

Limitations of Corrective Feedforward: A Call for Resubmission Practices to become Learning-oriented

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Abstract

As part of well-planned formative assessment, feedback can help students to understand the demands of a summative assessment task, evaluate their current level of performance, and then find ways to close the gap. As students take a more active role in this process, their feedback can be thought of as becoming 'feedforward' since it serves a specific purpose and drives student action. As the value of formative assessment design is becoming emphasised in higher education, summative assessment practices need to be re-evaluated in terms of how well they support learning as opposed to just supporting valid judgements of student performance. However, despite significant discussion of Assessment for Learning and Learning-Oriented Assessment, resubmission practices are largely overlooked even though resubmission can be a key event in whether students are retained.

As part of a learning support department's effort to provide effective feedback on academic writing, students referred for support were offered two types of feedback: one was simple correction, the other was in-depth dialogic feedback which followed "feedback for learning" guidance (Askew and Lodge 2000). Student engagement with the two types of feedback was analysed by looking at the changes students made to their work and feedback from their subject tutor (including the resubmission grade). The tutor's feedback was also analysed to see if any intentions for the resubmission task could be inferred.

Results suggest that corrective feedback is highly efficient in enabling students to pass resubmissions and that more in-depth feedback is much less efficient. This paper highlights some of the ways in which resubmission practices can unknowingly encourage surface approaches, and suggests some ideas for how learning support can better align with subject tutors to enable resubmission to become more learning-oriented.

Introduction

This article analyses the experiences of three students who were referred for writing support following a failed assignment which they were required to resubmit. It looks at how they engaged with two types of feedback: corrective feedforward, and dialogic feedback. Their engagement with feedback is analysed through the framework of learning-oriented assessment as a way of explaining why they engaged in certain ways, and to offer suggestions for changing resubmission practices so that learning can be better supported.

The concept of feedforward has grown in popularity in higher education, focusing attention on the requirement for students to do something with their feedback (Duncan 2007). At a deeper level, feedforward can also refer to implied functions of feedback (Price et al. 2010), such as the developing of slowly learnt literacies and employability skills (Knight and Yorke 2004). When tutors talk about feedforward, however, it appears to be in a much more limited sense which I describe by borrowing a phrase from engineering – "corrective feedforward", meaning very

precise instructions which a tutor expects a student to fully implement. Assessment of corrective feedforward therefore focuses more on the extent to which changes have been implemented and advice followed rather than being an assessment of the overall quality of the submitted work, a concern which has been raised in the way PhD amendments are assessed (Holbrook et al. 2004).

In contrast, dialogic feedback refers to the way that tacit values are communicated through discussion as a way of developing shared understandings (Nicol 2010). When effective, both feedforward and dialogic feedback can be thought of as sustainable to the extent that students are able to make improvements for themselves both immediately and in the future (Carless et al. 2011). The extent to which assessment arrangements support this type of learning can be understood through the concept of learning-oriented assessment (Carless, Jaughin, and Liu 2006), which has its roots in the distinction between assessment *of* and assessment *for* learning (Black and William 1998). Resubmission design clearly needs to deliver justifiable and robust judgements since the stakes are so high. Exploring the way that feedback is used will therefore help to understand the extent to which this need for improved judgement-oriented feedback limits the potential for resubmission tasks to be learning-oriented.

Learning-oriented assessment

The conceptual framework for learning-oriented assessment has three components: assessment tasks should be evaluated as if they were learning tasks, students should be involved in assessment, and feedback should feedforward (Carless, Jaughin, and Liu 2006). These three components will be returned to in the discussion section in order to evaluate the resubmission practices observed.

The first component requires keeping “the development of learning firmly in mind” (Carless, Jaughin, and Liu 2006: 7), even if an assessment task must also judge a student’s performance or maintain institutional standards. This component can be seen as an attempt to get away from the dichotomy of assessment being ‘of’ or ‘for’ learning, recognising that any particular assessment task is likely to have multiple purposes, some of which might pull against each other (Boud 2000). An assessment can still be regarded as learning-oriented even if it serves these other functions, but there are different priorities. For example, unseen written exams are a popular technique for maintaining institutional standards and act as a barrier to many professions, but the tasks required in exams often lack relevance to the skills they claim to examine. Notions such as constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang 2011) or authentic assessment (Wiggins 1989) therefore become much more important in learning-oriented assessment design.

