‘Testing, testing...’

Pitts, Stephanie E.

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ARTICLE

'Testing, testing . . .'

How do students use written feedback?

STEPHANIE E. PITTS *University of Sheffield*

ABSTRACT This article reports on a small-scale study of feedback on music students' written work, in which staff and students were asked to evaluate existing practice and suggest potential modifications. The value of feedback as a communicative learning tool is illustrated through students' participation in a range of research tasks, including rating the usefulness of existing feedback comments and attempting to generate their own. The study shows that challenges in developing practice apply even where changes sought are far from radical, and conclusions are drawn which suggest ways forward for practice and research in giving feedback.

KEYWORDS: *feedback, improving practice, music in higher education, self-esteem, student consultation*

Why investigate feedback?

Research interest in assessment in higher education has grown in recent years, as increased student numbers have necessitated a greater awareness and development of teaching practices in institutions which have historically been research-led. Asking pedagogical questions about higher education, however, is still rather unfashionable, and Mantz Yorke has claimed that 'pedagogical research in higher education is undervalued' (2000: 106). In music, where the study reported here is located, several recent articles point to recognition of the need to broaden assessment methods, involving students in peer- and self-assessment in ways that foreground the learning opportunities of feedback, rather than emphasizing its summative and evaluative roles (cf. Daniel, 2004; Blom and Poole, 2004). Looking for new ways of assessing students' work is a valuable and necessary endeavour, but my question here is more pragmatically driven: how do we improve existing practice, not through radical change, but through an increased awareness of how students use and understand the feedback they currently receive?

Students' difficulties in understanding and acting upon their tutors' comments have been explored in several recent articles (Chanock, 2000; Higgins et al., 2001, 2002), and the challenges of 'feeding back' effectively

are acknowledged to embrace 'patterns of power, authority, emotion and identity' (Higgins et al., 2001: 273). Pat Young (2000) has drawn attention to the emotional impact of receiving comments and marks, challenges which may be particularly acute for a music student, whose sense of self-identity as a musician is closely tied to musical ability and achievement (cf. Pitts, 2002). Beyond the mature students that Young studied, there are 'psychologically vulnerable students' in our classes too (Young, 2000: 409), and it is easy to underestimate the extent to which careless assessment and feedback might affect their development and emotional stability.

The majority of recent studies of feedback have advocated substantial change from a traditional system where the tutor holds sole responsibility and authority in assessment, towards alternative methods of peer- and self-assessment (e.g. Cheng and Warren, 2000). My aim in this study is not so ambitious: I am searching rather for ways of doing tutor assessment *well* and for an understanding of how students interpret and use the feedback they receive in the process. Calls for different forms of assessment may result from that investigation, but the principal aim here is to measure the health of the current system, and determine whether it seems set to grow or perish.

Research aims and methods

The study reported here was carried out between March and May 2003 in the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield, where I have been a lecturer since 1999. The research therefore embraces the perils and opportunities of researching 'close to home', not least the ethical considerations of researching with my own students, and the limitations of being 'a prophet in [my] own country' when reporting back to colleagues (Wellington, 1996: 15). Care was taken to preserve the anonymity of participants, who were volunteers from the third-year undergraduate population, recruited through an initial questionnaire and covering letter distributed via the internal mail. Permission to use their responses in publications was sought at every stage, and participants were free to join and leave the study as they wished.

Questionnaire design reflected standard practice in educational research (Cohen and Manion, 1994), with the inclusion of a number of 'tick box' questions, followed by some more open-ended questions with space for qualitative comments. Students were asked about the ways in which they typically receive and respond to written feedback, given words to select from to describe the tone and style of the comments they receive, and asked to describe the features they find helpful and unhelpful. Return rates were typically low (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1994), but sufficient for my

purposes: 18 out of 53 questionnaires were returned (34%), and five students also returned their reply slip and volunteered to be in the discussion group.

