Improving essay writing skills - comparing the effects of written and verbal feedback in Animal Biology undergraduates

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Feedback is essential for student progression and learning (Price et al., 2010) as it allows students to reflect on previous work and consider how to make future improvements (Fry et al., 2003). Without feedback students may struggle to improve upon their mistakes and may continue to make errors affecting their grades. Studies have found that written feedback can provide significant improvement to students learning (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009) as students can refer back to the feedback and take time to digest it. However, students sometime struggle to understand the written feedback (Orsmond & Merry 2010). Verbal feedback although less well studied, has been found to increase student confidence in their coursework (Attali, 2011). Therefore, if staff can engage in dialogue with the students about their written feedback they can gain insight in to how effective they are at communicating their feedback. Verbal feedback may also help build stronger staff-student partnerships which should open the door for future communications.

Here students were given a lecture on effective essay writing, then given time to write an essay from a list of titles. Markers gave written feedback and an initial grade to the student. Students then had time to reflect on the feedback before meeting with the marker to further discuss how they could improve their essay. Students then had a further two weeks to resubmit their essay for a second grading. Data was gathered via a questionnaire on the students perceptions of the effectiveness of the two types of feedback and grades for first and final drafts compared. Students generally saw benefits to both types of feedback and felt more confident to approach staff in the future for feedback. Further, final grades were improved, highlighting to the students the importance of engaging with feedback to improve future work.

References