

'I was really upset and it put me off': The emotional impact of assessment feedback on first-year undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

Assessment feedback can have an emotional impact on students. This qualitative research contributes to the existing body of literature on students' emotional reactions to assessment feedback by investigating the negative responses to summative feedback experienced by first-year students at two UK universities. The majority of the learners interviewed indicated that their initial first-year feedback had a negative emotional impact and demotivated them. For some students, these negative emotions were very serious and led them to consider leaving university. Negative emotions were related to the written feedback provided, the grade received, and the student's expectations about both. Potential solutions to mitigate first-year students' negative emotional reactions to summative assessment feedback are provided.

Keywords: assessment, first-year students, emotional reactions to assessment feedback, pedagogy, first-year student experience, summative assessment, assessment literacy

Introduction

Assessment feedback practices in tertiary education impact students' lived experiences at university. This paper provides an original contribution to the literature on the emotional impact of assessment feedback, where there is a gap in research on the negative emotional impact of summative assessment feedback on contemporary first-year students. Its finding that substantially greater numbers of first-years may experience negative emotional reactions to feedback than previously considered, and that students' perceptions of the amount of time and effort they expended in producing their assessed work affect their emotional response provides a new and novel contribution to our understanding of students' reactions to summative assessment feedback.

Literature review

Within the literature on assessment, there is an established argument that assessment practices can involve complex and emotional processes for students (see; Carless 2006, Davies & Ecclestone, 2008; Higgins, 2000; Higgins et al., 2001; Hyland, 1998; Molloy et al., 2013; Rowe et al., 2014; Rowe, 2017; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Shields, 2015; Skelton, 2002; Torrance, 2012). Assessment feedback can impact learner's identities and notions of self-worth and confidence, both positively and negatively (Carless, 2006; Cramp et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2021; Torrance, 2012). It is commonly understood amongst educators that assessment feedback can motivate learners if they have been successful in an assessment task, yet, if they are less successful, it can undermine confidence and the capacity to learn (Torrance, et

al., 2005). As may be expected, positive emotions are believed to affect learning in a positive way (Pekrun et al., 2011), whilst negative ones have been found to have the opposite effect (Lewis et al., 2011).

Assessment feedback can threaten a student's self-perception and confidence (Carless, 2006) and, in turn, whether they achieve to the best of their ability. Shields (2015), for example, found that, for Social-Science and Humanities students in the early stages of their degree, there was a link between how they interpreted feedback comments and their individual beliefs about themselves as learners. Feedback could help develop confidence and reinforce notions of self-worth, or, reinforce notions of inability to successfully study at university, with some learners interpreting negative feedback as being personal criticism. Student feedback processes are, however, never simple ones and educators cannot assume that feedback will lead to a student's development. As Ryan & Henderson (2018, p.881) have suggested "The receipt of feedback comments from an external source is a complicated form of social interaction, in which factors such as such as power, discourse, identity, and emotion may come into play".

Cramp's (2011) work on first-year students' engagement with feedback draws attention to what he labels as students' first formal 'moment' of receiving summative feedback. He argues this can put confidence and self-esteem at risk, with feedback that a student perceives as being negative, impacting negatively their confidence and self-esteem. Work by Jones et al., (2012) concurs with this, identifying that, for many students, their initial emotional reaction is extremely important. Where feedback demotivated, it was found to have "very limited value to the ongoing learning process" (ibid. p.4). Students' emotional reactions to assessment feedback can be significant, particularly in influencing how they act on the feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2017; Rand, 2017). The difficulty students may have in overcoming negative emotions to feedback should not be underestimated, with Shields (2015) suggesting that where it has had a detrimental effect on confidence, it takes students a long time to subsequently engage with it to improve their work.

The present study

This research investigated whether students felt they had experienced an emotional response to the summative assessment feedback and grade they received in their first year of university and, if so, its impact on them. Its focus was on first-year students' initial summative assessments, their first formal 'moment' of receiving feedback at university.

