

# Red Ink or Blue? Providing Feedback in an Electronic World

(Article submitted for presentation only)

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## ABSTRACT

It is accepted that the provision of effective and timely feedback on written assessments is crucial to promoting student progress. For distance learning students, feedback on performance in summative assignments may be the primary teaching interaction throughout a module. Whilst there have been a limited number of studies into the nature of tutor feedback and how students perceive it, little research has been conducted into the perceptions on which tutors model their feedback and how they put these into practice.

This presentation reports on a study of the motivations of tutors, and the methods they employ, when providing feedback to students studying an Open University (UK) distance learning Level 1 Technology module. Up to 2300 students register for the module annually, supported by 140 tutors. Tutors give written feedback on four summative assignments over the nine months' duration of the module, using a centrally written Marking Guide. Assignments are submitted electronically, annotated by the tutor and returned online. In this study, tutors were surveyed about the aims and practical aspects of their feedback provision, and about which elements of the Marking Guides they used. Additionally, a thematic analysis was carried out of over 10,500 tutor messages posted to an online academic discussion forum since 2005.

Tutors' survey responses revealed that electronic assignments enabled them to be very flexible in their approach to feedback. Moreover, a comparison with the analysis of early postings to the forum showed that, over the 4 years, tutors had developed individual styles and methods. Despite the 'copy and paste' opportunities electronic marking presents, many tutors provide extensive, personalised feedback to each student. However, it was found that there was a tendency to repeat the same advice to a student in a number of places.

Tutors were asked to rate Nicol's seven principles of good feedback practice [1] in order of the importance they attached to them in their own feedback. There was substantial agreement that the principle "Deliver to students high-quality information about their learning" – rated third in Nicol's hierarchy of self-regulation – was most significant to respondents. The response to a second question about the principle tutors felt the marking guides best supported produced an overwhelming majority for "Clarify what good performance is" – sadly rated lowest by Nicol as feedback likely to encourage self-regulation.

The ultimate aim of this project is to enhance the Marking Guides so as to better assist tutors in providing feedback comments that help students improve their grades in subsequent assignments. The study demonstrated a consensus on tutors' aims in providing feedback and which of Nicol's principles the Marking Guides supported. This, combined with data and evidence on how the Marking Guides are currently used, will allow improvements to be made.

## References

[1] D. Nicol and D. MacFarlane-Dick, "Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice". *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2006, pp. 199-218.