the use of exemplars, Scoles, Huxham, and McArthur recorded similarly positive benefits, noting that their findings '... suggest that the students who accessed exemplars tended to gain higher assessment scores than those who do not access exemplars (2012, 12). As such, exemplars may have distinct pedagogical advantages over personalised feedback, as well as the time and resource advantages it presents. It is worth noting that the studies by Huxham (2007), Green (2007) and Scoles et al. (2012) were conducted within the 'hard' sciences, which might be considered a more suitable field for the use of model answers, while the greater emphasis on the discursive, interpretative elements of humanities and social science writing might render the approach less effective. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that it is precisely these disciplines that would benefit from greater use of exemplars since the criteria for assessment and estimations of quality in these subjects rely heavily on tacit knowledge and interpretation (Sadler 1989). Through the use of exemplars and creating a dialogue around feedback and assessment, students can gain improved access to these forms of knowledge and processes of interpretation.

An exemplar exercise using 'model' examination answers

As part of our research, an exercise using exemplar exam answers was trialled as a means of generating formative feedback and dialogue around feedback prior to submission. The exercise was conducted with a group of second year undergraduate students enrolled on a humanities module. They were given three exemplar answers to

a typical exam question. The answers were not actual students' papers. Following an introduction by the tutor, explaining the way in which exams are marked, the students were given a copy of all three answers and asked to read them individually and to score each answer. The exemplar answers were designed to reflect different aspects of the assessment criteria. Answer 1 was a very good, solid, well-structured answer giving a good accurate overview, context and analysis, but with limited historiography. Answer 2 was a poorly presented and brief answer, but which addressed most of the key issues in an accurate and relevant way. Answer 3 was a long, well-written answer, full of facts, almost all of which were irrelevant to answering the question. Having individually rated each answer, the students then worked in groups of three to discuss their views. The marks allocated by each group of three were then collected. These were recorded in Table 2 below, and then discussed by the whole class.

The majority of the students involved had not taken part in similar exercises before. The class as a whole commented that they found the exercise extremely valuable. Students were reassured when they saw an answer that was worth 79%, as they could see that it was good, but by no means perfect and were able to identify ways in which it could have been improved. Seeing an answer that was worth around 56% was reassuring, as many students could see that they could produce a better answer. Overall, students overestimated the value of length, grammar and facts and underestimated the value of structure, relevance, overview and context in assessing the marks for each answer. In general, students who produced less high quality coursework were much less able accurately to assess the example answers. Some of the groups were unable to place the questions in rank order of quality. These findings strongly suggest that there is value in conducting exemplar exercises prior to exam submission since they demonstrate clear misconceptions about the assessment criteria, and suggest that these misconceptions are most marked among students whose prior performance is most in need of improvement. This is a particularly significant finding as existing work on exemplar exercises has tended to emphasise the catch-all benefit of the exercise, with Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong (2011, 9) noting that '[e]xemplars give students confidence that they can complete an assignment of the same quality...'. Yet our research suggests that in addition to enhancing learning and understanding across the student body, exemplar exercises are of specific value in clarifying the understanding of weaker students and as such have the potential to be a major factor in improving retention rates. In this context, exemplar exercises create opportunities for these misconceptions to be exposed, challenged and corrected and help to demystify the process of awarding examination grades. Our research also emphasises the benefit of providing dialogue on exemplar exercises within class and as such confirms the findings of others who note the obstacles of using exemplars through VLEs. As Handley and Williams note in their findings of student views on a VLE exemplar exercise,

Table 2. Student estimates of marks for exemplar answers

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Average student mark	Tutor mark	Difference
Answer 1	66	75	62	55	67	70	66	79	+13
Answer 2	49	40	35	35	45	40	41	56	+15
Answer 3	38	41	68	42	59	57	51	39	-12

'[t]he more spontaneous and informal learning space of the classroom was preferred, suggesting that the main benefits of learning through exemplars accrue through class discussion' (2011, 106).

Conclusion

Enhancing the feedback given to students is likely to become an ever-greater priority in Higher Education in the coming years. While progress has been made on improving student feedback, examinations continue to operate in a mostly unreconstructed fashion with a strong norm against the provision of any kind of feedback on exams beyond grades. If exams are to be retained as a tool of assessment, serious consideration needs to be given to reforming feedback provision. The recommendations above offer some suggestions as to how exam feedback can be brought into line with a set of basic principles for the enhancement of student feedback that apply to all forms of assessment. These principles suggest an alternative way of thinking about feedback that may begin to address the areas of concern and dissatisfaction with current practice that is consistently identified by students. Firstly, and most clearly of relevance to examinations, is that feedback should not be thought of as only applying to coursework such as essays. Our research strongly suggests that feedback in any form tends not to be embedded in methods of assessment other than essays. While exams continue to be widely used, there is an established presumption against the provision of feedback on exams that is shared by both tutors and students. Secondly, feedback should not be understood as comprised solely of written comments. This approach tends to favour a one-way transmission of information that provides a 'full stop' to the feedback process and precludes further discussion. The aim for exams as well as other forms of assessment should be to engage students in dialogue *about* feedback and assessment, which enables students to take part in a discussion that demystifies the process of assessment. Third, feedback need not be exclusively summative, even when the form of assessment is by examination. While summative feedback may be necessary to explain and justify grades awarded, it is not suitable for helping students to develop and close the gap between present and desired performance. Although the recommendation by Race, Brown, and Smith (2005) for a two-stage feedback process offers one strategy for moving away from exclusively summative feedback, exams appear to involve particular practical difficulties in implementing this strategy. However, as the above discussion demonstrates, there are ways of providing formative feedback in advance of sitting exams, such as using discussion of exemplars, which can then be 'fed forward' to improve later performance. As such, it is not the case that the use of examinations rules out the provision of formative feedback prior to submission. Finally, feedback should not be understood as being solely provided by the tutor. Creating opportunities for dialogue with peers and improving students' self-reflective abilities should be considered as integral to the feedback process (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012a). As long as feedback is understood solely as the responsibility of tutors, students will remain in a position of dependence, which may restrict their ability to develop their critical and reflective capacities in regard to their own work both in academia and in their future careers. Treating feedback as a more collective activity also offers practical advantages through greater efficiency as compared to providing individualised feedback only. We suggest applying these four principles in combination provides one possible route by which exams can be included in the increasingly urgent drive to enhance student feedback.

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