Learning Through Reflective Dialogue:
Assessing the effectiveness of feedback vivas

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Aims

- Outline Feedback viva

- Teachers' perspective on its value

- Students' perspective on its value

- Practical issues and barriers to wider application

Context

- Viva appears in Issues in Contemporary Society (L2 course).

- Compulsory for Liberal Arts students (literature, philosophy, history, humanities) and students on the MA in Primary Education

- Popular elective for Health & Social Studies and Environmental Stewardship students

- Class sizes vary from lows 20s to 80+

Rationale

- **Academics frequently complain that written feedback is not being followed by students, for example.**
  - High achieving students look at their mark and consider that as they did well there is nothing to learn from comments
  - Low achieving students look at the mark, and fear harsh comments, so are reluctant to engage
  - Considered by students to be less significant than summative grade as this is the basis of their degree
- **This leads to**
  - A failure to improve performance by students.
  - Frustration on the part of markers.

Feedback Viva: The basics

- A 10 minute formally assessed viva with a student discussing their written feedback from their previously submitted assignment.
  - Worth 10% of total course marks
- The written feedback on the essay is provided several days in advance (usually over a week) by the academics to the student.
- Guidance sheet (one side of A4) about the viva is placed on the Moodle site and discussed in a lecture
  - Additional opportunities to discuss it in the tutorials

The feedback viva has five educational goals

1. To ensure that students read the comments
2. An opportunity for the student to respond to the comments and highlight areas of ambiguity or disagreement with the assessment
3. To assist them in identifying strengths and weakness in their academic work, both on this and other courses.
4. To enable the application of the advice to the marked assignment and to future academic work
5. To allow the students to reflect on the skills learnt on this course and their wider applicability.

- Plus Implicit goals
  - Encouraging constructive dialogue for both students and academics.
  - Developing individual relationship between academics and student (evidence suggests this is what students value)

Five questions form the backbone of the viva

1. Do you understand the feedback?

- are there points you need clarification on?

- do you disagree with any of the comments?

2. What would you say are the essay's main strengths?

3. What would you say are its weaknesses, and how would you improve these if you could write the essay again?

4. Are these strengths and weaknesses specific to this essay, or do they represent more general tendencies in your assignments?

5. What skills (if any) have you learnt on the course?

Marking criteria

1. Evidence that they have read and understood the feedback.

2. Ability to identify strengths and weakness in the essay (form and content), in part through their articulation of the main points in the feedback.

3. Insight in terms of applying the feedback in order to improve this essay, and future academic work.

4. Ability to reflect on the relationship between this essay and its strengths and weakness and academic performance and output in general.

5. Ability to reflect on the skills learnt on this course and their wider application.

Strengths of Viva: Benefits for students

Teachers' view

- A large majority of students engage with the viva, and the dialogue is productive (note distinction between preparation and the value of the dialogue)

- And not just in terms of insight into the qualities of the assignment, but in terms of:

a) Practice in constructive dialogue

b) Practice in more generalized critical reflection; ostensibly on their work habits, but with broader application for their personal development (and organic rather than bolt-on)

Strengths of Viva: Benefits for students

Teachers' view (cont.)

- Alignment with graduate attributes (from UoG booklet):

a) 'Effective communicators'

b) 'Accountability': pronounced requirement to take responsibility for their output

c) 'Confidence': ('defend their ideas in dialogue with peers and challenge disciplinary assumptions')

d) 'Reflective learners'

Strengths of Viva: Benefits for students

Students' view (data from interviews and course evaluations)

- A chance to better understand written FB
- A chance to ask questions about essay writing, time management etc. they wouldn't otherwise seek out.
- A chance to explain their intentions, and discuss points further that word limits prevented
- The transferable value of practice in oral communication

Strengths of Viva: Benefits for students

Students' view (cont.)

- Value of 'dialogue with academic staff'

- Encourages greater reflection on their work

- Chance to voice views about 'the course as a whole'

- Chance to apply learning to learn advice to other courses

- More attention paid to feedback delivered in this way

- The value of personalized attention ('to find that lecturers actually cared about your improvement')

Strengths of Viva: Benefits for teachers

- Provides feedback on our feedback (e.g. identifies alienating terminology in feedback, encourages constructive and clear feedback)

- Helps identify material from the course students have struggled with

- Getting to know students better

- An enjoyable experience

Challenges: practical

- Time limitations (currently only 10 mins); strong theme from the interviews was they they'd prefer longer vivas

- Time-consuming
  Vivas for 63 students took about 16 additional contact hours (x 2 staff)

Overcoming Barriers

- Making time:
- Naïve argument: If this is as important an assessment tool as we think it is, then it's worth devoting staff hours to (inc. GTAs).
- More realistic argument: If this is as important an assessment tool as we think it is, then make time by dropping other assessments (usually the exam).
- And note that even if it is important, we're not arguing that it should feature on every course (e.g. one per semester; or one per year).

Appendix 1: Methods

Two main research methods

- Use of questionnaire
    - Restructured student evaluation forms
- 8 anonymized semi-structured interviews
    - Carried out by independent research assistant to avoid
        - Implied coercion (we don't know who volunteered)
        - Biasing answers (to please the lecturer)

Questionnaire responses: 2010

- General course satisfaction: 4.5
- Overwhelming majority of comments entirely positive emphasising
- Emphasis on:
  - Reflection
  - Deeper learning
  - Engagement with academic
- Dislike:
  - Formality
  - Reminder of performance
    - Stressful for poorer achievers

A. Helpful as I now know how to approach future essays and not make the same mistakes. Also encouraged me to engage with the written feedback on my work.

B. good two way assessment. Opportunity to ask tutors questions on essay.

C. The viva was a very good method to use as an assessment of a students understanding and engagement.

d. helped pinpoint parts of the course that I needed to look over again and focus on for the exam.

e. was successful in relation to focusing on feed-back rather than grade and a good chance to properly reflect on your work, and focus on what can be improved in future essays.

f. the level of formality was way higher than I expected and that plus the room made me feel uncomfortable. But it has highlighted (for me) the importance of reflection other than just moving onto the next thing. So not entirely a wasted exercise.

g. Highlighted things I already knew in regards to how I am performing. I feel the mark should not contribute to final course grade.

h. I thought it was extremely helpful and provided me with good practical ways to improve on my essay writing and organisation.

i. useful

j. Encouraged deeper analysis of work and what improvements could be made. Very positive.

k. it was extremely informative and helped me reflect on my learning style, presentation etc

l. Good form of assessment. Helped to make me think about ways of improving future work. Good to talk about feedback - not just a written form. it was more personal.

m. good form of assessment. It was good to have thorough feedback and to have feedback explained having the chance to talk about the essay was also helpful.

Appendix 2: Weaknesses in research protocol

Interviews

- Anonymisation leads to loss of some data
- Self-selection: students volunteer
  - Could be especially delighted or especially annoyed participants
- Could not ensure that it was a cross-section of students as independent researcher could not (and should not) have access to confidential student records

Questionnaire

- Lack of reliability of student feedback
- Bias towards more committed student
  - Questionnaires given out at end of term, when uncommitted students have already drifted off
    - Mitigated in this case