Research Design / Methodology

The research was a qualitative, interpretive study involving 20 first-year students studying Education at two UK universities (11 from one, nine from the other) in the north of England. Both institutions score over 75% for both research quality and student satisfaction according to the most recent UK university league tables (The Complete University Guide, 2022)

All of the students were white females, 95% being UK citizens, and one a Polish citizen.

A qualitative, interpretive study was used to find out, in rich detail, about contemporary students' lived experiences in respect of their emotional reactions to assessment feedback. A quantitative study would have been unable to capture the full range of students' views in sufficient detail. For the students involved, assessment processes at each institution did not include examinations, yet did include essays,

presentations, and group work projects. All of the students in this study received their summative assessment grades at the same time as written feedback comments. Students were selected on a voluntary basis following lecture shout-outs and email requests. Semi-structured interview questions were developed to explore students' use of and reaction to assessment feedback. The questions were piloted with two students to check for clarity and understanding. Data was then collected through 30-40 minute individual semi-structured interviews. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce accurate transcripts. Participants were offered the opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy (respondent validation) and trustworthiness, though it should be noted that none opted to do so. No triangulation was carried out due to constraints on time for the participants. It is acknowledged that they gave up their time freely and willingly, with no financial or other incentive for participation. Transcripts were manually analysed through a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014). Themes identified from an initial deductive analysis were reviewed and further analysed and refined until clear key themes were finalised. Student anonymity was preserved throughout the data collection and analysis process. The research was conducted following institutional ethical approval and following the British Educational Research Association's (2018) guidelines for ethical research.

I acknowledge that my positionality (Holmes, 2020) as a white, male, university lecturer, who is older than the students and in a relative position of power, may have affected, in some way, the students' engagement with the interview process. To mitigate this, I adopted a reflexive approach throughout the interview and data analysis process. Interviews were conducted in each institution's student union building so that students could feel more relaxed and comfortable. I ensured that I did not interview any students whose work I had previously assessed, or would assess in the future so that students could be honest and open in their responses. My positionality as a researcher, working to ethical guidelines and as a professional academic, with experience in designing and conducting qualitative interviews contributed to the trustworthiness and reliability of the research.

Limitations of the research

This study relied on semi-structured interviews, using questions devised by myself, with a sample of students, from only two UK universities. All participants were white females, 95% of whom were UK citizens. The views of male, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic, and international students are not represented, and I acknowledge that their views may be different. Data was analysed by myself. The results may not be representative, nor generalisable. The focus of this paper is on the negative emotional reaction to assessment feedback. I acknowledge that not all first-year students will experience an emotional reaction to assessment feedback, and that emotional reactions can be positive as well as negative.

Results/Findings

Key themes from the thematic analysis are listed in Table 1 (below). Of the 20 students, 90% reported that the initial first-year assessment feedback they received had affected them emotionally, with only 10% reporting it had not. Of the students who had been affected emotionally, 83% indicated that feedback had a negative emotional effect, impacting one or more of their: confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and belief in their ability to be successful at university. Only 17% of students emotionally affected indicated that feedback had a positive emotional effect on them. These students identified this was due to the grade they received being higher than expected and that, because of this, they had not been too concerned with the content of the written feedback. 10% indicated they had not even read the feedback because they

perceived their grade to be 'good'. Table 1 identifies the key themes from the thematic analysis. For this paper, these were then combined into three coherent areas: grade expectations and 'negative' feedback, students' conception of themselves as a learner, and time and effort expended on assessed work.

Table 1: Key themes from the thematic analysis

Time and effort expended on assessed work
Grade expectations – linked to perception of ability
Grade expectations – where grade lower than expected - linked to negative emotions
Grade expectations – where grade higher than expected - linked to positive emotions
Grade expectations – where grade higher than expected, feedback unlikely to be read by learner
Student conception of themselves as a learner
Feedback comments perceived as being 'negative'

Grade expectations and 'negative' feedback

For the students who indicated they had experienced a negative emotional reaction(s) to their summative assessment feedback, these reactions could be categorized as originating in two ways. Firstly, where the grade received was lower than they expected, and, secondly, where the grade received was broadly in line with their expectation, yet the feedback comments were perceived by the learner to be 'negative' in some way.