Having established an initial overview through the questionnaire, my next aim was to gather more detailed, individual views from those volunteers who had offered to participate further. As had been outlined to the students when they agreed to take part, the discussion group meetings included some structured tasks designed to encourage deeper reflection on real and ideal feedback. Students were asked to bring to the first meeting a piece of feedback that had had a particular effect on them and their work, and to write a short reflection explaining the significance of the feedback they had nominated. Following a discussion of that task, which was tape-recorded and transcribed, the students were asked to complete a ratings grid which sought their reactions to examples of vocabulary and style that were typical of feedback in the department. Finally, they were asked between meetings to write their own feedback for a piece of work that I provided: a modified version of a book review that I had recently written, altered to include some of the common faults that are identified through feedback – such as inelegant expression, arguments that are not pursued effectively, sudden jumps of direction – whilst retaining some more positive features that the students might choose to comment on. They were asked to 'write some comments on this piece of work in whatever way you feel would be helpful to the author', so allowing me to match their own attempts with the ideals they had identified through earlier tasks and discussion.

Findings from the questionnaire and first discussions were summarized and used as the basis for discussion in the second meeting, in order to check my understanding of the students' views in a manner consistent with focus group and grounded theory research (Charmaz, 1995; Wellington, 1996). This summary was also distributed to staff in the music department, as my hope was to gather colleagues' views and perhaps even to stimulate a discussion about feedback practices in the department. Four colleagues (out of 12) responded to the questions that were circulated with the summary, and their views were compared with the student perspectives.

It will be apparent from this outline of methods that the research reported here is in the nature of a small-scale preliminary investigation, and is of value as much for its testing of a range of research methods as for its findings. Results from staff and students will be reported in the next section, forming the basis for reflections on good practice and the potential for development.

Research findings and discussion

Students were asked in this study about both current and ideal practice – their views of one perhaps inevitably informing their hopes for the other. The distribution, style and frequency of feedback received were all covered, raising a number of ideas which can be generalized beyond the idiosyncrasies of our departmental practice to varying degrees. The focus in this article will be on the communicative effects and possibilities of written feedback, since this is likely to offer the most fruitful point of comparison with readers' own experiences.

Asking students what they *need* from feedback is a salutary exercise, since it is immediately apparent that a scribbled comment or hasty judgement is seen by them as an indication of lack of care and interest in their work, which lessens their trust in the tutor's professional judgement as well as potentially threatening their own self-confidence through carelessly negative comments. Some comments from the questionnaire data endorsed this recognition of the care (or otherwise) taken over providing feedback:

- Irritating if it's difficult to read. Feel a little bit more effort could have been put in after all student's effort.
- If the tutor writes messily and criticizes at the same time, it makes it twice as bad!
- If it seems that a tutor has taken time and effort to write feedback, then I am more inclined to take the comments on board (e.g. word processed, a decent length).

Other students were more pragmatic in their views on presentation and style:

- I would rather have lots of messy feedback than two lines of beautiful print. We understand that time is precious.
- Don't think it really matters – notes and bullet points make just as much sense as full sentences.

Students' requirements for clear and individual feedback might be met through short, precise comments, or demand a more lengthy response: opinions seemed to be divided on the values of brevity and depth, a point which was investigated more closely through an item on the questionnaire which asked students to 'underline the words that characterize the feedback you generally receive' from the selection shown in Figure 1.

These adjectives were chosen to be balanced for positive and negative connotations without including obvious opposites which would counteract one another and so limit responses. 'Brief' was the most frequently selected word, appearing in 12 out of 18 responses (66%), and coming

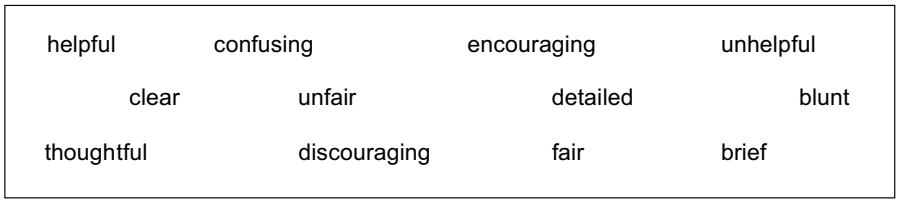

Figure 1 **Adjectives for describing typical feedback**

slightly ahead of 'fair' and 'helpful', which were both selected by 11 students (61%). It was combined with the full range of other responses, implicitly acquiring positive associations by being perceived as 'clear' and 'helpful'. Indeed, the combinations of words showed that in these students' eyes it is possible for feedback to be both 'blunt' and 'helpful', or 'unhelpful' but 'fair' although, perhaps surprisingly, never 'confusing'!

