Improving student engagement with feedback in pharmacology practical teaching

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Background and Aims: BIOL20932 is a semester 4, level 2 practical unit compulsory for B.Sc. Pharmacology. Students taking this unit write up three integrated practicals as a short research paper, on which they receive extensive feedback. However, in 2014 only 71% of students accessed this feedback and further investigation revealed that this problem occurred across our practical unit portfolio. Here, I report on research into why students did not access feedback and an intervention aimed to improve feedback access rates.

Summary of work and outcomes: A survey of students who did not access feedback from a level 1 practical unit revealed that 87% (N=24 responses; 220 students surveyed) felt that the feedback they had received would have been valuable when writing their level 2 practical reports and wished that they had accessed it. Logistical and awareness issues appeared to account for failure to access feedback with 61% of students stating that they did not realize feedback was available, 63% not knowing how to access feedback via the Turnitin GradeMark system and 67% not realizing that feedback ceased to be available at the end of the academic year. The introduction of a SoftChalk module giving step by step instructions on how to access BIOL20932 feedback and further, mapping this feedback onto final year practical units, was associated with an improvement in access rates to 90% (2015) and 96% (2016). However, an audit of ten final year practical reports from the 2014 and 2015 BIOL20932 cohorts revealed only limited evidence for BIOL20932 feedback feeding forward onto these assignments.

Discussion: Previous studies on student engagement with feedback have focused mostly on its influence on future coursework. However, Winter and Dye[1] found, in concordance with the current results, that students cited logistical issues as reasons for not collecting their feedback. Although use of the SoftChalk module was relatively limited (12/59 and 18/53 students in 2015 and 2016 respectively), those using it may be the very students who would not have been able to navigate GradeMark independently. Generic mapping of feedback onto final year work does not appear to be effective and other interventions may be necessary encourage a "feed-forward" effect.

Conclusion: Students can struggle to navigate online feedback systems. Relatively simple instructional resources may help to rectify these problems.

References:

1. Winter C and Dye V (2004). University of Wolverhampton Learning and Teaching Projects 2003-2004. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.502.5201&rep=rep1&type=pdf