



Beyond the st sandwich: empowering student learning through action-oriented feedback**

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Presentation abstract

Feedback is a cornerstone of effective learning, yet dissatisfaction with its practices persists in higher education (Henderson et al., 2019). At De Montfort University, NSS data revealed declining student satisfaction with feedback clarity and applicability, particularly in STEM disciplines. Whilst our existing feedback toolkit improved outcomes in social science disciplines, STEM students remain underserved in this area. This project seeks to address this gap.

With ethics committee approval and led by a student research assistant, the study employs focus groups with third-year Engineering students to explore their reception, understanding, and application of feedback on final-year projects. Data was triangulated through staff interviews and a review of written feedback to identify key barriers and opportunities for improvement. Preliminary findings indicate a need for discipline-specific resources that demystify feedback language and promote actionable responses.

This paper showcased the co-creation of an evidence-driven feedback toolkit tailored to the needs of Computing, Engineering, and Media students. The project demonstrates the value of embedding student voice in Learning Development practice to enhance learning outcomes. By aligning staff and student approaches to feedback, the project supports positive learning outcomes, contributes to institutional metrics, such as the TEF and NSS, and offers insights transferable to other disciplines.

Keywords: feedback; STEM education; student satisfaction; feedback toolkit; evidence-based practice.

Community response

This session was widely praised for its clarity, rigour, and relevance. Many participants described it as a ‘well-presented piece of solid research’, with several expressing hope that the work would be developed into an extended journal article in due course. The session resonated strongly with participants, who saw immediate relevance to their own practice. As one participant shared:

I will be taking learning from this session and applying it in my own work, specifically about helping staff to create feedback proformas to help them maintain consistency of feedback across an assignment. Maybe we can take this further and have consistent feedback across the whole university! I loved the idea of the feedback translation tool and the ingenious use of Library Search! I will be sharing this with my Learning Development colleagues. In fact, I feel inspired to organise a seminar on feedback literacy generally. I hope Bev will be able to join to share her work!

The presentation was commended for how it articulated familiar challenges around feedback in a fresh and evidence-based way. Hancock-Smith’s identification of the disconnect between staff providing feedback and students receiving it struck a chord with many. The feedback translation tool developed by her team was seen as a particularly innovative response to this issue. As outlined in Figure 1, this online tool encourages students to ask questions of their tutor’s feedback so that they can work with their feedback to improve their future grades. Figure 2 shows how a student who has received feedback that their ‘writing is too descriptive’ or that they need to ‘be more critical’ would be signposted to resources to support them in developing their critical writing.

One participant particularly appreciated the second half of the session through its focus on inconsistency in feedback as a key contributor to the disconnect students’ experience. Seeing concrete examples of how the same point could be communicated in multiple ways helped participants reflect on their own institutional practices. Several expressed interest in using the project’s outputs to support staff development, with one participant noting how the project could be used to ‘create some really excellent workshop resources’, which the participant would ‘love to use for my staff workshops’.

Figure 1. The opening page for the 'feedback translation tool', encouraging students to type a question to take action on their feedback.

