

MARKING AS A WRITING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent literature on the provision of written feedback on assignments in tertiary education and presents the findings from a questionnaire in which 50 experienced markers described what actions they performed when marking, what “rules of thumb” they used, and how long each stage in their marking routine took in relation to others. Markers reported performing various actions but the bulk of their time was spent writing comments, and reading and evaluating the script, before assigning a grade. Commenting on the script was rated to be more time-consuming than writing a summary on the marking schedule. Assigning marks generally took less time. The majority of markers reported spending only a short time revising their comments. The markers’ “rules of thumb” identified two themes, “Recognise the positive attributes of the assignment and accentuate the positive” and “Use appropriate language”. It is argued that it can be advantageous to consider marking as a special form of the traditional writing process. Mapping the questionnaire findings on to the stages of the traditional writing process highlighted the need to reconsider ways in which markers plan what feedback to give, determine the structure and placement of feedback, and revise its quality. This enables the author to draw inferences about best practice components in the tertiary marking process.

AIMS OF THE PAPER AND WHERE IT FITS WITHIN PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the context of tertiary assessment, provision of feedback has attracted considerable research interest as feedback has long been recognised as one of the most powerful influences on learning and student achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Gibbs, 2010). This paper is a critical analysis of marking as a form of feedback provision; it offers insight into what academic staff do while marking and compares marking to the traditional writing process. Of relevance to this paper are previous studies which examined:

- » conditions under which feedback is likely to support learning
- » students’ and markers’ perceptions of written feedback
- » characteristics of marker comments, and effectiveness and usability of various kinds of comment.

Conditions under which feedback is likely to support learning

According to Gibbs and Simpson (2004, pp. 16–25), for feedback to be conducive to learning it must be:

- » sufficient, frequent and sufficiently detailed
- » appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and its criteria for success
- » appropriate in relation to the learner’s understanding of the task and of marker expectations
- » focused on the learner’s performance and actions under their control rather than on personal characteristics
- » attended to and acted upon by the learner

Carless, Joughin and Liu (2006) and Carless (2009) emphasise that feedback should be timely. This does not only mean returning assignments within an institutionally regulated timeframe but providing feedback as close as possible to the act of learning when the learner can still improve their work – ideally before assignment submission rather than after as is commonly practised. The literature on post-assessment feedback is complex in terms of determining the extent to which such feedback may provide formative advice which motivates future student

learning. However, what is clear is that feedback should also assist learners in becoming self-regulated, that is, develop their reflection skills and ability to “troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 208). Although self-assessment is a highly desirable competency for all learners (Boud, 1995), it becomes particularly important for learners in distance education contexts who often rely on written feedback on assignments as one of the few, or sometimes even the only, source of information about progress. It should be emphasised that promoting self-assessment is not merely an exercise in reducing the marker’s workload but a necessary prerequisite for the learner to be able to engage with, or even understand feedback. Unless learners themselves are capable of comparing their work to an established standard and monitoring their progress against an internalised learning goal, any feedback they receive would be meaningless.

Students’ and markers’ perceptions of written feedback on assignments

Although tertiary students certainly value written feedback (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008; Margrain, Everiss, Murphy, Edlin, McClew & Meade, 2009), their perceptions of its usefulness appear to be different from those of markers. For example, in Maclellan’s survey, while academic staff considered that feedback they provided was “helpful in its detail”, most students indicated that it was helpful only sometimes (2001, p. 313). Indeed, helpfulness is correlated to the extent to which it enables students to ‘close the learning gap’ with their study requirements and to motivate them to continue future studies. Similarly, Carless (2006) found that staff perceived their feedback to be fairer, more detailed, and more useful for improving the following assignments than students believed it was. For students, receiving feedback alongside grades is a highly emotional and often negatively charged experience (Crossman, 2007; Bowker, 2010). Educators perceive “the often tedious task of marking” (Boud, 1995, p. 168) as time-consuming and doubt whether their feedback is actually used (Higgins et al., 2001; Bailey & Garner, 2010).

Effectiveness and usability of marker comments

Research into textual characteristics of marker comments demonstrates the significance of their linguistic features and tone alongside the cognitive composition of the marking content. For example, lack of specificity and explanation, and unfamiliar academic discourse can constitute a barrier to students’ understanding (Chanock, 2000; Walker, 2009). McVey (2008, p. 40) points out the need for comments to “be constructed as unambiguously as possible”. In an assessment, marker’s comments must identify the shortcomings and areas for improvement while at the same time developing the learner’s confidence rather than undermining their self-esteem (Young, 2000). The quantity and quality of feedback varies enormously among programmes, courses and individual markers, which means that students experience inconsistent or even conflicting advice (Lea & Street, 2000). Whilst post-graduate learners may be attuned to this variability, it can be distracting for students who are new to tertiary learning. Some studies found that positive comments tended to be brief and general (“Good”, “Well done”) whereas the criticisms were long and more comprehensive (Weaver, 2006, p. 289; Brown & Glover, 2006, p. 85). To make sure that comments “connect” with the recipient, Weaver suggests markers strive for a balance of positive and negative feedback (2006, p. 392).

Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) identified various functions that written feedback on assignments may serve. For example, the marker can:

- » explain the grade in terms of strengths and weaknesses
- » correct or edit the student’s work
- » evaluate the match between the student’s answer and an “ideal” answer
- » engage in dialogue with the student
- » give advice which will be useful in writing the next piece of work
- » give advice on rewriting the current piece of work

Frequent corrections of the student's wording may signal the marker's 'presentation bias' whereby grammar and expression - while accounting for only a small proportion of marks according to the marking rubric - make "a more pervasive impact on the perceived quality of the assignment" (Greasley & Cassidy, 2010, p. 185). Depending on the function and context, some comments will be more useful to students than others. In some circumstances, forward looking, future-oriented comments have a better chance of being used than feedback about how the current piece could be improved given that most students are unlikely to resubmit or repeat the same assignment. As Higgins, Hartley and Skelton suggest, "Perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to 'feeding forward' into a piece of work, rather than simply 'feeding back' ." (2001, p. 274). Marking practices that have both retrospective and prospective commentaries are more likely to be effective in providing students with motivational learning advice.

Lizzio and Wilson's study (2008) confirms that students favour developmental, encouraging and fair feedback. Developmental feedback is the kind of commentary that demonstrates to the recipient which areas of their performance differ from the qualities of benchmark performance, to what extent, and how the gap between the actual and benchmark performance can be bridged. An educator giving such feedback not only identifies shortcomings in a piece of student work but provides guidance by suggesting what to do to improve it. Developmental feedback extends the student's knowledge of the topic and of what makes for good work, helps them develop their competence beyond the present level, and can often be applied outside the context of a particular assignment. Encouraging feedback involves positive remarks that acknowledge the writer's good ideas, reinforce correct answers and recognise the effort put into preparing the assignment. Lizzio and Wilson argue that praise and encouragement not only 'enhance the motivational state of the learner' (2008, p. 271) but soften the effect of criticism and increase the probability of students' accepting and acting upon the developmental feedback (Young, 2000; Hyland and Hyland, 2001). Fair feedback means comments which render the assessment criteria and process transparent (and show that these are applied consistently), explain or

justify the grade or marks for particular sections of the assignment, and invite the recipient to clarify the meaning of, or seek further feedback. In agreement with the notion of 'feeding forward', Lizzio and Wilson's data demonstrated that out of the three desirable dimensions – developmental, encouraging and fair – "developmental [emphasis added] feedback was most strongly associated with students' evaluations of effective assessment feedback" (2008, p. 273).

Aims of this paper: Comparing marking and the traditional writing process

The vast literature on assessment in higher education encompasses an ongoing debate around assessment standards (course- to institution- to nation-wide), formats (multiple-choice questions, short answers, essays, team and individual presentations, portfolios), aims (formative, summative), frequency, timing, appropriateness as well as alignment to instruction, learning outcomes, and graduate profiles among a number of other parameters (Meyer, Davidson, Anderson, Fletcher, Johnston, & Rees, 2009). Although such debate is immensely valuable for educators, at a time when they start marking a piece of student work most of these parameters are already 'locked in' (no longer amenable to change).

There is no shortage of conceptual models of feedback (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008), general principles of what it should accomplish (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006; Bryan & Clegg, 2006, Carless, 2009), or literature demonstrating its effectiveness (Hattie, 2009). More recently researchers also started looking at what kind of feedback students consider effective and how they are using it (Crisp, 2008; Walker, 2009). However, the process of giving written feedback, that is, how educators go about marking has not received much attention and certainly calls for further research (Bailey & Garner, 2010).

A traditional writing process – roughly consisting of planning, researching, structuring content, drafting, revising and editing – has been advocated in numerous textbooks (Keene, 1993; Marsen 2007; Guffey, 2009). Undeniably, a substantial proportion of the marker's time is spent writing commentary on the student's script or the marking schedule. Thus, it could be

beneficial to compare the marking process to the traditional writing process. Many aspects of marking appear similar to the traditional writing process and the same kinds of cognitive processes would likely underpin both.

The following section of the paper reports the findings of a small-scale questionnaire in which academic staff at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand described their marking practices. The final section compares the marking process as evident from the questionnaire responses to the traditional writing process. The linkages between marking and the traditional writing process are considered with the view to assist markers in reflecting on their practice.