The second component, students being involved in assessment, seeks to utilise the learning potential of several aspects of assessment, including the way that academic judgements are made and applied to a piece of work. For example, learning-oriented assessment would help students to develop their sense of connoisseurship by evaluating the quality of their own work and then evaluating their work against exemplars to identify the gap they need to bridge, an approach which draws on Sadler (1989). Whilst not part of the conceptual framework described in Carless, Jaughin, and Liu (2006), this second component of learning-oriented assessment could also link with students being more engaged in task design so that they create meaningful learning journeys for themselves, including having more choice in how they are assessed (Falchikov 2013).

The third component, in common with more general definitions of feedforward as forward-looking feedback, emphasises student action as crucial in making feedback effective. Assessments which are learning-oriented therefore facilitate this type of feedback by creating opportunities for earlier feedback to be used in preparation for the task, or for the task to help generate forward-looking feedback for future tasks. Following Gibbs and Simpson (2004), learning-oriented assessment must include feedback which is usable by students, has a learning focus, and is then actually used by students to improve their learning. These three components draw together established good practice in assessment and feedback, but it is the combination that makes learning-oriented assessment such a useful concept since it reminds us that effective task design must focus on learning and what students do.

Feedback in academic writing support services

Writing support for university students can have an ambiguous role, much of which can be related to the ambiguous role of feedback itself. Writing centres and their tutors emphatically assert that they are not a proofreading service (Turner 2010), but there is an 'ever present pressure' from students to provide exactly that (Booth and Record 2013: 602). More broadly, engaging students with feedback intended to support their long-term learning is equally problematic. For example, some tutors complain that students often fail to even collect their written feedback (Bailey and Garner 2010, Carless 2006), while considerable written comments by tutors, even if read, can still be poorly used by students (Dysthe 2011). It is therefore 'not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004: 20).

One of the key challenges faced by academic staff is therefore giving feedback that students will want to use, for example through feedback which is more satisfying to students-as-consumers by being detailed, prompt, and personalised (Bols and Wicklow 2013). However, the feedback students appreciate is not necessarily the feedback that best supports their learning. For example, Boehler et al. (2006) found not only that general praise led to improved student satisfaction ratings when compared with constructive feedback, but also that these more satisfied students failed to improve their performance compared with their less satisfied peers. Focusing more on student learning than student satisfaction means questioning the assumption that the customer is always right (Price 2013). For example, students can be forced to engage with feedback by making engagement credit-bearing (Withey 2013). This risks irritating students, so a tutor has to be confident that the learning gain is worth the trade-off or that students will eventually see the benefits. This pragmatic approach also goes against the principle that assessment supports learning more when it is low-stakes, with the risk that forcing students to engage can lead to an "arms race" of tutors competing against each other's modules for student attention (Harland et al. 2015).

When feedback is provided by a writing support service, there are also concerns about fairness if these services are not available to all students, balancing the risk of an unfair advantage against the particular needs of disadvantaged groups who might have a legitimate claim to needing proofreading services (Babcock 2008). Students can also be pushed towards commercial services if they find feedback frustrating, potentially creating a gateway to the kind of 'heavy editing' that borders on malpractice (Bartlett 2009). As a result, it is not enough for writing centres to limit the support given to students since such support can be easily found online. Instead, writing support needs to convince students that proofreading will not benefit them in the long-term and that there is real value in engaging with more demanding feedback. This has been highlighted as a particular challenge for feedback on draft essays, as students can perceive improvements as too demanding and time-consuming (Court 2012).

One of the key ways in which students are encouraged to pay attention to feedback is convincing them that doing so will improve their grades. Nzekwe-Excel (2014), for example, has demonstrated that attending writing support is associated with increased grade performance. Students can also be motivated to engage with support if they feel it will help them avoid procrastination or get past feeling stuck, making it more likely that they will complete an assignment on time. Another motivation could be assistance in interpreting feedback from their tutor if they feel unable to understand the language of their tutor's feedback (Deyi 2011), helping students to make sense of what is required.