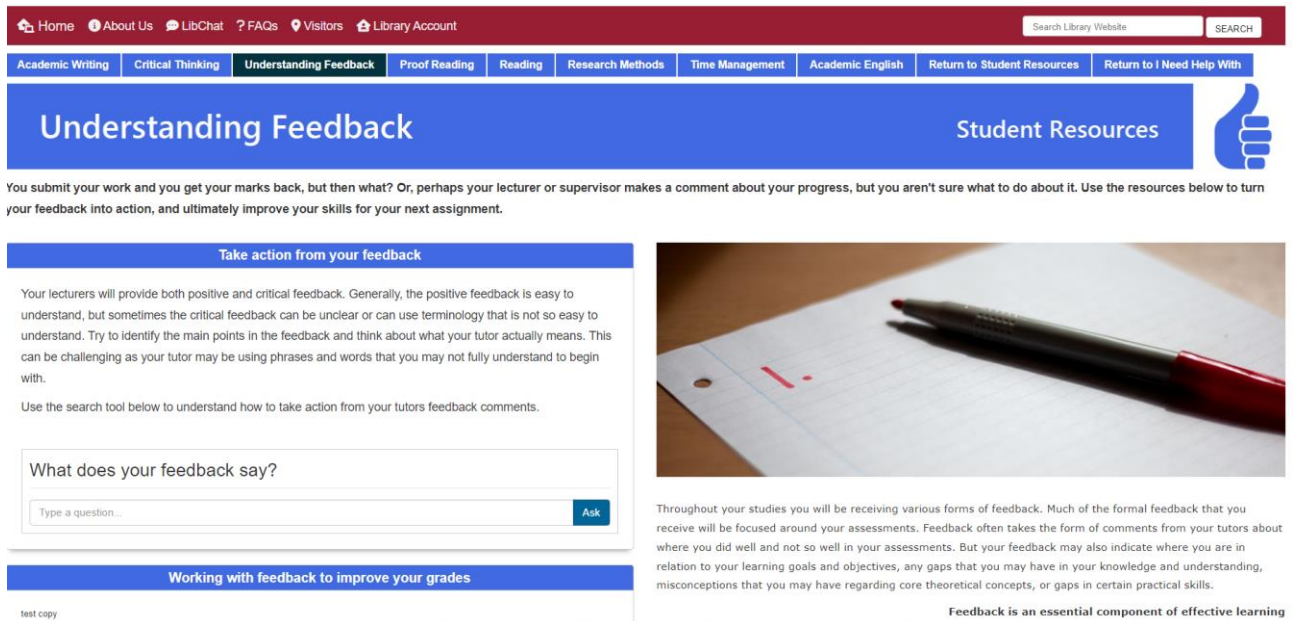
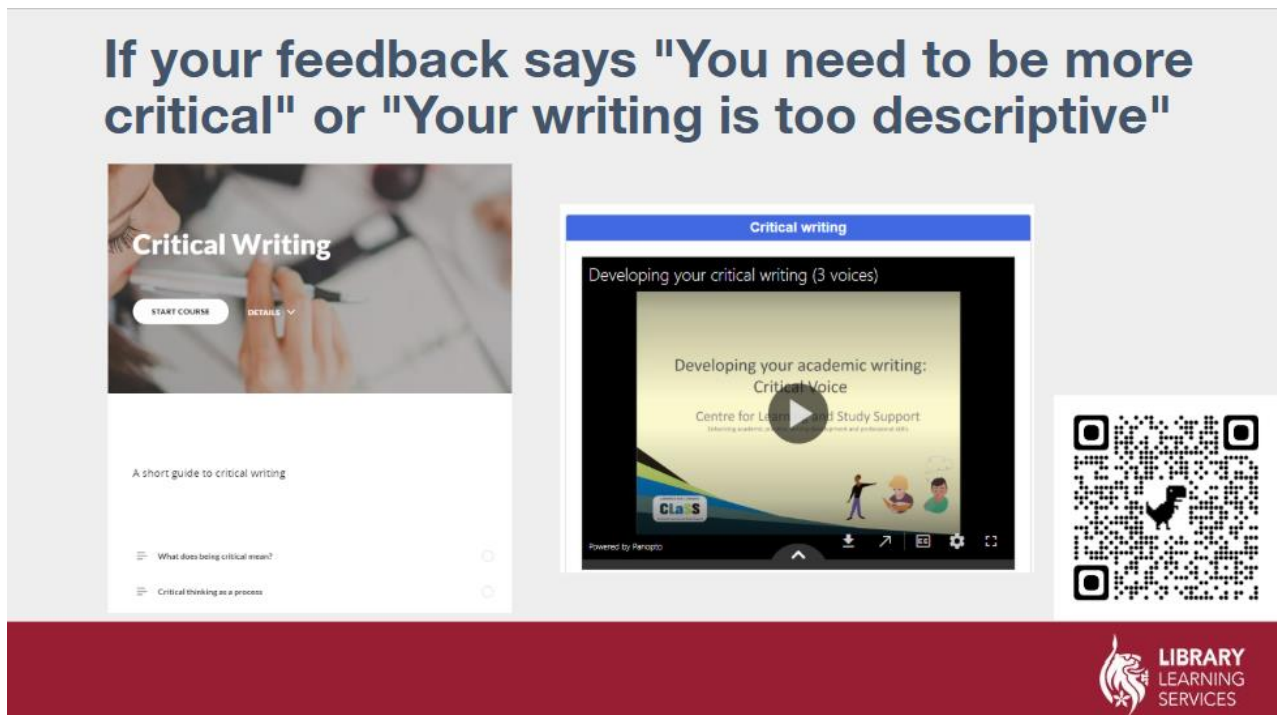


Figure 2. An example from the feedback translation tool where a student has been signposted to resources focusing on critical writing.



Next steps and additional questions

The session sparked a range of thoughtful questions and ideas for future exploration. One participant expressed interest in how feedback practices might be tailored to different disciplines, asking whether the project incorporated lecturers' voices and disciplinary perspectives. This raised broader questions about how feedback literacy might be developed in ways that are both consistent and context-sensitive.

Participants also reflected on the potential for expanding the project's scope. Could the feedback translation tool be adapted for use across different subject areas or levels of study? How might it be integrated into staff training or curriculum design? There was particular interest in how the tool could support students' sense of belonging and engagement, especially if feedback is framed not just as academic commentary but as a form of dialogue that affirms students' places within the university community.

These reflections point to exciting possibilities for future work. Whether through further research, resource development, or cross-institutional collaboration, Hancock-Smith's project has clearly opened up new ways to enhance feedback practice and deepen our understanding of its role at the heart of students' learning.

Author's reflection

I was both surprised and delighted by the engagement the session generated, and found the discussion with participants both affirming and motivating. When I began this project, I cheerfully, if somewhat naively, assumed it would simply be a case of replicating the successful work carried out in one faculty and applying it to another. A Learning Developer should never assume.

What research revealed was that the disconnect between feedback and action lay not only with students, but with academic staff as well. It is what colleagues in IT refer to as a 'PICNIC situation': Problem In Chair, Not In Computer. Students do, of course, struggle to interpret and act on feedback: research confirms this (Henderson et al., 2019), as do assessment results. However, this project found that at least as much work was needed to support academic staff in providing clear, consistent, action-oriented feedback as was needed to help students understand it. In that context, the feedback toolkit, while still

valuable, functions more as a sticking plaster than a cure. Addressing the root causes will require a shift in project focus and, inevitably, some frank conversations with programme leads and academics.

When I submitted the proposal for the paper, I was at the very beginning of the project. The optimist and completer-finisher in me assumed I would be presenting the finished product. Again... never assume. Work will continue on the feedback toolkit to respond to STEM-specific feedback, and support will be offered to staff in the School of Engineering to develop consistent feedback practice. But, for now, this project and wider discussion around feedback literacy is set to continue... perhaps at ALDCon26?

Acknowledgements

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Further reading

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