

## A Desire for the Personal: Student Perceptions of Electronic Feedback

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An earlier study conducted into tertiary student perceptions of feedback on their work revealed a mixed response to the idea of electronic feedback. This result was surprising considering the attention given to Generation Y and the preference for digital technology in their lives. This paper reports on the results of a follow-up study exploring a 2010 cohort of Australian tertiary students and their perceptions of electronic formats for providing feedback on their work. Student preferences, experiences, feedback clarity, teacher feedback and feedback from others were all investigated within the overarching context of *electronic feedback* on students' work. A survey was used to collect data about this topic via a combination of qualitative open-ended and closed questions. The findings continue to generate surprise as young, tech-savvy students revealed a preference for the personal via face-to-face and hand written feedback, while seeming to just tolerate electronic formats as a back-up form of feedback. In considering these findings, this paper argues that we cannot make assumptions about how students want to use technology in all aspects of their lives, including the learning environments in which they are engaged. In this hyper-technology aware period, there is a human aspect to feedback that is conveyed through non-electronic forms that students value very highly.

### Introduction

"There's only so much you can convey in the electronic form." "Electronic feedback is very distant. It seems like there is less opportunity for clarification." (students' comments from the Students' Perceptions of Electronic Feedback survey, 2010)

Constructive, timely feedback is central to student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In particular, formative feedback is important because it presents opportunities for students to address aspects of their learning and to develop an understanding of their progress. Formative feedback gives students opportunities to apply specific feedback to their work and learn as they do so. Yorke (2003) contends that formative assessment, whether informal or formal, is critical to success in higher education but should not solely focus on correction. Formative assessment may also involve a number of participants including students' peers. According to Yorke (2003), summative assessment, although not often recognized for such, can also act in a formative capacity in developing students' overall learning. Furthermore, he highlights research that identifies the significant value students place on organized formative feedback sessions (see for example, Carroll, 1995, Rolfe & McPherson, 1995).

While there is recognition of the significant role and value that feedback plays in student learning, very little is understood about how students perceive the feedback they receive on their work (Rowe & Wood, 2008). In an earlier study, a cohort of Australian tertiary students of mixed-year levels surveyed in 2009 revealed that students hold very strong opinions about the quality, quantity, frequency, and timing of feedback they receive on their work (Budge & Gopal, 2009).

Furthermore, the findings of that study showed that students value feedback highly and perceive it as an indicator of teaching staff caring about their work, as a "justification of their grade," and as an indicator of "what they need to do to improve their performance" (Budge & Gopal, 2009, p. 76).

In their study on feedback, Rowe, and Wood (2008) state that while constituting a central aspect of learning, education research to date has largely neglected the feedback issue particularly from the student's point of view. This research gap, also identified by Weaver (2006), is an important one to explore because feedback is understood to be a critical part of student learning (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989) and the most powerful influencer of student achievement (Hattie, 1987).

The lack of research about student perceptions of feedback was the original motivator for the 2009 study (Budge & Gopal, 2009). An extra driver to developing the study was low levels of student satisfaction with feedback. The study used an adaptation of Rowe and Wood's 2008 survey instrument and aimed to explore students' perceptions of feedback. Students from one discipline were surveyed, and both quantitative and qualitative data was collated and analyzed to identify patterns and relationships of interest. By contextualizing the study for a specific discipline, the researchers developed a detailed understanding regarding the provision of feedback from the student perspective. Contrary to popular opinion that suggests students do not value or use feedback to improve their work, the authors found that 95% of respondents indicated they use feedback to improve their results in future assignments and projects.

The results of that earlier 2009 study shed some valuable light on student views, thoughts, values, and beliefs about the feedback they receive. In particular, the study revealed that students value detailed, timely feedback with a focus on quality information about the weaknesses and strengths of their work, that they are open to peer and self-assessment as forms of feedback, and that they value feedback as a means to improving their learning.

One finding of the 2009 study was particularly surprising. In relation to perceptions of electronic feedback on their work, students revealed a mixed response to the idea and use of it. This result was especially surprising given all the discussion about Generation Y students and the preference for digital technology in their lives (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Martin, 2005). To date there has been little research on how students perceive electronic feedback. After sharing the findings of the 2009 study at a conference and hearing from other participants that they were beginning to discover similar information, the author became intrigued by this topic. In an endeavor to know more, a follow-up study was conducted in 2010 with the same tertiary student cohort to investigate this topic in more detail. The aim of the study was to tease out the topic further and investigate student preferences, experiences, issues about feedback clarity, students' views on teacher feedback and feedback from others, all within the overarching context of "electronic feedback." The overall aim was to gain a deeper understanding of what students think about the use of electronic feedback as a mechanism for communicating information about their work.

