

# Using technology to help students engage with their feedback



## A best practice guide for academic staff

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**Technology, Feedback, Action!: The impact of learning  
technology upon students' engagement with their  
feedback**

An Enhancing Learning Through Technology Research  
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Also available:

- A ten minute guide for senior managers
- A student guide to using feedback
- Technology, Feedback Action! A Short Report

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## About this guide

This guide is based on the outcomes of a research project funded by the Higher Education Academy and undertaken at Sheffield Hallam University during 2008/09.

Technology, Feedback, Action! evaluated how a range of technical interventions might encourage students to engage with their feedback and formulate actions to improve future learning, including

- online publication of feedback and grades through the Blackboard Grade Centre
- adaptive release of grades through a bespoke Assignment Handler within Blackboard
- linking feedback to assessment criteria via an in-house developed electronic Feedback Wizard

The project worked in partnership with 23 undergraduate students to explore their experiences of receiving feedback with varying degrees of technical intervention.

Best practice recommendations for the use of technology to help students engage with their feedback have been identified from the research. The recommendations should be considered within the context of an institution where e-learning is characterised as a mainstream feature of the student experience.

This guide is aimed at academic staff. There are complementary guides available for students and for senior managers.

The full research report for the project can be read at <http://tinyurl.com/tfaproject>

## Background

The main themes from a full literature review available to read at <http://tinyurl.com/tfalitreview> are

### Why feedback matters

Feedback is an integral feature of effective learning, and can be one of the most powerful ways to enhance and strengthen student learning.

### Current issues with feedback

Many traditional feedback practices are no longer effective. The bunching of assessment tasks at the end of modules, along with the writing of feedback under tight time constraints, limit feed forward opportunities. This has resulted in student dissatisfaction with the timeliness and usefulness of feedback, and claims that students fail to act on feedback or are only concerned with the grade.

### Improving student engagement with feedback

It is considered that disengaging the grade from feedback encourages students to focus on the feedback. Using reflective activities that link feedback evidence into personal development planning can promote future learning, as well as providing students with the means to monitor their own performance on different assignments.

### Technology-enabled feedback

The use of technology can enhance student engagement with feedback. Returning feedback online enables students to receive feedback in a legible format, and to engage with it in privacy. Electronic templates aligned with assessment criteria and comment banks enable feedback to be generated in a consistent and equitable way.

### What our students said...

*'It is all really good, valuable stuff and if you don't use it then you're currently doing yourself an injustice really.'*

### What our students said...

*'You can check grades as and when you want rather than when it suits the university, when it fits around your timetable.'*

*'You don't have to share it with everyone whereas if you're in a seminar and everyone's talking about what they got, you kind of have to feel the pressure to join in, whereas if you get it on Blackboard you can see it at your own leisure.'*

*'It keeps grades all in one place. It means you can see how you're progressing throughout the course of the year.'*

## Online publication of feedback and grades

### What does this mean?

Using an online tool to publish feedback and grades to students throughout the duration of the modules they are currently studying.

### What are the benefits of this approach?

- **Pushes** feedback to students removing the burden to seek out feedback from tutors
- Allows **control** over how, when and where feedback is received
- Enables students to read and respond to feedback when they are **emotionally ready** and in privacy
- Facilitates prompt return of feedback making it more current and **meaningful** in terms of the original assessment
- When stored alongside the rest of their learning, students are more likely to **revisit** feedback when completing future assessments
- Students can **monitor** progression and see how performance on each assessment task builds to an overall profile for individual modules
- Perceived personalisation, thoughtfulness and **legibility** of typed feedback
- Makes module management and assessment tracking **easier** for staff
- Offers ready **access** to this information for staff
- Reduces academic and administrative burden of **distributing** feedback to large student cohorts

### How can I put this into practice?

- Find out what tools and technical support are available at your institution to enable you to publish feedback and grades online
- When publishing feedback and grades online think about who needs access to these: you, your students, the teaching team, administrative staff
- When feedback and grades are published online, ensure that it will be easy for both staff and students to access and archive for future reference
- Are you publishing provisional grades or waiting until after assessment boards? Ensure that students are informed of the status of all published grades
- Think about whether you want to display the actual grade or the calculated weighting for each assessment task. Consider how important is it for students to cumulate their grades
- Set, and communicate to students, the date when you expect to publish feedback and grades. Keep your students informed of any delays
- When publishing feedback and grades online, ensure you tell students how long this information will be available to them
- Whenever you change the format or delivery method of feedback, inform students in advance of how to access and use the feedback
- Suggest techniques that enable students to effectively and easily download, store and retrieve online feedback