Failing an assignment brings all these issues into sharp focus: a student has an immediate need to understand what is required and make the necessary improvements. Feedback is therefore highly relevant as it relates directly to the assignment being (re)produced. The resubmission also typically comes after the main assessment period, making tutors more available for in-depth feedback. There could also be a strong incentive in terms of learning: whilst rare, the opportunity to repeat work can give students significant long-term advantages over peers who pass the task on their first attempt (Proud 2014). Encouraging students to engage with feedback when preparing for resubmission therefore has the potential to be highly rewarding and drive student learning.

However, common resubmission arrangements could also discourage engagement. Marks are typically capped at the lowest passing grade, offering little tangible reward for students who make significant improvements to their work. The resubmission is also very high stakes as there are often severe consequences for failing the same assignment twice, including students delaying graduation or paying hundreds or even thousands of pounds to retake a module. The challenge for feedback on resubmission is therefore to encourage students to learn and improve even though they will not be rewarded with a higher grade, and to enter into dialogue at a time when they are desperate for the certainty of passing.

High stakes resubmission and the threat of failure

Before looking in greater detail at how students respond to or are motivated by the threat of failure in resubmissions, it is worth considering how this threat is experienced by students more generally. Surprisingly few higher education students actually fail their courses in the UK, particularly when compared with failure rates at secondary level or in further education. Indeed, Floud argues that non-completion is a much wider concern than those failing assessments as the number of students failing 'are very small indeed: it is probably more difficult to fail British university exams than it is to get a first class degree' (2002: 59). The most recent figures support this point: whilst failure is not reported separately from non-continuation, 14% of students left UK institutions in 2014 without any qualification, compared with just 2% who were awarded third-class honours or unclassified 'ordinary' degrees, compared with over 30% of students who obtained first-class honours (HESA 2015).

Failure is similarly unlikely to result in removal from a course, instead non-continuation is still largely seen as a decision by the student, with failure being only part of their decision. For example, only 30% of respondents gave lack of academic progress as a factor in their decision to leave their course in a study by Yorke (2004), while none of the students surveyed reported being forced to leave because of failing an assessment. A similar study of postgraduate trainee teachers found that only 1% of the sample was actually forced to leave due to repeated failure of an assignment compared with 8% who did not complete the course, the majority of whom 'cited unspecified personal reasons' (Gorard, See, and Smith 2006: 83). The apparent unlikelihood of failing a university degree therefore seems at odds with the significant number of students who are recorded as leaving voluntarily without any qualification: either they feel unable to complete a task which it seems they would likely pass, or the failure acts as a trigger for students considering leaving a course for other reasons. Either way, it is far more common for students to not resubmit than it is for their resubmission to fail, indicating that part of the role of feedback on resubmissions should be to reassure students that improvements are possible, possibly by encouraging a growth mindset view of learning and emphasising the need for 'grit' and perseverance (Hochanadel and Finamore 2015).

Despite the apparent unlikelihood of resubmission resulting in failure of a programme, resubmission remains high stakes; many university policies only allow one attempt at resubmission, after which students must pay to retake an entire module, potentially costing around £2000. In addition to these high stakes, there is low reward as resubmission is typically capped at the module pass mark. This is of particular concern for large-credit modules, where capping can contribute to 'unduly lowering a student's overall degree classification' (Bloxham and Boyd 2007: 170). Resubmission policy might therefore indirectly contribute to a student's decision to withdraw by either financially penalising them or reducing their motivation to finish their degree by acting as an anchor on their grade average, despite the risk of outright failure being so low. These resubmission policies create a high-risk, low-reward situation: there are severe sanctions for a second failed attempt, but even a first-class resubmission would give no more benefit than a bare minimum pass. Indeed, no amount of hard work on a resubmission can remove the effect of a capped mark on a student's average.

Writing support needs to appreciate the emotional impact of failure on students, including feelings of helplessness. It seems that the greatest risk to students when preparing for resubmission is their own lack of confidence or inertia resulting in a failure to resubmit, or feeling that feedback requires an overwhelming amount of changes (Court 2012). As a minimum, writing support must help students to see that completing the resubmission is within their ability

and encourage them to do so. Ideally, support would go further than this and help to address any feelings the student might have that they are failing to make progress. Given the limited incentives for significantly improving any one resubmission piece, it is also important that students see improvements as feeding forward into future tasks so that they will learn something valuable from the resubmission in terms of their long-term goals.