### Methodology

The participant cohort was the same as that in the 2009 study: students from a school within a large urban Australian university, delivering both higher education (with a focus on academic skills and knowledge) and vocational education and training programs - VET (with a focus on applied skills and knowledge). Most programs are delivered in a face-to-face mode, with a small number also offering a blended mode (a combination of face-to-face and online learning). This distinction in terms of mode is important to acknowledge because to a large extent the class mode will determine how feedback is given to students on their work. For example, if all classes were taught online, it would be expected that most, if not in fact all feedback would mirror this mode and be provided via electronic formats. Given the number of programs in the School offering a blended mode is currently still very small, it can be reasonably assumed that participants were from programs offering face-to-face classes. Students participating were not asked to

identify the program in which they were enrolled. An additional contextual element is that the School teaches a creative discipline: fashion and textiles.

The study involved 69 ( $n = 69$ ) participants in total via an electronic survey. When total enrollments for the School were taken into account, the response rate represented 5%. The response rate in the 2009 study was a little higher (7%); however, as the authors pointed out in the findings of that study, a lower response rate appears to be an issue in relation to electronic surveys. However, the sample represented the two sectors in the School in line with their wider proportion; higher education students comprised almost 30% of participants, and just over 70% were from VET programs.

Participants were asked a series of questions via an electronic survey titled *Students' Perceptions of Electronic Feedback*. The survey was developed by the author and aimed to elicit students' views of receiving feedback on their work via electronic formats. Three of the seven questions were closed questions, while the remaining four were open-ended and of a qualitative nature. The survey was conducted during the first semester of 2010, and students were given a one month period to respond. It was explained to participants that the aim of the study was to better understand student views on the topic of electronic feedback on their work.

Analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken by studying yes/no responses to questions and then thematically coding the data collected via the four open-ended survey questions to identify patterns and relationships of interest. Closed questions were analyzed descriptively by looking at percentage responses.

The definition of "electronic feedback" used in this study and for the purpose of this paper includes feedback given to students about their work via email, feedback given in the form of electronic notes on essays/projects/folios or other, via blogs and/or wikis, via the Learning Management System Discussion Board (in Blackboard), and via online games/activities. Students were also able to indicate whether there were other ways they received electronic feedback on their work in addition to these categories. Interestingly, they did not offer any extra categories to those provided by the survey.

The term "teachers/lecturers/tutors" was used in the context of the survey questions as a variety of these terms are used and heard in a university offering both higher education and vocational education and training programs. However, for simplicity, the term "teacher" will be used in this paper.

As the researcher in this study, the author was also the learning and teaching advisor for the academic school that forms the center of this study. In this role, the author's contact is mostly with staff rather than

students. University ethics approval was gained to carry out the study, and all participation was on a voluntary, anonymous basis.

## Findings

### Feedback Preferences

The first two questions of the survey asked students to indicate their preferences and experience of feedback more generally. Response data is provided for these in Tables 1-2. For both questions students could choose one category only to respond to from the seven prescribed areas.

In response to question one, it is immediately clear that students prefer feedback from their teachers to be given verbally in a private, face-to-face format, with just over 55% indicating this preference. There was also a strong preference for private, hand written feedback (27.5%). Strong responses in these two areas suggest that students have a preference for private feedback from their teachers.

In response to question two, once again, students indicated a strong preference for privately given face-to-face verbal and hand written feedback from other students and/or work experience supervisors (see Table 2). This response is consistent with their preference for how feedback is given by their teachers. Interestingly, the response rate for “electronic feedback” is consistent (13%) for both questions one and two, suggesting this format is not affected by whether teachers, students, or others are giving the feedback. However, there was less of a preference for publicly given face-to-face feedback from teachers compared with other students and work experience supervisors, which suggests a degree of sensitivity surrounding this.

### Electronic Feedback

In answering question three, students were able to check as many areas as was appropriate to match their feedback experience. The results indicate that students participating in this study were most familiar with receiving electronic feedback via email. There was some experience in having received feedback via “electronic notes on essay/project/folio, etc.” and Discussion Board in the university Learning Management System (Blackboard), but there was almost no experience via blogs, wikis and online games/activities (see Table 3). Interestingly, five out of the twelve students who checked “other” in response to question three indicated that they had experienced none of the six forms of electronic feedback suggested in the answer fields. Therefore, 12 % of the sample (as only 42 of the 69 completed this question) indicated that they had not experienced

electronic forms of feedback on their work. The remaining seven “other” responses described non-electronic forms of feedback they had experienced (e.g., face-to-face, and so were deemed not relevant in terms of answering this particular question).