MARKING QUESTIONNAIRE

An electronic questionnaire was developed to examine what actions academic staff perform when marking and in what order, approximately how long each stage in their marking routine takes, and what techniques (“rules of thumb”) they use when marking (see Appendix 1). Fifty Open Polytechnic lecturers responded. Participants, 20 male (40%) and 30 female (60%), came from a distance education setting and taught a variety of subjects from Level 2 to Level 7 as defined by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (n.d.). The vast majority of respondents were quite experienced markers. Nobody had less than 2 years of marking experience; 28 participants had over 10 years of marking experience (see Appendix 2). Participants had over a month to answer the questions; most completed the questionnaire in one sitting, although there was an option to save responses and resume later. Participants could skip questions if they wished.

What actions do markers perform?

In response to the question “When you start marking a script, what do you usually do first?” the majority of markers reported that they check the marking criteria and the assignment brief. Four common scenarios emerged from the data regarding what happens after the marker refreshed assignment criteria in their mind:

1. The marker starts reading the script and writing comments straight away. In this sample this was the most common scenario.
2. The marker scans the script quickly. They make sure the script is complete (all the questions or components are answered) and check how many pages it contains, whether there is a list of references, and how many sources are listed. If the script passes this initial ‘weight test’, the marker starts writing comments.
3. The marker skims over the script to get a general idea of the quality of the work and the student’s written expression. They check the key sections, for example a conclusions section if the assignment is a report or the hardest part of the assignment or the section that is worth the highest number of marks.
4. The marker reads the whole script from beginning to end before commenting. In our sample the readers were a small minority.

When asked “When do you decide which areas or properties of the script require your feedback?”, 45 respondents (90%) selected “I decide as I go (while I’m reading and commenting)” and only 5 respondents (10%) opted for “I decide in advance, before I start writing comments”.

The bulk of the marker’s time is spent evaluating the script by applying their professional judgement and criteria provided, writing comments and assigning marks. The vast majority of lecturers in this sample stated that they provided commentary within the script in addition to comments on the marking schedule and 45 respondents (90%) selected “I think about the purpose of my marking while I’m marking a script”.

There are various actions which markers engage in occasionally when the need arises. These include:

- » seeking a second opinion (discussing the student’s work with a colleague)
- » comparing the script to other scripts to ensure consistency
- » checking for plagiarism

- » checking the student's prior academic history
- » contacting the student to clarify an aspect of their submission

Some actions were mentioned by only few participants but deserve special consideration as they tie in well with contemporary theories of learning-oriented assessment:

- » considering whether the script could be used as an exemplar (with permission from the student)
- » sending the student additional information or a resource
- » noting areas of common misunderstanding in students' answers
- » looking up the sources that students cite

Information about parts of the assignment that several students struggled with can be used to improve the assignment question, to write a general feedback document to the whole class, or, ideally, to improve course materials and guidance to the next cohort of students. If the marker stays open to the possibility that a student can introduce them to a new idea or reference, not only marking becomes less of a treadmill but future students can also benefit from the resources which their peers had discovered. Indeed, experienced markers will often acknowledge students' 'fresh ideas'.

In response to the question "When you nearly finished marking a script, what do you usually do last?" most participants stated that they summed up the marks and filled in the marking schedule. Answers also indicate that while on the script the majority of markers write new, individual comments for every student, on the marking schedule they tend to include more pre-prepared comments and are likely to follow an established pattern, for example list the strengths of the assignment, list several points for the student to work on and finish off with an acknowledgement of effort or a message encouraging the student to start on the next assignment. Eleven respondents (23%) believed that the main role of the marking schedule was to give the student an overview of how the grade was arrived at and to summarise and reinforce the

main messages from the in-script comments. The next most common role, identified by 10 respondents (20%), was "to provide generic, transferrable feedback applicable to future assignments". Some participants also saw the marking schedule as a place to provide further feedback, additional to in-script comments.

After summing up the marks for all sections of the assignment, markers generally step back and consider whether the resulting grade is an accurate reflection of the quality of the student's work overall or whether the marks need adjustment. Interestingly, some responses suggest that at this stage markers trust their "gut feeling" more than the scoring rubric, the implication being that both subjective and objective processes are involved.

For 24 (48%) respondents finalising the grade was the end of the process, and the marking was now complete. Fourteen (28%) markers added more comments or proofread the marking schedule and only 12 (24%) reported revising the content and tone of their comments. One participant mentioned that sometimes if they were not entirely happy with the comments or the marks, they would leave the script and return to it in a day or two, others that they would then compare all scripts marked in a particular sequence and determine whether the distribution of grades was fairly comparative.