Negative emotions were strongest when the student received *both* a grade lower than expected and feedback they perceived to be negative. For these students, assessment feedback seriously demotivated them and eroded their confidence. Student 11, for example, stated:

I remember being really upset and crying...if my mark wasn't very good, and the feedback was, like, negative. It really knocked my confidence".

Whilst student four reported:

I take the feedback very personally. I remember getting a really poor grade and having a remark saying that it was 'almost fit for purpose' and that devastated me. That put me right off, as I'd put a lot of time and effort into it, and expected a good grade. I think if I was not fit for purpose and if you are only just fit for purpose you are not very good, are you?.

Whilst student 10 talked about throwing in the towel [i.e. withdrawing from the course:

It was our first assignment and none of us had done anything like that before, so we were a bit thrown in the deep end and I remember contemplating quitting the course...I was close to throwing in the towel...I was crying, which I never do...I ended up going to counselling. I think they put us too deep in the water. I was expecting a really good grade, yet I didn't and the comments I

got back were really, you know...they were really, I thought, negative, and yet I'd put so much time and effort into writing it.

Where grades were lower than expected the emotional impact was considerable, particularly so when the student believed they had put a considerable amount of time and effort into producing the assessed work. Student 13, for example, talked about how, based on her previous pre-university grades and the amount of work she had expended, her grades were lower than she expected, which led to her considering leaving university.

I was expecting to get marks in the 60s as I'd done ok at college, and you know I'd put a lot, a lot, of effort and time and work into the assignment. I got my first marks back and they were 40s and 50s. I felt pretty devastated and my confidence in my own ability, like, went really low for a long time after. It put me off doing any work for weeks. I thought about quitting university.

Whilst student seven stated:

I'd put lots of time and effort into the assessment, yet the mark they gave me was really not very good, and a lot lower than I thought I'd get. It put me off, and I couldn't face reading the feedback for weeks. In fact, I didn't read it for one module. I was really put off university and not very motivated for weeks after.

Student's conception of themselves as a learner

It would seem that the impact of feedback, along with the grade received, was directly related to an individual student's unique conception of themselves as a learner; specifically, their conception of their ability as a first-year university student, and, from this, the grade they expected to receive for their work. Their grade expectation in turn, was based on a combination of both their conception of their ability and how much time and effort they felt they had put into producing their assessed work.

However, even where a student felt that their grade was acceptable to them, or broadly in line with their expectations, there was still a considerable negative emotional impact when they perceived the feedback to be 'negative'. Student 17, for example, commented:

I remember getting really upset when I got my first assessments back, the mark was kind of ok, but the comments upset me. My tutor said my spelling was crap, my sentences did not make sense. I was using too many abbreviations. Yet I didn't know not to. It really put me off.

Similarly, student eight stated:

I remember the first bit of assessment I got back...I felt the lecturer's comments were so horrible. It was rubbish...my spelling was rubbish, my grammar was rubbish, my referencing was all wrong, I was really, really upset and it put me off. My grade was sort of ok, but the comments were really negative.

Time and effort expended on assessed work

Interestingly, 40% of the participants were under the impression that assessors would give higher grades for work that a student had spent considerable time and effort in producing. For example, student four "I put a lot of effort into my work and expected a high grade", student eight "I'd spent hours on the work, hours and hours, and they didn't take any account of that at all", student 15:

I spent a lot of time and effort on my assignment, I worked really hard on it. But they didn't seem to recognise that at all. My friend, put hardly any effort in, they only started it two days before the deadline, and they got a much better mark than me,

and student 12 "I put loads of effort in and they didn't seem to, like, recognise that at all".