Current reassessment practices in HE

With very little published on how students learn from resubmission of failed work, this section briefly considers how students learn from reassessment opportunities (i.e. 'resits' or chances to submit work more than once where there are no penalties for reassessment; where such penalties are applied, the term resubmission is used instead of reassessment). Making multiple attempts low-risk, such as by removing mark capping, would logically provide a more formative focus to assignments. However, an attempt to do so found that for more than half of students the first attempt was perceived 'as a "safety net" rather than an opportunity to learn' (Covic and Jones 2008: 82). Consequently, students who achieved good grades on the first attempt had little interest in improving and resubmitting, whilst other students submitted work which was weaker than normal (and which failed to pass) in an attempt to get through the assessment. Whilst some students in Covic and Jones' study did make good use of the feedback opportunity to drive their learning, the overall conclusion was that many strategic student approaches to assessment will take a long time to change. In contrast, Bland and Gallagher (2009: 722) found that removing reassessment chances resulted in 'closer working relationships with lecturers, to ensure that their one and only submission was their best work'. The effect of resubmission options on attainment is therefore complex, particularly when students attempt to leverage the system.

Whether or not reassessment improves learning, it has been demonstrated to improve performance. Pell, Boursicot, and Roberts (2009) offer four possible explanations for an improvement of 2 standard deviations in their study (bringing the reassessment mean equal to the mean cohort score): students have had an extra assessment practice, reassessment typically occurs at a time of reduced workload or assessment bunching, reassessment students receive additional tuition, and the higher stakes can increase motivation. Pell, Boursicot, and Roberts (2009) argue that this represents an unfair advantage for reassessed students, which supports the argument either for demanding a higher pass mark for each reassessment attempt (also recommended in McManus and Ludka 2012) or penalising the student in some other way (such as mark capping). In extreme cases, such as modular A-level in England and Wales, overly-strategic approaches can be employed in unlimited reassessment situations, leading to a host of undesirable and unfair consequences (Scott 2012). This unfair advantage has also been found in resubmission situations in HE, where despite mark capping the benefits of the learning gained from resubmission helps students to later out-perform peers who passed first time (Proud 2014). Another explanation is that failing increases receptiveness to feedback, so if the impact of failure is reduced then feedback can support continuous improvement and even gamification of learning. This distinction is made clear in Whitton's (2017) matrix, in which a low impact/high feedback environment makes a failure into a 'micro fail' – much more desirable than a trivial, serious or critical fail.

To summarise, motivating students to use reassessment feedback to improve their learning is highly problematic and can lead to unintended overly-strategic student behaviours. Allowing reassessment can improve learning, but it can also unfairly reward students who have not made the required improvements. To add to the complexity, prohibiting reassessment can also have both these outcomes. Another issue is that assessors might be overly influenced by how well the student heeds their advice or shows an increased effort, which again might incentivise students to strategically display these behaviours. Tutors might also be tempted to reward a student's effort if they have almost reached the required standard since they are aware of the severe penalties which students might face. Feedback on reassessment is therefore a highly complex area where there are no clear best practice recommendations and a wide range of potential negative outcomes for student learning, making it disappointing that the topic has received very little attention outside of medical education.

Procedure

Planned changes to the role of writing support tutors prompted the service to look for efficiency savings in writing support for students by identifying the most helpful types of feedback. A change in practice was therefore trialled in which students would be offered two separate tutorials. If one type of feedback was found to be much more effective than the other, then the writing support service could make a relatively painless budget cut.

The first was simply to offer students satisfying feedback as efficiently as possible to reduce their fear of failure, guiding them to interpreting their tutors' feedback and improving their work just enough to pass (plus whatever buffer they felt was prudent). The main aim of this first feedback session was to enable students to complete the resubmission and feel confident that it would pass, even if it would only barely do so. This is an example of what is meant by corrective feedforward, as described earlier. This included fixing minor grammatical and referencing errors and a more professional layout, such as consistent fonts and the use of headings.

With the assurance of being able to pass the assignment, a subsequent feedback session would be offered which would take a highly dialogic approach in which students could talk through their work and improve it until they were happy that they had identified and met their longer-term learning goals. If the learning gains from this type of feedback were persuasive enough, there would be a case for the writing support service to resist budget cuts. Improvements were judged by the resubmission mark given by their course tutor, the feedback from that course tutor, and through a more general reflection from both the student and writing support tutor on their learning.