How long does each marking stage take?

The quantitative data reported in this section should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size.

Participants were asked to rate the duration of their actions on a scale from 1 to 5, "1" meaning that, on average, they spend only a short time doing something and "5" meaning that something takes the marker a long time: 1 = short, 2 = somewhat short, 3 = medium amount of time, 4 = somewhat long, 5 = long.

As can be seen from Table 1, reading the script and evaluating it against the marking criteria took markers in this sample the longest. Writing comments on the script took them almost just as long. Commenting on the script was more time consuming than writing a summary on the marking schedule. Assigning marks generally took less time, although markers spent slightly longer finalising the overall grade compared

to assigning marks for each section. The majority of markers in this sample spent only a short time revising their comments, which is probably reflective of their extensive marking experience.

Stage	Average rating
Reading and evaluating the script	3.72
Writing comments on the script	3.57
Writing comments on the marking sheet	2.93
Assigning the mark for the whole assignment	2.65
Assigning marks for each section	2.47
Revising (content and tone of) comments	1.98

Table 1. Comparative duration of marking process stages.

Other findings regarding timing

38 respondents (76%) indicated that they provided more feedback on low-quality student work compared to high quality work, and 12 participants (24%) selected 'About the same'. Many of the respondents also noted that marking lower quality work was considerably more time-consuming.

How long marking takes overall varies depending on the level of the course, subject matter, and the nature and size of the assignment. Participants were asked to specify the minimum and maximum amount of time they needed to mark one script in each course they were marking (and teaching). Collected data represents around 120 courses and is summarised in Table 2.

	Minimum amount of time to mark one script	Maximum amount of time to mark one script
Range of answers	5 minutes–2 hours	10 minutes–7 hours
Mode (the most common answer)	30 minutes (repeated 29 times)	60 minutes (repeated 28 times)
Median (middle of the range answer)	40 minutes	60 minutes
Mean (average)	42 minutes	1 hour 27 minutes

Table 2. Minimum and maximum amount of time required to mark one script.

What techniques do markers use?

Participants' responses to the question "Do you use any personal "rules of thumb" when you are marking?" exhibited a surprising degree of uniformity.

The vast majority of markers noted that they strived to provide at least some positive and encouraging comments regardless of the quality of the student's work. Their personal rule can be formulated as "Recognise the positive attributes of the assignment and accentuate the positive". A lot of markers reported aiming to always make the first comment positive or using the "commend, recommend, commend" approach, that is, enclosing suggestions or criticism in between positive comments. Some participants mentioned negative feedback mitigation strategies aimed at keeping the student motivated and minimising the emotional impact of assessment. Five participants

referred to the desirable linguistic qualities they were trying to achieve in their comments, so their individual rule can be very broadly summarised as “Use appropriate language” which included, for instance, giving clear examples of how to improve, supplying reasons for why improvement is necessary, personalising comments and crafting them according to the student’s individual level of understanding. More examples of how markers articulated their “rules of thumb” are presented in Table 3.

Marker’s technique	Examples
Highlight the positive in students’ work	“Try for more positive than negative comments”
	“Start with a positive comment and always think of something positive. If the work is a long way from being of high standard, talk about it in the 3rd person, to make it less personal”
	“Praise first, then suggest ways to improve. Encourage and support, don’t just criticize.”
Use appropriate language when commenting	“Polite comments always, no sarcasm”
	“Use full sentences as students can misunderstand short comments”
	“Use plain English wherever possible with open, clear language”

Table 3. Examples of markers’ personal techniques (“rules of thumb”).

COMPARING MARKING TO THE TRADITIONAL WRITING PROCESS

Normally, regardless of the genre taught, writing textbooks and guides include a description of the writing process which is termed “the traditional writing process” in this paper. I propose that marking can be considered as a special form of the traditional writing process. The intended outcome of writing is a coherent text which communicates a message to the reader. Quite similarly, the outcome of marking is essentially a text that should communicate the marker’s ideas to the student, the only substantial difference being that the text will be accompanied by a numerical grade which constitutes a prominent part of the message. The idea of regarding marking as an instance of the communicative process is not new (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001); adopting it as outlined below may assist educators in reflecting on what they do and identifying where improvements are possible.

The traditional writing process

It stands to reason to compare marking to either academic or business writing since the marker’s text can probably be appropriately likened to a brief investigative report rather than, say, a novel or a poem. The number of stages authors distinguish in the traditional writing process varies from three (Marsen, 2007, pp. 2-17; Guffey, 2009, p. 33; Reep, 2009, pp. 6-17) to four to eight (Keene, 1993, pp. 30-51; Emerson, 2007, pp. 20-24) to up to 20 in some sources (Keller, 2004, p. 161).

