

# Work in progress: how formative feedback enhances the student learning experience

Su White and Alastair Irons

saw@ecs.soton.ac.uk ,alastair.irons@sunderland.ac.uk

**Abstract** - Faculty invest considerable effort to provide students with formative feedback. Educational research has endorsed the value of a clearly articulated approach when providing student feedback known as ‘assessment for learning’. In order to ascertain whether claims associated with ‘assessment for learning’ hold true in the engineering disciplines, a three-year study of the deployment of such approaches was undertaken. Preliminary research identified differences in perceptions between staff and students. They showed different understandings of what constitutes feedback, and different expectations of how feedback might be used.

*Index Terms* – Assessment, Assessment for Learning, Feedback

## INTRODUCTION

It is observed, following Boud that assessment drives learning [1]. Understandings have been refined by the findings and observations of Black and William [2], specifically: a) the impact of assessment on learning, mediated and strengthened by distinguishing between and separating feedback and the award of marks; and b) the advantages for learning of peer assessment and personal reflection. Assessment for learning has gained broad currency as amongst educationalists and within institutions; see for example [3-5]. However Askew and Lodge observe that there are dilemmas and tensions in the discourse on formative assessment and suggest there is little correlation between formative feedback and enhancing learning. This paper reports on work which set out to explore claims associated with assessment for learning in the engineering disciplines. Surveys of student beliefs

and attitudes were conducted. Faculty attitudes were also examined.

## SURVEYS

Data was collected to establish a benchmark for existing feedback practices. Email surveys were conducted with students to identify their best and worst experiences of feedback and to envisage an ideal feedback scenario. Responses were analyzed and clustered under general headings as presented in Tables I-III. A total of 31 students responded.

TABLE I  
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS - MOST USEFUL FEEDBACK RECEIVED

Item	Points identified	No. of responses
a	Suggestion for future work	7
b	Suggestions for additional marks	4
c	Easy to understand comments	3
d	Pointed out mistakes	3
e	Work with comments	3
f	Grade	3
g	Sample solution	2
h	Written comments	2
i	Identifying where marks have been lost	2

Students were asked to rank types of feedback indicating their perceived usefulness to their personal learning.

TABLE II  
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS - LEAST USEFUL FEEDBACK RECEIVED

Item	Comment	responses
a	No feedback	12
b	Marks only / grade	6
c	Pointed out mistakes / what I hadn't done correctly	5
d	Didn't get to keep assignments	4
e	Insulting comments	3
f	Quality of feedback	3
g	Feedback in front of class	2

The method of data collection and the free format questions meant that differing numbers of responses were elicited from each student. Although in each case the numbers associated with this data is not large, the responses may still be taken as indicative of the relative importance of each identified item.