Following ethical approval, all three students referred for resubmission support in that semester were offered the changed structure, or they could opt for the current model of a one-hour tutorial talking through their feedback and then offering brief email support on a redraft. All three students chose the new format. This research took place near the end of the academic year, with one postgraduate business student, one undergraduate medical student, and one undergraduate social science student. All had narrowly failed their assignment, with marks between 33 and 38 where the pass mark was set at 40. In all cases, the resubmission would be capped at 40, but the student would be told what mark they would have achieved if not capped.

Session one: superficial improvements

All three students seemed highly stressed by the thought of failing. They were glad of any support and keenly accepted the changed format for tutorials, which would give them much more contact time with their writing support tutor. My first observation was that simply offering this extra time made a difference to the learning climate, particularly with the medical student who visibly relaxed when I assured her that we did not have a strict time limit (as would normally be the case). Taking time for a cup of tea already seemed to make a significant improvement to her approach to the resubmission. The lack of time constraint seemed to have a negative effect, however, on how the business student viewed me as a tutor, seeming to take this as a cue that I would be doing most of the work for him and would extensively rewrite and correct his work. This may well have been a sign of the stress he felt under; he had previously offered to pay hundreds of pounds for this additional service privately, and I had to work hard to persuade him that this would not be beneficial. From a mindset perspective, he might not have believed himself capable of improving the work himself. From a learning-oriented assessment perspective, his self-evaluation was replaced with tutor-evaluation, but he was still unable to take the feedback forward into action.

With this unexpected development of a cash offer, I felt it was ethically important that the change in how I offered support should be completely beyond reproach. The first session was therefore careful to make no changes to ideas or add any content. An example of significant correction is given below (minor changes have been made to all examples of students' writing to protect anonymity):

Tesco is the biggest private sector company in Great Britain, and it was established in 1924 by Jack Cohen, ~~and~~ Tesco recently has be-the come one of the most successful ~~of the~~ food retailers in the UK, ~~since~~ Since its ~~established~~ establishment it was known as ~~innovation~~ an innovator in its industry; ~~and this company it~~ opened the first super stores in England (about (90000 sqft) ~~also it opened and~~ the first self service grocery in the US. ~~and~~ Tesco also made the decision to ~~make ensure~~ its future ~~company~~ by modifying its technique by starting to act in the market ~~as quality~~, ~~and in~~ the 1980s Tesco efficiently ~~increases~~ increased its range of ~~the products~~ and customer ~~basis~~ bases. improved equipment and presentation ~~means of its store~~ ~~as and well as its~~ customer service (Ajami, 2012).

Figure 1. Extensive grammatical correction of a business student's essay

These corrections were made whilst talking to the student, although his input was minimal and he was quite clear that he would rather have the changes made during our session than be given something to think about later. In contrast, the example below is from another student who appreciated being talked through the issues and simply asked for comment bubbles to help her understand and remember the necessary changes that she would make later.

Let's first focus on the importance of Assessment for Learning in the teaching practice through the Teachers' Standards expectations. Then, let's analyse the different impact of the two types of assessments on pupils' achievements. Finally, I will explain on which aspect I would like to focus on during my practice in my second placement.

Assessment for Learning is a true challenge for teachers. Being able to check pupils' knowledge and understanding (all along) the lesson is the main tool to be able to complete at least four of the Teachers' Standards expectations. For instance, the standard 6 of the Teacher's Standard is very clear when it stipulates that "A teacher must; "make accurate and productive assessment".

Indeed, teachers should try to include strategies to assess pupils' achievements all along their lessons. Using a range of assessment techniques will allow the teacher to keep track of the

Comment [MC2]: "let's" is very informal, avoid using it in writing. I think it would be better to just make your point directly.

Both types have different impacts on pupils' achievements and different expectations of trainee teachers as expressed in the Teachers' Standards.

Comment [MC3]: again, too informal. 'throughout' has a better tone.