Students in the discussion group were asked to supply a piece of feedback that 'had had a particular effect on them': the three who responded all interpreted this to mean a positive impact, and their reflections on the usefulness of the feedback received endorsed the views that had emerged from the questionnaire data. Suggestions for future work, encouragement and balanced criticism were all valued, and criticism was accepted where it was tactfully articulated. Two of the students mentioned practical steps they had taken in future work as a result of this feedback: one explained that she now aimed 'to cut down on words and use less "common" language', while another had used a tutor's 'ideas and suggestions to create an "essay dos and don'ts list" which I now have pinned on my wall and refer to for every essay'. I asked this last student if she could have been given such a list of such 'dos and don'ts' at the start of the course, and whilst she agreed that might have helped her, she valued the specificity of the list she had constructed from her feedback.

In the final task in their first meeting, the discussion group students were given a selection of sample comments and asked to choose the ones they 'would find most helpful and/or approachable'. As in earlier tasks, they reflected here on the tact of markers, the recognition of student effort, the value of comments that are applicable to future work, and the use of encouragement and a positive tone. Only one statement – the least destructive out of a group of three negative comments – attracted unanimous approval; others were more divided, and prompted useful discussion on feedback style and content. The statement 'A good summary of a difficult topic' was dismissed as 'too vague', although elsewhere the acknowledgement of difficulty was felt to indicate tutors' empathy with students' level of effort. Similar confusions emerged in discussion of a statement that was

chosen by two students: 'Some great ideas here – I particularly enjoyed your discussion of the symphony's title, which *is* very misleading, I agree'. Here one student valued the 'positive and encouraging' nature of the comment, having earlier dismissed a lecturer's expression of 'enjoyment' as a 'useless comment'. With such variations emerging even across different examples with the same student, the range of interpretation to which feedback comments are open has worrying implications. In this task, students showed themselves to be sensitive to language, less concerned about presentation but keen to see evidence of thought and commitment on the lecturer's part, and to be given encouraging, specific comments that were applicable to future work.

The perceptive analytical skills these students have shown in 'feeding back on their feedback' highlight their capacities as discerning learners, who at times are feeling short-changed by their teachers and assessors. Previous studies have shown that students' sensitivity to the language used to discuss their work is often highly charged, and the 'objectivity' we implicitly claim for our assessments, with finely graded marks and a distanced commentary, is misleading (Sadler, 1983), particularly in the interpretative realm of the creative arts (Smart and Dixon, 2002). The students in my study, as in Hyland's (2003) work with learners of English as a Second Language, often had clear ideas about what they wanted from their feedback, and had been unable to communicate these needs to their tutors, despite being able to articulate them clearly for a researcher. Asking students what they *want* from their feedback might therefore be a useful step forward, although Southworth (1999) questions the usefulness of familiar ways of gathering such student views, whilst emphasizing the need to bridge conceptual gaps which are 'to subject academics . . . too obvious to need explanation' but remain for many undergraduates 'a mystifying refusal to name the rules of the game' (Southworth, 1999: 3).

Students were generally very accepting of the current system, and dissatisfaction was expressed in fairly mild terms, with students showing an awareness of the limitations brought by staff workload and availability of time. They were also willing to take some responsibility for improving practice, sometimes admitting that they had not taken up existing opportunities to meet with module tutors or submit drafts of writing for interim feedback. However, the view of one discussion group member, that 'we can get by on how it is now – it's not dire but it could be improved', shows a clear need for further development if students are to do more than 'survive' the system.

Students' suggestions for development centred on two main requests: more verbal, face-to-face feedback, given through meetings with module tutors; and improvements in the written comments that they receive, with

greater equality of provision amongst different tutors. These questionnaire responses are illustrative of the range of suggestions made on this point:

- It should be compulsory (not all lecturers are good at writing comments as feedback and some only give grades).
- Possibly more detailed comments, though for some tutors, not necessary.
- I think it should be ensured that students always receive detailed, legible commentary on their work, not just a mark (although maybe this is already in place?).

A few students suggested a standardized 'comment sheet', but this was often hedged around with provisos that supported the general emphasis on the individuality of the feedback they would like to receive. If written feedback is about communication between teachers and learners, the restrictions of a standard form could inhibit current good practice, even while raising less satisfactory practice to an acceptable minimum standard. The students seem to be aware of this balance in their cautious approach to any blanket solutions.