Stage	Description	Guidelines for writers
Planning	Purpose and audience analysis	Define purpose clearly Find out as much as possible about your readers Keep thinking about your purpose and audience throughout the writing, not only at the beginning
Research	Collecting facts, figures, ideas	Collect as much information as you can Take note of sources
Structuring content	Sorting and organising information	Think how relevant each item of information is Have a visual representation of the order and relationships between items (an outline, a mind-map) Check if there is an expected format or a template
Writing	Drafting, producing text	Capture thoughts, don't worry about style Do not expect the first draft to be perfect
Revising	Evaluating effectiveness, rewriting	Assess how well the writing meets its purpose and the audience needs Remove, add, reorder or rework content if necessary Take a break between writing and revising
Editing	Polishing , proofreading	Check presentation thoroughly (grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting)

Table 4. The traditional writing process (adapted from The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2009).

The precise number of stages is not crucial considering that the advice that the textbook authors offer and techniques they recommend to novice writers for each stage tend to be largely similar. One version of the traditional writing process and the corresponding guidelines for writers are presented in Table 4. Taking this version as a starting point and reviewing the marking questionnaire findings, let us consider whether some of the generic writing advice could be applied to the marking context.

Planning and research

It has been emphasised in literature repeatedly that the marker's conception of the purpose of what they do "has a powerful shaping effect on the nature of their comments" (Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000, p. 59). For example, depending on the marker's beliefs about learning and assessment they can present their evaluations and advice to the learner as categorical ("This is the truth. Do X, Y, Z.") or contestable ("In my view, this is perhaps... I would do X, Y, Z."). Lecturers in our sample articulated the purpose of their marking in a variety of ways (this in itself is a topic for further research) but the encouraging finding is that the vast majority were consciously keeping this personal purpose at the forefront of their thinking while responding to student work. The questionnaire findings also suggest that participants were well aware of the needs of their audience as a whole ("students"/ "students taking this course") as one respondent illustrates: "I try to always treat students with respect and take for granted

that they have worked hard and want to achieve". However, how much and what the marker knows about the individual whose work they are marking (apart from what is revealed in the piece of work itself) can be quite limited. Marking also has a socio-political context. Economic recession, lowered funding for tertiary education and high workloads may result in academic staff having less time to get to know their students, which, in turn, makes providing personalised feedback and tailoring it to the needs of a particular recipient problematic. Yet, personalised feedback is what students seem to appreciate (Rae & Cochrane, 2008, p. 224; McVey, 2008, p. 41).

In regards to the research stage, participants in this sample reported that they spent a long time reading the scripts they mark, which is a positive sign. However, their "research" appears to be incomplete because most begin commenting before they read the student's submission and, therefore, would have had little chance to determine which properties or areas of the script require feedback the most or what sort of feedback and to plan their comments accordingly. In terms of considering all possible sources of information, only rarely do markers seek to find out more about the reader they are communicating to, for example what courses a student had already completed leave alone what feedback the student had received in current or previous courses.

Structuring content

If we accept that treating the outcome of marking as a text is advantageous, a logical question to ask is whether markers organise this text in a coherent and reader-friendly manner. Our questionnaire participants did not appear to give much thought to how their response to the student's writing can be best structured but rather followed an established convention. For most, this convention consists of inserting comments on the margins of the script and on the marking schedule. A small minority reported that they provided comments on the script only, not on the marking schedule, or vice versa. But are these conventions optimal for presenting the marker's message if they want the reader to understand and learn from it?

Ineffective or overly restrictive marking schedules are not uncommon; some force the marker to provide an evaluation of every section, others only include the scoring rubric and a space for a summary. When comments on the marking schedule do not directly refer to the student's answer, they may "appear disembodied, and students are unable to connect them to specific elements of their assignment" (Bailey & Garner, 2010, p. 194). However, when there is feedback both within the script and on the marking schedule, the recipient may not be able to judge which of the comments they should pay close attention to and remember to implement and which comments are relatively minor. Here a distinction must be made between marking comments for marker's own benefit and those for the student. Consider Willingham's (1990, p. 12) advice:

A hierarchy must be easily discernible in the instructor's comments. The student should know immediately which aspects of the paper need the most work, which need less work, and which aspects have been handled well.