It would seem that first-year students do not understand that individual assessors cannot know how much, or little, time and effort has been expended by a student in producing their assessed work. Exploring this issue with some of the students in the interviews it became apparent that students had assumed that lecturers would somehow 'know' how much time and effort they had spent in producing their assessed assignments. It should be noted here that the courses at each institution used anonymous marking, meaning that assessors, even if they did have some foreknowledge of individual time and effort expended, would be unable to take account of this when marking work.

Discussion

As an educator in higher education, I was very concerned by these first-year student comments. Summative assessment feedback had a serious negative emotional impact, leaving students upset and demotivated, and some to consider leaving university. Given the considerable institutional time, effort, and financial resources devoted to recruiting and retaining students, and to providing a positive student experience, and, acknowledging that first-years are at the greatest risk of leaving university (Barbera, et al., 2017; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Johnson, 1994; Kehm et al. , 2019; Ortiz-Lazano et al., 2020; Tinto, 1993, 2009, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004), it was evident that initial summative assessment feedback could potentially be highly detrimental to these students and their future achievement and success.

It is generally recognised that assessment feedback should be "encouraging and supportive in tone" (HEA, 2013 p.13) as this is regarded as helping learning. If feedback is taken to refer to the 'closing of a gap' (Ramaparasad, 1983), the 'gap' effectively being the student's current level of knowledge/understanding/skill and the level of knowledge/understanding/skill they need to be at, then lecturers' feedback should be constructive and supportive, and minimise negative emotional reactions, so that students can utilise it to close any gaps and improve future work (Gibbs, 2010; Irons, 2008, Morris et al., 2021; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Zhang & Zheng, 2018). However, if the feedback is too uncritical, it may not convey the necessity to improve work, inferring that students may feel it is not necessary to take any action to close any gap. Yet, there is a problem if feedback is more corrective than developmental, and only focuses on telling students what they need to do to close the gap. Torrance (2012), for example, has argued that sending the message feedback is about closing a gap may signify to students that, once the gap has been closed, no further learning is required, which may lead to students adopting a more surface approach to their learning. It is therefore important to ensure feedback is used to help students build upon and develop skills and encourage the use of a deep approach to learning (Holmes, 2018a). The student comments indicate that where feedback had a negative emotional affect; they may not use it to make improvements to future work, may delay engaging with it, or may disengage from it entirely, so that its impact on future learning is considerably less than it should be, or has the potential to be.

The emotional upset experienced by students from assessment feedback may, to some extent, be explained by higher education's blurring of the different functions of summative assessment and formative feedback (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Yorke, 2003), whereby a summative grade is provided at

the same time as formative developmental feedback. Criticism of higher education practices of providing summative assessment results alongside feedback intended to be developmental is long-standing, as is the argument that formative and summative assessment serve different purposes and should be separated out (see Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2006; Crooks, 2004; Gipps, 2010; Harlen, 2007; Joughin, 2010; Knight, 2002; Yorke, 2003). Winstone and Boud (2022) have recently re-drawn attention to what they refer to as the 'entanglement of assessment' where the two different functions of assessment and feedback are combined and the dominance of assessment hinders the purpose of feedback. They clarify the distinction as follows:

Assessment commonly focuses on summative assessment of student performance against appropriate standards or criteria, in order to generate grades which are reliable, valid and defensible. On the other hand, the primary function of feedback is to influence students' future work and learning strategies. Thus, within the same act of grading work and providing comments, the marker is enacting two very different purposes: (grade award and justification) considering past achievement and the provision of feedback information (to influence future achievement). (ibid, p. 657)

Many UK students, having recently left school or college, will have experienced some form of Assessment for Learning (AfL) pedagogy in the compulsory education sector, which frequently emphasises formative feedback provided separately from a summative grade (Harlen, 2012a, 2012b; Wiliam, 2011). Students in my study explained that prior to university they had been used to receiving frequent formative feedback, and subsequently submitting work for summative assessment confident about the feedback and grade they would receive. Whereas, at university, they had usually only received formative feedback once, typically on a plan or outline. For their initial first-year assignment submissions, they did not know what quantity, or type, of feedback to expect. Consequently, where the grade and/or feedback comments received did not match their expectations, it frequently came as a surprise or shock to them, and, often was perceived as being negative and led to a negative emotional response.