#### What our students said...

*'It obviously makes it a lot more beneficial to me as a student to receive that in a much more legible form ... typed feedback is much better than written feedback, because you can read it. Lecturers have a tendency to scrawl.'*

*'It's good in a way because you get to know your mark straight away so it's still fresh in your mind. Whereas I think when you have to wait a month for your feedback you've totally forgotten what you wrote in the first place and you've moved on to other things...it just doesn't seem relevant anymore.'*

### What our students said...

*'It makes you think about your feedback because it's very easy just to read feedback and think 'oh, I did alright' or 'oh, that's not so good' but if it actually makes you think about it and you have to write about it because that's how you're going to get your grade then I think that's good for yourself.'*

*'If I have to reflect on the feedback before receiving the grade then it sticks in my mind a bit longer; the feedback I receive, the points that I'm going to use and it's a little bit easier to remember when I'm working on my next assignment.'*

## Adaptive release of grades

### What does it mean?

Giving students feedback comments before grades for their assessment to encourage them to focus on the detailed feedback comments rather than just the grade.

A key feature of the technology explored in the study, was the ability for students to undertake a reflective task on their feedback and submit an action plan to automate the immediate release of their grade.

### What are the benefits of this approach?

- Students often **value** feedback comments more when published in advance of the grade
- Emphasises the importance of **reflection** and action planning to students
- Enhances **student engagement** with their feedback
- Students are given the **time and space** to read, engage with and reflect on their feedback
- Students can link their reflective task and resulting action plan into their **personal development portfolios**
- Helps students to **understand** their feedback comments and feed forward for future assessments
- The use of technology to support this approach enables students to read and respond to feedback when they are **emotionally ready** and privately, with the immediate release of their grade afterwards
- Technology can provide a space for students to **formalise** the process of reflection and action planning

### How can I put this into practice?

- Find out what technology and support is available at your institution to enable you to introduce adaptive release of grades into your practice
- If you do not have access to technology, think about what other methods you could use to give students access to feedback with the grade made available to them at a later date. You might speak with colleagues who have already embedded this approach into their learning and teaching
- Think about how reflection is designed into your module and be clear to students how this is integrated into their personal development planning
- Articulate to students the purpose and process when introducing adaptive release of grades and set clear expectations at the beginning of the assessment process
- The study found that students acknowledge the learning benefits of adaptive release of grades when they fully understand the process. Clear guidance needs to be given to students regarding the process of reflection in the context of assessment, action planning and feeding forward into future assessments
- This approach can be further enhanced by designing assessments that enable and encourage students to consider previous feedback in the context of their next assessment to get the most benefit from it

#### What our students said...

*'The first time I did it I was a little bit irritated because I just wanted to get my mark. But then as I had to do more of it I thought 'Yes it is useful and I can see how it's...helping me.'*

*'If it was in every module and it had been like that from the start since I'd come to university then it would just seem the norm and it would be fine to do, but introducing it at the moment would maybe not.'*

### What our students said...

*'It was quite good, a lot more detail than you usually get and it was structured as well, it wasn't just the teacher rambling on about your assignment.'*

## Linking feedback to assessment criteria

### What does it mean?

Explicitly linking feedback to the original assessment criteria. A series of standard feedback responses are created for each assessment criterion and set of grading boundaries. These comments are then used to populate an assignment-specific template or feedback grid.