He goes on to say that important comments can be buried on the margin and thus easy for the student to miss (Willingham, 1990, p. 13); this would become especially likely if the marker's in-script feedback is extensive. The fact that comments are commonly split between the script and the marking schedule does not assist the reader and goes counter to facilitating comprehension and learning: "...when designing instruction it is important to avoid formats that require learners to split their attention between, and mentally integrate, multiple sources of information" (Ayers & Sweller, 2005, p. 135). There are no ready solutions to these issues but possible options could include:

- » cross-referencing the feedback on the marking schedule back to the relevant parts of the script
- » embedding the marking schedule into the script
- » highlighting the most important in-script comments and reiterating them on the marking schedule

Writing, revising and editing

It is clear from the questionnaire findings that the actual writing of comments takes a long time, consequently a proportion of the students' well-documented frustration with unsatisfactory feedback can no doubt be ascribed to markers' workload pressures.

While the Open Polytechnic markers engage in quality control to a degree, this mostly concerns making sure that the commentary is consistent with the marks, checking the addition of marks and proofreading. Markers spent only a short time revising the content and tone of their comments. Responses such as the following were rare: "I check that I have a balance of positive and negative comments and that taken home messages are clear", "I review the whole script and marking schedule and reassess the applicability and tone of the comments". Understandably, given the workload and assignment turn-around constraints, many markers cannot afford the time to revise but a not-so-costly strategy would be to put the script aside after marking and to look over the feedback quickly the next day. This would prompt more emphasis on macro-revision – considering the feedback text in its entirety to evaluate if it communicates the marker's message accurately and if the reader will be able to understand and learn from this message.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the recent literature on the provision of written feedback shows that a number of conditions must be met for the feedback to be effective and to realise its full potential to enhance learning. This alone partially explains why (as both students and educators well know) it does not always do so. The way markers go about providing comments is only one of the numerous variables in the complex feedback equation but, unlike many others, it is one that markers have direct control of. The questionnaire findings illustrate the repertoire of actions and techniques which experienced markers employ and which can be of interest to novice markers and staff in charge of marker training.

Considering marking as a special form of the traditional writing process appears to have some merit in terms

of providing a framework for describing and reflecting on the marking practice. Mapping the questionnaire findings on to the stages of the traditional writing process highlighted the areas of strength as well as the need to pay further attention to how markers (i) plan what feedback to give; (ii) determine the organisation and placement of feedback; and (iii) revise the quality of feedback.

Hattie cautions to distinguish between the sentiment that feedback is desirable and the question of how effective it is: "In general, feedback is psychologically reassuring, and people like to obtain feedback about their performance even if it has no impact on their performance (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 277, as cited in Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 95). By reflecting on and experimenting with the marking process, educators will hopefully be able to provide more feedback that makes a difference to their students' learning.

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APPENDIX 1: ELECTRONIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1: Your marking routine

In this section, we'd like to find out how you usually go about marking a script.

Note: Please think of assignments where you provide some feedback to the student.

EXCLUDE exam marking (where a grade is assigned but no feedback is given) and check-marking (moderating the marking done by off-campus markers).

Q1. When you start marking a script, what do you usually do first?

For example:

"I read the first few sentences and start commenting straight away".

"I read the script from beginning to end".

"I check the marking criteria, especially if I start a new lot of assignments or come back to marking after a break".

"I skim over 1–2 key sections of the script".

Please describe in 1–3 sentences: [text box].

Q2. What is the main purpose of your marking?

For example:

"My purpose is to assign a fair grade and justify the grade to the student".

"My purpose is to assess not only how well the student understands the course content but how well they can apply it".

"My purpose is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work and suggest improvements that the student can use in future assignments".

Please describe in 1–3 sentences: [text box].

Q3. Do you think about the purpose of your marking while you are marking a script?

No

Rarely (1–9% of the time)

Sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Usually (40–69% of the time)

Often (70–100% of the time)

Q4. Do you think about the student whose work you are marking while you are marking their script? For example, you recall your email communication or phone conversations with them, or your knowledge about their individual life circumstances, or their past assignments.

No

Rarely (1–9% of the time)

Sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Usually (40–69% of the time)

Often (70–100% of the time)

Q5. What do you spend the bulk of your marking time on?

‘Short’ means that, on average, you spend only a short time doing something. ‘Long’ means that, on average, you spend a long time doing something. If you don’t engage in an action listed, tick ‘N/A’ (not applicable).

Please read each action below and indicate how long it takes you when you are marking a script:

Reading the script

Evaluating the script against the marking criteria

Planning what feedback to give

Writing comments on the script

Writing comments on the marking schedule

Revising (content and tone of) your comments

Assigning marks for each section

Assigning the mark for the whole assignment

Q6. When you nearly finished marking a script, what do you usually do last?

For example:

“I adjust the marks for each section and finalise the overall grade”.

“I compare the script to other scripts in the same bundle/class”.

“I edit my comments on the marking schedule and sign it off with my name and date”.