Students who indicated that feedback had a positive emotional effect on them, and those who had not read the feedback, explained this was due to the grade they received being 'good' or higher than expected. This finding aligns with work by Pitt and Norton (2017), involving third-years, who identified that, for some students, the grade was more important than the feedback, and with Gomez and Osborne's (2007) research which found that, where students received a high grade, they believed it was unnecessary to engage with feedback. Similarly, Doan (2013); Gibbs (2010); Rand (2017); Weaver (2006); and Winstone et al., (2017) have identified that some students are more interested in grades than feedback.

That finding that some students believed that they should be rewarded for the time and effort spent in producing their assessed work broadly aligns with Taras's (2003) finding that 80% of the students she surveyed felt that the grade they received should reflect the amount of time and effort they had put in, regardless of the actual quality of the work produced. Students may, particularly in the first year, when their assessment literacy will not be well-developed, conflate their effort with the quality of the work produced (Boud et al., 2015). As Carless (2006 p.231) has identified, "Hard work does not guarantee a high mark". One may speculate that this is something they have learned from their experiences during compulsory education.

Implications for practice

The findings are of significance for educators involved in assessing first-year undergraduates, and those involved in enhancing the first-year student experience, improving student retention, and improving student attainment. The main implication for educators is that they need to be aware of the potential negative emotional impact that their feedback provided at the same time as the grade on summative assessments may have on some first-year students. Yet how can educators know what impact their feedback may have on an individual student? Torrance's argument that providing and receiving feedback is a "highly demanding emotional process, impacting on learner's notions of identity and self-worth...particularly so if it is a low grade" (Torrance, 2012, p.334) is borne out by many of the students' comments. Perhaps educators need to be more aware of 'negativity' in any feedback comments provided, or, more specifically, a student's potential interpretation and perception of negativity, particularly so where a relatively low grade is awarded. Yet, as previously discussed, if feedback is uncritical, then it may not convey to learners the necessity to improve their work.

Ideally, assessment feedback should be individually tailored to the student (Brookhart, 2017; Irons & Elkington, 2022), and should help them develop motivation, confidence, and self-esteem and to improve their future work (Irons, 2008). Yet, lecturers are usually unable to take account of a student's self-perception of their own relative ability, or the amount of effort they have put into an assessment task. Educators also need to bear in mind that students' expectations and emotional responses to feedback at university are influenced by their previous feedback experiences at school and college (Robinson et al., 2013). University lecturers very often do not know individual student's pre-university feedback experiences. A lecturer's summative feedback cannot easily address individual first-year student's feedback expectations, *particularly so* where anonymised marking is carried out. Lecturers also cannot know whether students will engage with feedback (Crisp, 2007), nor how they will interpret it (Wilson, 2012).

This research project suggests that greater use of formative feedback, alongside the development of students' understanding of higher education assessment practices should help them to more accurately predict their expected grade, and could help first-years to be better prepared for the accompanying feedback. This aligns with recent theoretical and practical work in the literature on assessment, which suggests that students' feedback literacy needs to be much better developed (see, Carless & Boud, 2018; Carless & Winstone, 2020; Malecka et al., 2020; Molloy et al., 2020). Students also need to learn, or have it explained to them, that the time and effort devoted to an assessment task is not directly taken into account when marking; the assessor only sees the final product. A well-designed assessment and grading scheme should, however, be able to recognise and reward time and effort through the assessor's judgement about the quality of the completed assessment task.