Comment [MC4]: you will need to give a citation here as you're making a direct quotation

Figure 2. Editing suggestions on a social science student's essay

These examples already illustrate that the more discursive approach had better potential to feedforward into long-term improvements, as the social science student would be able to reflect on the formality of her language and make simple checks that direct quotations had citations. In contrast, the business student was unwilling to engage with the reasoning behind amendments to help develop his self-evaluative skills. He might plausibly be able to use the text as a model for sentence and paragraph construction in future, but would have to seek further support to avoid similar problems on his next assignment. At the very least, however, it was hoped that he would now have an example to compare his work against when deciding if he needed more support before submitting the work to his course tutor. In Sadler's (1989) terms, while he would not be able to improve his work in future he should at least have learnt to recognise when his work was below the required standard and so seek support before having to be referred after failing.

Helping students to interpret feedback from their tutor was also varied as students had different levels of feedback. One had copiously detailed notes whilst another only had a few general comments. In one case, a medical student, the tutor was clearly irritated and commented that the student's work was 'annoying' and that she 'couldn't be bothered finishing reading it', offering very little advice for improvement. Whilst this may seem alarming practice, similar comments on PhD theses were reported in Holbrook et al. (2004). The student also did not seem upset by these comments and was keen to please her tutor with the resubmission, happily deleting vast sections of irrelevant text. Unsubstantiated comments were also culled as this was simpler than trying to find support for them, and the whole assignment was shortened to make sure it was below the word limit where it has previously been well over the 10% grace allowance (and so less 'annoying' to read).

The three first sessions for these students lasted around 90 minutes on average. The postgraduate business student decided that he was happy to barely pass and that he would submit this draft, and therefore he would not require any further support (I should have just taken the money). The undergraduate social science student felt confident to make the necessary improvements but would come back afterwards for more general support after resubmitting the work, whilst the undergraduate medical student felt that she should completely rewrite the assignment with a new focus and come for support once she had completed a draft.

Session two: redrafting

The social science student made several additional changes to those highlighted in comment bubbles, including some extra reading recommended in her tutor's feedback and some extra reading she had found herself. Some grammatical and typing errors which I missed had also been corrected, and the whole assignment read as more concise. We had previously discussed that finding reading to support assertions was a short-term fix which missed the point that her assertions should develop from broad, unbiased reading. Her understanding of this seemed evident in some changes which took a more balanced (if linguistically formulaic) approach to the reading, whilst the effect of time pressure could be seen in some assertions which were cut and the argument simplified. Routine checks I had recommended were also in evidence, such as looking for a common thread between the first and last sentences of each paragraph. Her independent changes therefore reflected a broader understanding of essay writing conventions, including making a clearer argument, and her subject knowledge showed some small but still significant improvement from the extra reading and clearer expression of previous reading.

The medical student decided that she had originally chosen a poor incident to write about for her reflective assignment, and so we talked through several key events in her course to find something more substantial. I also advised her that the previous reflection seemed too critical of her peers and did not really get to the key issue of what she had learnt from the experience. I prompted her to repeatedly ask herself what was the real explanation behind her observations. Her first draft of this new reflection read as far more meaningful, and she was able to talk more around the topic and make more notes while we talked. She was still concerned about writing style and frequently asked for my help to cut her word count, and she was almost entirely dependent on me for citations and referencing as she was adamant that she could not understand how to do it. As a compromise, I did one of each type and then supervised her amending other references. I believed that this draft was a significant improvement, and enough to pass, but still had some key weaknesses which would need addressing throughout the year.

Support for the medical student was more time consuming at nearly 3 hours over another two sessions compared with just one hour in one additional session for the social science student, but there are some signs that this is already being recouped as early drafts for future assignments already seem much stronger in general and future tutorials should be much shorter.

Results

I had reflected that the medical student had made significant learning gains and resolved some key misconceptions, that the social science student had made substantial improvements, and that the business student had learnt very little, possibly nothing, and would barely pass. However, this matched poorly with their tutors' grades on the resubmission. Whilst the social sciences student scored a first, the business student was given a 2.1 and the medical student was given an ordinary pass/third.