Please describe in 1–3 sentences: [text box].

Q7. Are there any other actions you engage in during marking (apart from mentioned above)?

No

Yes. Please specify: [text box].

Q8. On average, what is the minimum amount of time you need to mark one script?

For example: “20 minutes”, “1 hour 10 minutes”.

Please specify for as many courses as you currently mark for:

Course 1:

Course 2:

Course 3:

Course 4:

Course 5:

Q9. On average, what is the longest it can take you to mark one script?

For example: “20 minutes”, “1 hour 10 minutes”.

Please specify for as many courses as you currently mark for:

Course 1:

Course 2:

Course 3:

Course 4:

Course 5:

Q10. Imagine that you were asked to teach an inexperienced colleague how to mark. Your colleague has good subject-matter knowledge but no marking experience. What steps do you recommend they should follow?

For example:

Step 1. Read the assignment question/s and marking criteria.

Step 2: Read the script and evaluate it according to the criteria.

Step 3: Write comments on the script.

Step 4: Revise your comments (e.g. if the student makes the same mistake throughout the script, for example with referencing, make sure you point it out only once or twice).

Step 5: Assign approximate marks for each section.

Step 6: Write a summary comment on the marking schedule (identify what the student has done well and suggest 2-3 areas for them to work on).

Step 7: Revise the summary comment and finalise the overall grade.

Note: Feel free to add more steps if needed. Just continue typing them into the “More steps” field. Having fewer than 7 steps is fine too.

Q11. How much feedback, on average, do you provide on low-quality student work compared to high-quality student work?

I give more feedback on low-quality work.

I give more feedback on high-quality work.

About the same.

Any additional comments (optional)?

Q12 (rating scale). Please read each of the statements below and indicate whether you agree or disagree:

When a student gets back the assignment that I marked, they will clearly see which of my comments are the most important and which are less important.

My marking practices are generally effective.

The amount and quality of feedback I give depends on how many assignments I’ve got to mark.

[1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree]

Q13. Do you check that the mark you award for each section of the assignment and your feedback for that section correspond?

No

Yes, rarely (1–9% of the time)

Yes, sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Yes, usually (40–69% of the time)

Yes, often (70–100% of the time)

Q14 (only activated if the answer to Q13 was “no” or “rarely”). Why do you not check regularly (that the mark for each section and your feedback for that section correspond)?

I’m confident that I did it right (that the mark and my feedback are consistent).

It’s too time-consuming.

Assignments that I mark don’t consist of sections.

I usually give feedback on the script as whole, not section by section.

I don’t know (never thought about it).

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Section 2. Tools and techniques

In this section, we'd like to find out what tools and techniques you use when marking.

Q15. What is your preferred marking method?

On paper

Electronically

I don't mind (both are fine)

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Q16. When marking a script, how often do you refer the student to a particular resource, for example a reading, a website or relevant page(s) in the course material?

Never

Rarely (1–9% of the time)

Sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Usually (40–69% of the time)

Often (70–100% of the time)

Q17. When marking a script, how often do you rewrite the student's text for them or redo part of their work for them as an example (as opposed to explaining how they should do it)?

Never

Rarely (1–9% of the time)

Sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Usually (40–69% of the time)

Often (70–100% of the time)

Q18. Do you use any personal "rules of thumb" when you are marking? For example:

"The first comment must be positive".

"I aim for one comment per page".

"It's good to have a summary comment at the end of each section".

"3 C's – commend, critique, commend".

Please describe in 1-3 sentences: [text box].

Q19. When do you decide which areas or properties of the script require your feedback?

I decide in advance, before I start writing any comments.

I decide as I go (while I'm reading and commenting).

Anything you would like to add (optional)? [text box].

Q20. Some lecturers mostly write new, individual comments for every student. Others use pre-prepared comments. Looking at your marking on the whole, what comments do you usually include on the marking schedule?

Note: This question excludes comments within the script. The two figures you provide should add up to 100.

On the marking schedule I include: ___% individual comments ___% pre-prepared comments

Q21. Do you usually comment within the script? Yes No**Q22 (activated only if the answer to Q21 was "yes"). Some lecturers mostly write new, individual comments for every student. Others use pre-prepared comments. Looking at your marking on the whole, what comments do you usually include within the script?**

Note: This question excludes comments on the marking schedule. The two figures you provide should add up to 100.

Within the script I include: ___% individual comments ___% pre-prepared comments

Q23. What tool/s do you use to comment within the script? Tick as many as applicable:

I write comments in pencil or pen on the margin (may also draw arrows, use editing notation or correct parts of text).

I use Track Changes and Comments features in Word.

I use Comments, but not Track Changes.

I use Track Changes, but not Comments.