These two ideas – more frequent meetings with module tutors, and greater consistency and quality in written feedback – were the strongest suggestions to emerge from the student responses. Both seem reasonable in principle, but attract the familiar cautions that staff time and student willingness to engage with new practices can inhibit change. The discussion group participants were aware of these problems, with one pointing out that 'it takes two hands to clap'; in other words, that staff and students alike must perceive change to be necessary and desirable if it is to happen in any systematic way. This same student became very determined towards the end of the meeting, stating that 'unless we make it very clear across the board what changes we want exactly, it is very hard to change'. Another member of the group said that participating in this research had reassured him 'that there's concern elsewhere, not just in my head'.

As the discussion group students had recognized, consultation with staff formed an important part of this research exercise, and once again even a limited number of responses revealed a certain level of dissent, highlighting the problems of consistency in feedback practices. Staff found few surprises in the summary of students' comments, but predictability did not necessarily imply agreement, and there was recognition from several members of staff that students should take some of the responsibility for using their feedback more effectively. Staff noted a low level of students' ability to critique their own work, a view endorsed by the difficulties experienced by the discussion group students in the task that required them to generate feedback for themselves. Given a sample book review to comment on, the discussion group seemed reluctant to make criticisms of the writing, and

unable to apply the features of feedback that they had identified as being useful, one observing that 'we're just not used to doing this kind of thing'. One student commented on a previous experience of reading a friend's dissertation, when he had found it 'quite hard not to be too negative – I found myself just picking out what's wrong with it'. The encouraging aspects of feedback were valued by students as recipients, but seemed to be a skill requiring practice to avoid being 'a bit too critical and picky'.

Staff aims in giving feedback echoed the students' views in valuing 'formative feedback that will improve future work', 'encouragement for things that were done well', and 'highlighting of areas where more work could have taken place/more insight used'. Not surprisingly, staff were even more acutely aware than the students of the increased demands that more detailed and thorough feedback would place upon them, and were therefore resistant to ideas that seemed to duplicate effort unnecessarily. One colleague noted, for example, that detailed criteria could be used as a means of 'feed forward', such that strengths and weaknesses in the final piece of work could be related to these initial instructions. 'Feed forward' is a familiar idea from the literature, but is more often associated with formative assessment than with the criteria for a task (Higgins, 2000). The connection between each of these may be obvious from the staff perspective, but if links between tasks, criteria and feedback are not being consistently made by staff, it is likely that students will also find this an unfamiliar concept, and will need support in fostering those connections for themselves. The good intentions of one staff member are here possibly being subverted by the context in which they occur, showing the need for collaborative intention if real change is to be effected.

Taken overall, the student and staff perspectives gathered through these various research methods show a system in which there is an underlying dissatisfaction but little impetus for change. The final section of this article will therefore consider the practical and research implications of these findings, and draw some conclusions about possible ways forward.

Research and teaching implications

Staff and students in this study were both generous in apportioning some of the responsibility for improving assessment to themselves, and some to the other party, but given that colleagues who were willing to participate in the consultation are likely to be the most interested in developing current practice, our department is still recognizable in this description:

> One of the major barriers to innovation in assessment will be academic staff. Some will not see the need; some will be wary of the purposes and implications of change; while others will simply lack the technical knowledge to move from

> the rhetoric which they accept to the reality which needs to follow. 'Managing academics is like herding cats', it is said. There is, then, a substantial, hope-filled, staff development job to be done. (Brown and Knight, 1994: 142)

Carrying out this research project has already had an effect on the way I think about giving feedback to my own students, and has made me question some of the assumptions I had made about what constitutes good practice. At the simplest level, I was surprised that the discussion group students like 'getting ticks' on their work, having felt myself that this was too reminiscent of school marking and, frankly, rather lazy. As one student demonstrated in the book review feedback task, her preference would be for ticks for instant satisfaction, and comments to explain why each tick was deserved. Comments that directly address the student are highly valued, and this has made me think more carefully about the language I use in feedback: I am now more likely to write 'you . . .' than 'this essay . . .', and am less reticent about saying what I have enjoyed in a piece of writing, and in acknowledging any difficulties or impressive levels of effort that I perceive in the task the student has carried out. I have been pleased to find that my main aims in giving feedback are shared by the students; acknowledging what has been done well, advising on less successful aspects of the work, and offering suggestions that can be implemented in future tasks.