These grades may well have been given more for motivation than as a realistic grade, as each student was capped at 40 due to the resubmission policy anyway. It is also plausible that, as someone with no specialist knowledge of the disciplines, my own evaluation of students' work was based too superficially on their writing. Nevertheless, the grades for the business student and the social science student seemed unfair to me as one had made far more fundamental changes than the other and would be much less likely to fail subsequent assignments. The medical student had used feedback both to feed forward into the specific improvements she needed to make, and also feed back into improving her general approach to assignments, making her the only student who had really engaged with assessment as learning. She explained later that her tutor 'flicked through' the assignment during a tutorial and then said 'Better, that's a pass'. In contrast, the tutor for the business student explained to me that language issues had prevented him from understanding the student's points, and that fixing these issues was enough to get the content across. The social science student's tutor contacted me to say how pleased he was, echoing the sentiment that language was no longer impeding meaning.

Discussion

Writing support tutors can often feel frustrated that their knowledge rarely feeds back to improvements in assessment and teaching on students' main programmes (Devet 2011), so it was important not just to evaluate how well students engaged with support but also to see how this changed provision would be reflected in feedback from course tutors. My first reflections were that tutors had been too easily fooled by superficial improvements, as in Kangis (2001) and Hartley, Trueman and Betts (2006), and that their feedback and grades would encourage surface approaches to learning in the future. I was particularly disappointed that the medical student put significant effort into improving her work and received very little praise for doing so.

More charitably, however, it should be remembered that the marks were capped. It may well be the case therefore that marks were used for encouragement more than being a legitimate attempt to re-grade the resubmission. Meer and Chapman (2014), for example, have written of the importance of building confidence through low-stakes assessment in the first year, where grade averages do not carry forward to final degree classification. Since there is no difference in a student's actual grade based on the notional resubmission mark, giving the impression of significant improvement might simply be an effort at repairing self-esteem to balance the experience of the original assignment failure. Similarly, the medical student needed to learn the basic point of remembering her audience and focusing on the question, so more detailed feedback or praise would distract from reinforcing that point. The tutor therefore may have wanted to celebrate this specific success and promptly get the student back on track; the 'quick flick through' was perhaps a tacit 'job done, move on'.

Applying the three components of learning-oriented assessment (Carless, Jaughin, and Liu 2006), summarised in the table below, helps to show where these resubmission practices can change to become more learning-oriented, at the same time highlighting significant wasted potential in current practices.

Table 1. Applying the three components of learning-oriented assessment to the resubmission tasks

Component of learning-oriented assessment	Resubmission tasks
Learning is the main intention (but may also help to judge achievement or maintain standards)	There is a strong emphasis on improving <i>work</i> , but this seems too specific to quality as a genuine effort to improve <i>learning</i> . A strong emphasis on professional aspects of the assignments, such as grammar and layout, also implies that students need to demonstrate more effort or professionalism in their work. Resubmission practices might therefore be a type of behaviour management strategy. The resubmission tasks do not fit well with any of the three main purposes of assessment, since regrading appears too superficially to judge compliance with instructions to really be categorised as judging achievement. Similarly, the ease with which students could pass by simply following their corrective feedforward suggests that maintaining standards was not a key function either since the threat of failure was very remote. These resubmission tasks can therefore be thought of as poorly designed since they fail to address any of the three key intentions of assessment, and may be more rooted in routine or tradition than any principles of good design.
Students are involved in assessment judgements	The high-stakes and low-reward nature of resubmission, in which pass marks are capped but failing has severe consequences, will naturally reduce student involvement since they have very little power. However, there was some evidence that students could apply self-evaluation and carefully rework their submission, even if they were not rewarded for doing so this time – feedforward which looked to apply this learning to future tasks (where it could then be more rewarded) has significant potential to compensate for the high-stakes/low-reward problem. Increased contact time with tutors also has the potential to increase student involvement, and there might even be a case for self-evaluation to play a more dominant role – if students really are extremely unlikely to fail, then they could be more involved in the process of evidencing their competence rather than, as seemed the case here, passively awaiting judgement.
Feedback is forward-looking	Corrective feedforward is naturally forward-looking, but only as far forward as the very next task. This emphasises the importance of tutors really understanding the point of feedforward being improvements in learning, not just any action by students. Two of the three students were judged to make strong learning gains, particularly in self-evaluation and understanding the requirements of their discipline, and these were the same students who engaged with the dialogic feedback option. The third student was not helped to look far enough forward, so a better designed resubmission task should be able to motivate such students to engage more meaningfully with feedback.

