

Making every comment count: Effective formative feedback to journalism students

World Journalism Education Congress 2007, June 26–28 2007, Singapore.

Jonathan Hewett, Associate Director of Newspaper Journalism, City University, London.

Abstract

Effective formative feedback plays a crucial role in student learning, but it has received relatively little attention. Guidelines on policy or quality have rarely addressed formative feedback in depth, yet quality reviews have consistently highlighted concerns about it, as have student surveys. In addition, trends in assessment imply an increasing emphasis on lecturers providing formative feedback to students, as do other developments in policy (eg professional teaching standards) and practical concerns (eg staff workloads, student diversity).

A number of factors make the topic of feedback comments particularly pertinent to journalism educators. First, journalism students often produce a high volume of work (as journalistic articles) compared to other disciplines – an approach that serves to replicate professional practice in the newsroom as well as providing the opportunity for intensive experiential learning. This makes for a high volume of work for lecturers to read and comment on. Second, this work often requires detailed scrutiny, because accuracy and succinct writing are rightly emphasised as essential elements in journalism. So assessment and feedback in journalism arguably demand more time and more detailed comments than in other disciplines.

Third, many journalism educators (almost all in higher education in the UK) are journalists by profession and may not have much background in formal education. Despite the growing professionalisation of university teaching, some lecturers may thus lack in-depth prior experience and/or training in the provision of feedback to students. Fourth, the application of a scholarly approach to journalism education, as a form of scholarship of teaching and learning in the discipline, appears to have been slow to develop.

This paper presents the findings of a study of the content and quality of formative feedback, which involved the development of indicators that were then used to categorise and analyse a sample of written feedback comments to postgraduate journalism students. The research identified areas of good practice, as well as suggesting some gaps, which can be grouped under four themes:

- How far does the feedback make clear to students why/how they are succeeding or failing?
- How far does it link students' work with their wider progress and the module/course curriculum more generally?
- Does the feedback encourage dialogue?
- Does the feedback engage students with the content and with their own learning?

The research also raises questions about the availability of suitable tools to review feedback, for both individuals and institutions. More systematic reviews and support for good practice in feedback might help; encouraging lecturers to keep copies of feedback on which to reflect critically, for example, perhaps using indicators such as the ones from this project. They could discuss with colleagues what is often an individual process rarely seen by others. Some established institutional processes could take more systematic account of feedback, too, including programme evaluations, external examiners, reports, and student evaluations.

Jonathan Hewett is Associate Director of Newspaper Journalism in the Department of Journalism at City University in London. He has been involved in journalism education since 1997, and previously worked as a journalist, further education tutor, policy analyst, and teacher of English to reluctant pupils in Germany. After moving into higher education, Jonathan completed an Academic Practice diploma, and his research interests include assessment, active learning, quality, and student support. He runs a blog at hackademic.net and his email address is J.C.Hewett@city.ac.uk