One perception that needs to be challenged amongst staff is that feedback is written 'for the file', to justify a mark given and to keep some official record of each student's progress. The systematic recording of students' development is important, but only in so far as it has an impact on that development; where feedback is hidden from the students, even unwittingly, it serves very little purpose. At the most straightforward level, this suggests the need to improve systems of distributing written comments to students in our department; currently the majority receive comments in meetings with their personal tutor (who is often not their module tutor) and only 33 per cent of the questionnaire sample regularly received a copy of their written feedback. The staff responses show that giving students a copy of their feedback is not necessarily seen as desirable: 'if you've read it out to them, they might as well have a copy if they want it (let's not waste more paper though)'. There is evidence here of a misplaced sense of bureaucracy, with perhaps the implication that giving feedback is an administrative task, rather than a teaching task. Changing the practice by distributing feedback sheets more systematically would at least increase students' access to the comments that are written about their work, but would not change the more deep-seated attitude that such procedures are unnecessarily onerous.

In this study I have achieved my aim of understanding more closely how

students in the music department receive and use written feedback, but inevitably many questions remain unanswered and open for further investigation. Focusing only on written feedback was necessary for the scope of this study, and it was useful that some alternatives – such as increased tutorial contact – emerged in discussion to show the potential for more radical change. The students' need to use feedback to inform future work suggested that good quality written feedback should still be a priority, but their hope that this could take place within the context of informed and frequent tutorials offers another useful insight. It is worth noting, too, that feedback on written work forms only part of the students' assessment; most will also be assessed on their musical performing and composing during their degree course. Here the subject-specific literature points to the additional challenges of assessing in such a subjective realm (Hunter, 1999; Kleiman, 2001). Susan O'Neill and John Sloboda (1997) have shown that 'failure' in a musical task can directly affect children's motivation; combine this with Young's (2000) findings on the potentially destructive impact of feedback, and the powerful role that assessment comments play in music students' learning and development becomes ever more apparent. There is obvious potential for further research in each of these areas, and the combined research methods of this study offer a possible way forward in tackling potentially sensitive topics, particularly as a practitioner-researcher. Allowing students to approach and consider ideas repeatedly through different tasks and forums meant that a small sample of students yielded rich data, and individual experiences – shown to be at the heart of the assessment process – could be clearly heard.

My findings have shown a student body who are 'surviving the system', tolerating feedback of variable quality whilst seeing the benefits and potential of more effective communication with their tutors. Suggestions for change will be presented to staff to generate at least an increased awareness, and hopefully some clear improvements in practice. For my own part, the most important finding is to have heard from the students – and so much more powerfully than from the literature – that assessment is a teaching role, not an administrative one; that teaching, learning and assessment are intricately linked; and that feedback is about communication and is read and valued as such.

It has become increasingly clear during the course of this research project that surface-level changes – increased meetings with tutors, greater consistency in styles of feedback – are not enough to ensure a genuinely fresh approach to feedback in the department. Perhaps this is another reason for the more frequent focus on radical change when researching assessment: to approach a familiar task with renewed vigour demands even more determination, since old habits are easily resumed. Nonetheless, the

implicit suggestions that emerge from the questionnaire and discussion group data seem to me to be worthy of greater consideration. Developing students' skills in critiquing their own work, increasing the effectiveness of the drafting process in written work, and making the assessment criteria more accessible and transparent – these points go beyond the practicalities of how feedback is written and distributed, and offer greater potential for increasing students' independence and power as motivated, self-aware learners. Empowering the students to be critical learners and 'conscientious consumers' (Higgins et al., 2002) could turn out to be the most effective (if rather subversive) way of developing practice in the department.

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Biographical note

STEPHANIE PITTS is a senior lecturer in music at the University of Sheffield, where she directs the distance learning MA course, Psychology for Musicians. She is co-editor of the *British Journal of Music Education*, author of *A Century of Change in Music Education* (Ashgate, 2000), and has published widely on aspects of music education and social psychology of music. She completed an MEd in Teaching and Learning for University Lecturers in 2003, and followed this with an investigation of music students' transition into higher education, supported by a research grant from PALATINE. Her most recent book is *Valuing Musical Participation* (Ashgate, 2005).

Address: Department of Music, University of Sheffield, 38 Taptonville Road, Sheffield S10 5BR, UK. [email: s.e.pitts@sheffield.ac.uk]