### What are the benefits of this approach?

- Comment banks enable tutors to quickly populate feedback templates, enabling a **speedier return**
- Students receive **equitable and consistent** feedback, though individual comments can also be included
- Templates displaying feedback that is aligned to criteria allow students to easily **identify** their strengths and weaknesses at a glance
- Feedback presented in a **cohesive** way helps students to identify patterns of repeated comments across several assessments
- Students can use the criteria to identify learning targets for **feed forward** into future assessments
- Where each criterion is weighted as a percentage of the overall grade, it offers students a sense of how this has been **calculated** for their assessment
- Technology can further enhance this process by allowing unforeseen comments to be added to the bank during marking, enabling the **review and editing** of feedback document before returning to students, providing typed and legible feedback, and automatically generating a spreadsheet of grades for each student

### How can I put this into practice?

- Find out what technology and support is available at your institution to enable you to easily generate individual documents that link feedback to assessment criteria
- If you do not have access to technology, think about what other methods you could use to link feedback to assessment criteria when marking student work. You might talk to colleagues who have already embedded this approach into their learning and teaching
- Provide students with the assessment criteria at the start of the assessment process so they understand what is expected. Students can complete and self-assess their work against the assessment criteria
- Ensure standard feedback comments are accompanied by individual comments that personalise the feedback for each student
- Make sure the standard feedback comments don't just reaffirm the grade, but enable students to feed forward and demonstrate to students what they would need to do to achieve higher
- Consider keeping the grade awarded for each of the assessment criterion as well as the overall grade hidden from the feedback template or grid to encourage student engagement with the feedback
- Whatever the method of presenting feedback, always write it in the context of the students' original work. Students can see immediately or easily refer to the points that you are talking about

#### What our students said...

*'You could really clearly see what you had to do for the next one and where you could actually improve.'*

## Blackboard Grade Centre

In this research project, we explored the use of the Blackboard Grade Centre to facilitate the **online publication of feedback and grades** to students.

The Grade Centre is an online spreadsheet available in all Blackboard course/module sites. The rows represent each student enrolled on that course/module and the columns represent each assessment task.

Columns are generated when tests, assignments and certain other tasks are created in Blackboard. Additional columns can be added to support assessment tasks completed outside of the Blackboard environment. Calculated Columns can be used to calculate the overall or weighted average grade for a set of assessment tasks.

Grades are automatically entered following the completion of a Blackboard test. Grades for other assessment tasks are input manually either by direct entry or via a batch upload process using a spreadsheet. Feedback, either as file attachments or direct text entry, can also be returned to students through the Grade Centre for certain Blackboard assessment tasks such as assignments.

At Sheffield Hallam University, staff are encouraged to return grades to students as soon as they are available following marking. Students are informed that grades available to them through the My Grades tool are provisional subject to ratification at the relevant Subject Award Board.

**Students** can view their own grades and review feedback for tasks which they have completed via the My Grades tool (the Student Gradebook) which is available in each Blackboard course/module site on which they are enrolled.

## Assignment Handler

Assignment Handler is a customisable extension to the Blackboard Learn™ platform that was developed by Sheffield Hallam University in partnership with Blackboard Inc. to improve the way in which assignments are processed and enhance the way in which feedback is provided.

A key feature of Assignment Handler is the **adaptive release of grades**. Students are encouraged to engage with their feedback and identify key learning points in order to activate the release of their grades. When feedback is made available, students are prompted to review their work (if submitted electronically), download and read the attached feedback, and formulate an action plan or reflective account. On submission of this, their grade is then released.

Assignment Handler enables the process of disengaging the grade from feedback to encourage student engagement to be implemented at scale.

### **Small-scale non-technological alternatives**

Hand back marked student work and feedback (without the grade) during a seminar, ask students to work through a series of reflective questions to develop an action plan, and only at the end of the seminar provide students with their grades.

Ask students to collect their marked work and feedback (without the grade) in the usual way, requiring them to make a short appointment with you to discuss the feedback during which time you reveal the grade.

## Feedback Wizard

Feedback Wizard, developed at Sheffield Hallam University using Visual Basic and Microsoft Office functionality, is a complementary tool to Assignment Handler.

Feedback Wizard allows markers to generate consistent individual feedback documents for an entire student cohort using an assignment-specific feedback template containing a matrix of assessment criteria and feedback comments. Tutors enter a grade against each assessment criteria, automatically generating a pre-set feedback comment. Personalised comments can also be included.

When marking is complete, Feedback Wizard creates a feedback file containing grades and **feedback linked to the assessment criteria** for each student. Tutors can choose to keep both the weighted grade for each assessment criteria and total mark hidden from the feedback echoing Assignment Handler ethos. All feedback files and student grades are batch uploaded to the Blackboard Grade Centre via Assignment Handler.

## About the authors

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