The last four survey questions were of an open-ended nature and elicited a considerable amount of qualitative data from students. In relation to electronic feedback, questions were focused on issues of communication clarity, issues regarding whether teachers, students, or others should use it, and the electronic submission of work and accompanying feedback. The four questions were as follows:

4. When you receive feedback in an electronic form do you feel that the communication is clearer than when other forms are used (e.g., verbal, hand written feedback? If yes, why? If no, why not?).
5. Do you believe teachers should use electronic feedback for your work? Why or why not? If yes, how often and for what purposes?
6. Do you believe others (e.g., students, work experience supervisors, should use electronic feedback for your work? Why or why not? If yes, how often and for what purposes?).
7. If you submit work electronically, are you happy to receive electronic feedback or would you prefer another method (e.g., verbal or hand written? Why?).

Question four focused students’ attention on feedback clarity, and a significant 43% of all qualitative responses where an emphatic “no” in relation to the question about communication being clearer via electronic feedback. In addition, 26% believed it was clearer in communicating information, while 17% said they did not know, 10% indicated both electronic and other forms were good for communication clarity, and 3% responded in a way that did not answer the question. The reasons expressed for “yes” and “no” responses are outlined in Table 4.

Survey questions five and six were focused on exploring students’ beliefs about teachers and students or others using electronic feedback on their work. Students were more supportive of teachers using electronic feedback on their work (59% “yes”; 31% “no”) than they were for students or others (such as work experience supervisors) doing so (43% “yes”; 43% “no”). Of the students who agreed with the idea of teachers using electronic feedback, 22% had firm conditions attached to their agreement. Examples of how students expressed these conditions included the following responses:

Table 1  
*Student Preferences for How Feedback is Given on Work by Teaching Staff*

| Question 1. How do you prefer to receive feedback on your work from teachers/lecturers/tutors? |                  |                |
|--|------------------|----------------|
|  | Response percent | Response count |
| Face-to-face verbal feedback [private]   | 55.1%            | 38             |
| Face-to-face verbal feedback [public]  | 4.3%             | 3              |
| Hand written feedback [private]  | 27.5%            | 19             |
| Hand written feedback [public]   | 0.0%             | 0              |
| Electronic feedback (e.g., by email, blogs, wikis, typed comments on your work ) [private]     | 13.0%            | 9              |
| Electronic feedback [public]   | 0.0%             | 0              |
| Other (please specify)   |                  | 5              |

Table 2  
*Student Preferences for How Feedback is Given on Work by Other Students and/or Work Experience Supervisors*

| Question 2. How do you prefer to receive feedback on your work from other students and/or work experience supervisors? |                  |                |
|--|------------------|----------------|
|  | Response percent | Response count |
| Face-to-face verbal feedback [private]   | 53.6%            | 37             |
| Face-to-face verbal feedback [public]  | 10.1%            | 7              |
| Hand written feedback [private]  | 23.2%            | 16             |
| Hand written group feedback [public]   | 0.0%             | 0              |
| Electronic feedback (e.g., by email, blogs, wikis, typed comments on your work ) [private]                             | 13.0%            | 9              |
| Electronic feedback [public]   | 0.0%             | 0              |
| Other (please specify)   |                  | 2              |

*Note.* The two “other” responses added no new information to the fields already listed in the question.

- “Depending on the subject, if it is general work it’s fine with electronic feedback, but if it’s creative work then it needs to be face to face!”
- “They should, however, not for big assignment feedback, only on small due dates and small hand ins.”
- “I think it is ok for maybe exam work, but any design or new subject areas should have results delivered in person.”
- “Yes, if it is not an important assessment it would be quicker for teachers and students if feedback was given electronically but not for important assessments.”

The reasons given with the higher proportion of “no” responses to question six about electronic feedback from students and others indicate that students want more of a dialogue about their work in these situations and that electronic feedback doesn’t provide enough of an opportunity for that. A small number of the negative comments given also related to students

feeling that feedback should not come from other students, but rather from the teacher only.

The final survey question asked students about their opinions of receiving electronic feedback on work also submitted electronically. Compared to previous questions asked about electronic feedback, students were more supportive of this as an option (71% “yes”; 28% “no”). However, of the group who agreed with this option, 35% had strong conditions attached to this such as: the feedback is detailed; depends on the weighting of the assignment; acceptable unless there is a need for further discussion on the work; the opportunity of verbal feedback is still an option; that it is genuine and constructive; and that the feedback is well written.