The resubmission tasks were all simple repeats of the failed assignment, for which a revised draft or a completely new task could be submitted. The corrective feedforward provided a strong incentive to redraft, since the advice is so specific and students appeared to take it as implied that following the advice would result in a safe pass (this assumption appeared valid). The one student who chose to create an entirely new submission did so by being guided through self-evaluation to realise what a good attempt would look like, so there was some potential for dialogic feedback to influence whether students chose to resubmit drafts or new work. In terms of learning potential, there may be a case for requiring more substantial changes so that students are encouraged to look in more general terms at their work rather than simply fixing

specific flaws. However, such a change to resubmission practices could be problematic if students fear failure – indeed, such a change could even reduce the number of students who go through the additional effort to resubmit, and unnecessarily add to the dropout rate.

Conclusions

The project aimed to inform budget decisions regarding the level of support students could be offered, but instead led to the discussion in this paper of resubmission policy based on the argument that it was unrealistic to expect students to engage dialogically with feedback while there were still disincentives built into resubmission practices.

Reflecting on the changed two-session format for resubmission support, it seems that basic editing and proofreading might help both tutors and students to get past some of the routine aspects of academic writing and engage in deeper dialogue. Separating feedback into two sessions might therefore help to make explicit the difference between the aspects of assignments that relate to learning and those that relate to a student's professionalism. This type of support might also be usefully provided by support staff, helping to maximise the time students get with their course tutor by removing distractions from their writing. Students might also be usefully told that taking greater care over these issues themselves will save them a great deal of wasted effort in the future, and they will benefit from their tutor spending more time on more meaningful feedback. I was also reminded of the advice that attempting to control students' strategic approaches is often counter-productive:

Let us abandon the goal of manipulating students into doing what the faculty desires and settle for something more modest. We can take as a reasonable proximate goal that we at least do nothing (or as little as possible) to interfere with whatever tendency students might have to engage in academic activities . . . instead of trying to get students to do what we want, we look only for ways of not encouraging them to do what we do not want. We ask how a college might be organized so as not to provoke or coerce students into forms of activity that interfere with what we might want to achieve.

(Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968: 138)

From this perspective, it is vital resubmission practices are careful not to support the idea that superficial improvements are all that is required to get a student over the finishing line, as the student is effectively told resubmission is not a learning opportunity. This also has important implications for how writing support is evaluated. For example, Nzekwe-Excel (2014) demonstrates a significant achievement gain for students who attend writing workshops, but the value of such gains is questionable if they are an unreliable measure of student learning.

With the rise in commercial proofreading services in HE (Turner 2010) and its ambiguous role in supporting learning (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay 2011), it is important that all tutors are aware of the message they convey by the resubmission practices described in this study. If students believe that their work is basically sound but simply needs some polishing, the fees for proofreading services appear insignificant compared with the risks and costs of retaking modules. When a writing support service explicitly refuses to offer this support, students will be further driven towards commercial alternatives.

By way of a small theoretical contribution, this study suggests that the conceptual framework of learning-oriented assessment might require all three components to work in tandem, since there was little incentive for students to engage with the more in-depth dialogic feedback due to the poor task design. In terms of institutional efforts to improve feedback practices, it is therefore important to also look at assessment task design and how students are involved in an assessment journey throughout a coherent programme. Improving feedback on its own is simply not enough to make an assessment 'learning-oriented'.

This study has also highlighted a timely need for feedback to differentiate between the learning aspects and the professional aspects of assignments. Changing my practice to separate these

types of feedback brought this effect into sharp focus, highlighting disproportionate rewards for a professionally presented essay free of simple errors, and equally disproportionate punishments for assignments which were not well presented or edited. Students need to understand the importance of presenting themselves effectively in assignments, but also need a clearer message that this is not a proxy for learning. This message needs to come from their course tutors as well as writing tutors, with clear, demonstrable benefits for students who take the time to engage meaningfully with draft revisions. If we are to avoid overly strategic approaches to resubmission, feedback and assessment practices need to engage with the fact that students who fail assignments need significant support and feel under immense pressure, so simply rewarding effort sends the wrong message. It is reassuring that two of the three students in this study seemed to regard the support offered as too generous, and clearly wanted to take responsibility for improving their work themselves. Universities must ensure that such attitudes are not penalised by unhelpful resubmission practices.

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