I use a contrasting font.

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Q24. Do you check that your comments on the marking schedule are consistent with your comments within the script? Yes No**Q25 (only activated if the answer to Q24 was "yes"). Looking at your marking on the whole, how often do you check that your comments on the marking schedule are consistent with your comments within the script?**

Rarely (1–9% of the time)

Sometimes (10–39% of the time)

Usually (40–69% of the time)

Often (70–100% of the time)

Q26 (only activated if the answer to Q24 was “no”). Why do you not check (that your comments on the marking schedule are consistent with your comments within the script)?

I’m confident that I did it right (that my comments on the marking schedule and within the script are consistent).

It’s too time-consuming.

I don’t know (never thought about it).

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Section 3. What does good marking look like?

In this section, we’d like your opinion about the qualities of a well-marked assignment. Please describe the features of an assignment that, in your view, has been marked in an optimal manner. “The well-marked assignment” includes the marked script itself and the marking schedule that goes with it.

“The well-marked assignment” means that:

- » you are happy to use it as an example for other markers to follow
- » you believe you awarded a fair grade
- » you believe you gave the right kind and amount of feedback
- » your marking was thorough but did not take you excessively long.

Q27. How much feedback, on average, should a well-marked script contain?

Within the script the amount of feedback should be:

___ pages

___ paragraphs

___ sentences

On the marking schedule the amount of feedback should be: ___ pages ___ paragraphs ___ sentences

Q28. Diagnosis-based feedback means identifying strengths and weaknesses of the student’s work. Suggestions-based feedback means showing the student how to improve their work. What feedback should a well-marked assignment contain?

Note: The two figures you provide should add up to 100.

Diagnosis: ___% Suggestions: ___%

Q29. Positive feedback means praise or acknowledgement of effort. Constructive criticism means pointing out and explaining how to fix shortcomings. What feedback should a well-marked assignment contain?

Note: The two figures you provide should add up to 100.

Positive feedback: ___% Constructive criticism: ___%

Q30. In a well-marked assignment, what is the main role of the marking schedule?

to justify the mark to the student

to provide more feedback, additional to in-script comments

to summarise and reinforce the main messages from the in-script comments

to evaluate the script as a whole as opposed to separate sections

to provide generic, transferrable feedback (feedback that applies not only to this particular assignment but can help with future assignments – either in the current course or other courses)

to explain the hierarchy of in-script feedback (which comments the student should pay close attention to and which ones are relatively minor)

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Q31 (rating scale). Please read each of the statements below and indicate whether you agree or disagree:

The amount and quality of feedback in a well-marked script should vary depending on the timing of the assessment (the first assignment versus subsequent assignments versus the final assignment).

The amount and quality of feedback in a well-marked script should vary depending on the assessment weighting (20% versus 50%, for example).

The amount and quality of feedback in a well-marked script should vary depending on the culture of the student (for example, ethnicity, English as a second language etc).

[1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree]

Section 4. Background information

In this section, we'd like to find out a bit about you and what experience you've had with marking.

Q32. What is your age group?

18-25

25-35

35-45

45-55

55-65

Over 65

Q33. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Q34. What is your first language?

English

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Q35. How long have you been employed in a tertiary teaching role that involved marking?

I have been a marker in a face-to-face context for: ___ years ___ months

I have been in a marker in a distance education context for: ___ years ___ months

Q36. How would you rate yourself as a marker?

Very experienced

Experienced

Medium amount of experience

Inexperienced

Very inexperienced

Q37. What kind of assignments do you usually mark? Tick as many as applicable:

Essays (or essay-like assignments)

Short-answer format assignments

Reflective journals

Other. Please specify: [text box].

Q38. Would you like to take part in a follow-up interview? Yes No

**Q39. Would you like to go into the draw to win one of the ten \$10 vouchers for taking part in this survey?
Yes No**

Q40. Would you like to receive a summary of the main research findings? Yes No

**Q41. If you answered “Yes” to Question 37 or Question 38 or Question 39, please give an email address
you can be reached at: [text box].**

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE PARTICIPANTS' AGE AND EXPERIENCE

Age group	Number and percentage of participants
25–35	8 (16%)
35–45	10 (20%)
45–55	10 (20%)
55–65	20 (40%)
over 65	2 (4%)

Self-reported rating of experience	Number and percentage
of participants	3.72
“Very experienced”	24 (48%)
“Experienced”	17 (34%)
“Medium amount of experience”	8 (16%)
“Inexperienced”	1 (2%)
“Very inexperienced”	0 (0%)

Marking experience in a distance education context	Number and percentage
2–9 years	22 (44%)
10–19 years	20 (40%)
20+ years	8 (16%)