As Williams (2014, p.566) identifies, in the majority of current UK higher education practices, "the assessment of learning predominates over assessment for learning". Existing practices of providing a summative grade at the same time as developmental feedback (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010) mean that assessment of learning is carried out at the same time as assessment for learning; despite a strong argument that combining the two has a negative impact on learning (Gipps, 2010). None of the students in my study described learning experiences that would specifically align with an AfL pedagogy. However, as the use of AfL increasingly permeates higher education practices (Carless, 2017; Tee & Ahmed, 2014), this should better prepare students for feedback provided alongside a summative grade and might, to some extent, mitigate the negative emotional effects of first-year assessment feedback.

How could educators address these issues?

Robinson et al., (2013) also observed that feedback typically does not meet the expectations of first-year students and argued that assessors should incorporate more positive messages into feedback and coach or teach students about how to regulate their emotional responses to feedback. In a similar way to the use of coaching and mentoring to develop student autonomy (see Holmes, 2018b), a series of structured mentoring interventions could be a practicable means of facilitating students' understanding of their emotions linked to feedback. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest a specific feedback coaching scheme, a well-designed one could help develop students' mental resilience, provide them with strategies for 'managing' their emotional reactions and for moving forward from situations where their reaction has hindered or temporarily halted, their academic progress.

Developing students' feedback literacy would seem to be a key component of helping them to be better able to cope with negative emotions. Pitt and Norton (2017) suggest that educators should encourage students, from the start of their studies, to become more feedback literate. Improving student assessment literacy (see, for example, Carless & Boud, 2018; Carless & Winstone; 2020, Malecka, et al.2020; Molloy et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2013) may be an important way forward in reducing students' negative emotional reaction to summative assessment feedback, and, through doing so, help learners to have a more positive university experience. This research, as a new contribution to the field, identifies that as part of feedback literacy, there should be some explanation provided to students that the amount of time and effort they spend on their assessed work may not necessarily be a reliable indicator of the actual grade they will receive.

This research has identified that students' grade expectations are an important factor in their emotional reaction to assessment feedback. Learning activities that help students to develop more accurate expectations of their assessment grade, as part of their assessment literacy, should be incorporated into teaching practice. One key aspect of assessment literacy identified by Carless and Boud (2018) that may be particularly important is using exemplars of assessed work with students to help them identify the attributes of work that is of high quality. As they argue "analysis of exemplars develops students' feedback literacy by showing them rather than telling them about quality work" (ibid. p. 1321). The use of anonymous marking should also be reviewed. Although there is a strong argument that its use can reduce assessor bias, it may undermine the learning potential of feedback, particularly in respect of the ability of lecturers to personalise feedback to the individual learner, (see, for example, Pitt and Winstone (2018) for a discussion of the tensions and issues surrounding anonymous marking and its benefits). Serious consideration should be given to disentangling, and clearly separating out, existing processes of assessment and feedback, though actually doing so would require a not inconsiderable overhaul of existing assessment practices.

Conclusions and future work

This study revealed the negative reactions of first-year students to university feedback, and their accompanying demotivation and potential to drop out of higher education. Implications for practice include educators being more aware of the potential negative impact of their feedback, and the need for increased formative feedback instances within an evolving AfL culture. Educators need to help students develop their feedback literacy, including the use of exemplars for students to evaluate different quality work.

Future research could focus on second and third-year students and how they may manage their emotional reactions to feedback as they progress through university, to identify strategies they have developed, and what academic support they had for this and/or identify what support would have been useful. The research could also be expanded to students from a range of disciplines and backgrounds and larger-scale studies involving a greater number of institutions.

Biography

Andrew G D Holmes is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Hull and a trustee of the charity Hull and East Yorkshire Children's University. Andrew is a Senior Fellow of the HEA and a Senior Fellow of The University of Hull's Teaching Excellence Academy. His research interests include higher education assessment, students' approaches to learning, and higher education pedagogy and practice.

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