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

Dr Ashley Le Vin
School of Life Sciences,
University of Glasgow

Importance of feedback

- Feedback can assist students in reflecting on and improving future assignments (Fry et al., 2003).
- However, although students want feedback (O’Donovan et al., 2001), this doesn’t mean they read and/or understand it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Orsmond & Merry, 2010).
- Feedback needs to be understandable and we need to get students to engage with it in order to benefit.

Essay writing exercise

- Students given a choice of 10 essay titles
- Given an essay writing lecture and an essay planning session
- One month to write a 1500 word essay
- Essay marked and written feedback sent to student, then student meets with marker for verbal feedback session
- Students then had at least 2 weeks to rework and complete a second draft

Written feedback

- How easy was the feedback to understand? (5= very easy)
  - 76% rated written feedback a score of 4 or 5 (Av. = 4.02)
- Comments from students:
  - Each comment was at the point in the essay that needed modification, it was simple and understandable. It was useful to look back at written feedback to remember what was said in the verbal feedback
  - Some of it was vague - comments left of just “?????”
  - Could have said what parts were good and why
Verbal feedback

- **How easy was the feedback to understand?** (*5 = very easy*)
  - 83% rated written feedback a score of 4 or 5 (Av. = 4.34)
- Comments from students:
  - It was great to bounce new ideas off each other
  - I could discuss areas which needed to be improved and explore the best ways to improve them
  - Clarification of written feedback
  - There was a lot of information - I should have written it all down to be honest
  - Wasn’t much on what was good and should be kept
- **Do the two feedback methods compliment one another/are both necessary?** (*5 = very necessary*)
  - 75% rated this a score of a 4 or a 5 (Av. = 4.2)

Approachability of staff

- **91% of students felt more confident to approach staff in the future for feedback**
- Comments from students:
  - Staff are approachable and easy to talk to. Give useful answers to questions asked.
  - It’s not of something I would have done before but now I feel much more confident in both emailing and approaching staff.
  - Very helpful for improving work. Will not hesitate to ask for feedback if needed.
  - Depends who the staff member is, some are welcoming, some are not so much.

Increasing confidence in essay writing

- 73% of students rated their confidence in writing a better quality essay a 4 or 5 (*5 = very confident*)

Paired t-test: \( t = -10.5, \text{d.f.} = 65, P < 0.001 \)

How to improve the exercise?

- Maybe a forum where you could ask either peers or lecturers
- Essay feedback from more than 1 member of staff. Feel like there was a large discrepancy between markers
- All feedback should be given at the same time, not fair that some people had whole week more to write the essay than others

[Nitto et al., 2012]

Moving forward...

- We should continue with this essay skills exercise.
- Encourage students to use Moodle forums – peer evaluation/help (perhaps set up one for each essay topic).
- Improve on positive feedback to students.
- Emphasise the importance of reflecting on feedback on other coursework.

Thanks!

- Any questions?
- Your thoughts?
- Your experiences of feedback?
- How can we get students to reflect and engage with feedback more widely to aid their future work?

http://teachers.net/mentors/student-motivation/topic6/6.13.11.19.35.01.html

References