### Discussion

When all the data gathered during this study is considered and students’ perceptions of feedback as a whole are explored, interesting information surfaces offering valuable insights for those teaching in contemporary tertiary education environments. In

Table 3  
*Student Experience of How Electronic Feedback has been Given on Work*

| Question 3. Have you had experience in receiving feedback on your work from: |                  |                |
|--|------------------|----------------|
|  | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Email  | 92.9%            | 39             |
| Electronic notes on essay/project/folio etc.                                 | 33.3%            | 14             |
| Blogs  | 2.4%             | 1              |
| Wikis  | 2.4%             | 1              |
| Discussion Board (in Blackboard)   | 19.0%            | 8              |
| Online games/activities  | 2.4%             | 1              |
| Other (please specify)   |                  | 12             |

Table 4  
*Reasons For and Against Electronic Feedback in Relation to Clarity of Communication*

| Reasons For   | Reasons Against  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can refer to it later</li> <li>• Concise and direct</li> <li>• Clearly thought out before given</li> <li>• Teacher tends to elaborate more</li> <li>• Convenience, efficiency</li> <li>• Easier to read than handwriting</li> <li>• Explanation is better</li> <li>• Is a record</li> <li>• Time to read, absorb and refer back</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers do not answer questions in emails</li> <li>• Not personal enough, too distant</li> <li>• Too short, not enough detail</li> <li>• Does not feel official enough</li> <li>• Teachers do not get results back promptly</li> <li>• Verbal is more detailed, easier to clarify points</li> <li>• Hand written is more direct</li> <li>• Verbal is more direct</li> <li>• You can misinterpret electronic feedback</li> <li>• Less informative</li> <li>• Face-to-face is better as you have the work there in front of you</li> <li>• No chance of discussion, cannot ask questions on the spot</li> <li>• Sometimes it is just graded so not enough information is communicated</li> <li>• It is difficult for the teacher to write everything they need to say</li> </ul> |

relation to electronic feedback on their work (or indeed feedback generally), what is clear from the findings of this study is that students value opportunities for a personal connection with their teacher as well as others. They have a strong desire for detailed feedback and a preference for feedback to be provided in a private forum. In addition, due to the nature of the work being submitted in creative disciplines, electronic feedback may be limited in its ability to provide the feedback required for learning. A well-rounded feedback package which provides information to students about their progress in a variety of forms and which does not make assumptions about students' views and preferences is suggested as a strategy to assist student learning.

### **The Personal Connection**

An overwhelming theme that came through the qualitative data collected is that students value the personal experience and connection when feedback is given verbally, face-to-face, regardless of who it is from. In responding to the question about whether feedback should be given electronically, one student stated the following: "No – that separates the procedure. The teacher and student need to communicate with each other. The student and the teacher learn from all of these interactions." Students like this one perceive feedback as a two-way communication with both parties actively involved and learning. To these students, electronic feedback is

viewed as static, one way, and not alive. Electronic feedback is viewed as “not human enough,” as another student described it. This concurs with Wood’s (1987, as cited in Yorke, 2003) view that feedback is a form of collaborative activity between the participants (e.g., the student and the teacher). Even when they can see the value and convenience in receiving electronic feedback, students frequently responded by saying that their first preference was still for personal, verbal face-to-face feedback. Many agreed that both options, when used as a package, were acceptable. However, very few students expressed comments suggesting that they would be happy to receive electronic feedback alone.

The importance of the personal connection was also evident in the earlier study which found that students perceive feedback as an indicator that teachers care about their work (Budge & Gopal, 2009). In their study on feedback, Price and Donovan (2007) also support the need for a more personal approach and for feedback to be considered in the broader context of student learning rather than just in relation to a single piece of assessment.

### Craving the Detail

Students also value the detail in feedback on their work, regardless of the form in which it is given. One student noted the following: “Again, not really fussed . . . I have found so far that feedback is inadequate and incomplete and I believe that is more important than the method of delivery.” This finding is also consistent with those of the earlier study in which students referred to the need for a greater amount of higher quality feedback more frequently (Budge & Gopal, 2009). Other studies have also confirmed students’ desire for detailed feedback (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Rowe & Wood, 2008; Rowe, Wood & Petocz, 2008; Weaver, 2006).

### Creative Disciplines and the Nature of Feedback

In relation to the creative nature of the discipline in which this study was conducted, some interesting insights were gained about the kind of feedback that students perceive as valuable. Comments throughout the responses referred to the physical nature of the work being submitted and the need to discuss it and look at it when receiving feedback. A connection with their learning was implied in these comments. In this respect, students viewed electronic feedback as limited in providing the kind of feedback for their learning that they need in a creative discipline. “With such visual based submissions it’s good to discuss the work I show,” one student explained. This perspective about the kind of feedback on creative work that is valued by students is an issue that those teaching in

creative disciplines need to be mindful of, and it is an issue that also surfaced during the earlier study conducted with the same student cohort (Budge & Gopal, 2009). Differences in assessment and feedback traditions between creative and other disciplines are also commented on in the findings of Weaver’s (2006) study about student perceptions of feedback. Weaver’s findings highlight the strong oral tradition of feedback through tutorials in art and design programs. Where possible, teachers may need to use oral forms of feedback more often in creative disciplines as a means of communicating both the explicit and tacit knowledge associated with complex, creative work.

### Private Versus Public

Questions one and two in particular revealed a tension between students’ perceptions of publicly and privately given feedback. Data collected from these two questions indicates that students have a preference for privately given feedback regardless of who the feedback provider is. This suggests an issue of sensitivity for students in receiving feedback, as well as the need for privacy to allow for this. The 2009 study revealed that students attach a great deal of the personal to their work (Budge & Gopal, 2009). Teachers can address this issue by ensuring that when they need to give feedback publicly to the whole class or group that it is based on group work rather than that of an individual.

### A Well-rounded Feedback Package

What is clear through the research conducted with this cohort in both the earlier and current study (2009 and 2010) is that students’ value feedback when it is provided through a variety of forms. While they do value privately given, face-to-face, verbal feedback from their teachers over other feedback forms, these two studies show that students are also open to other forms of feedback (e.g., peer feedback, group-to-group feedback, electronic feedback [from teachers, peers and others], verbal feedback, and written feedback). What they do not value is the idea that one of these other strategies, such as electronic feedback, might be the *only* way feedback is given. Viewed as a package, feedback on their work that is varied by form and provider, that is timely, and that provides enough detail for learning is of value to students and can deliver useful information for deep learning (Biggs, 1999). This idea is also supported in the feedback literature (see for example Boud, Cohen, and Sampson, 1999; McCallum, Bondy & Jollands, 2008; Potter & Lynch, 2008; Price & O’Donovan, 2007; and Rowe, Wood, & Petocz, 2008.)

### Electronic Feedback, the Digital Age, and Assumptions

What is also of interest from the findings of this study is the ambivalence students expressed toward electronic forms for providing feedback. Students have very mixed views about the role and value of feedback in electronic forms. This emerged in both the 2009 and 2010 studies. This finding continues to generate surprise for the author, other academic developers and teachers as young, tech-savvy students reveal a preference for the personal experience via face-to-face and hand-written feedback while they seem to barely tolerate online formats as a back-up form of feedback.

In considering these issues the limitations of the study need to be acknowledged, particularly in relation to class mode. That is, this study was conducted with a cohort of students primarily experiencing face-to-face classes. If the same study had been conducted with a cohort enrolled in online programs (which is the case for many distance education programs), it could have conceivably produced quite different results. The students' experience in an online program context could mean that they are more open to electronic feedback; however, further studies in this area would be needed to evidence this.

### Conclusion

While conducted in a particular tertiary environment with a small sample, the insights from this study into students' perceptions of electronic feedback could well be applicable across other teaching contexts. The message here is that we cannot make assumptions about how students want to use technology in all aspects of their lives, including the learning environments in which they are engaged. Significantly, in this period of history where technology plays a central role in peoples' lives, there is a human aspect to feedback that is conveyed through non-electronic forms that students value very highly. As educators we must acknowledge this preference for the human and also respect it, and we must find ways in which to work with it while also acknowledging the tensions this contributes since the workloads of those teaching in tertiary environments continues to increase (Blackmore, 2005). Moreover, students are telling us that they require detailed feedback for learning. Due to the nature of the work being submitted for evaluation in creative disciplines, there may be a need for more face-to-face oral feedback than in other disciplines. Students are also sensitive to the feedback they receive and have a preference for feedback to be given privately. This needs to be considered and a reasonable balance obtained. Indeed, all of these issues need to be acknowledged and contemplated within the broader

framework of a multi-faceted feedback package which varies both in form and provider. When these issues are considered and a good balance of constructive and timely feedback is provided, students can more readily absorb and apply its meaning in relation to their learning.

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