Professional and educational research group

Refining e-marking practices: Embedding interactivity within tutor feedback

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Introduction

The general discontentment of students with tutor feedback is well-known. NSS questions in the 'Assessment and Feedback' group consistently attain the lowest satisfactions ratings out of the six broad categories.[1] In a recent online survey of UK undergraduates, the majority of respondents said that they waited more than 2 weeks for marked work to be returned, Fig. 1, and that they were given infrequent (less than once a month) opportunities for formative feedback.[2]

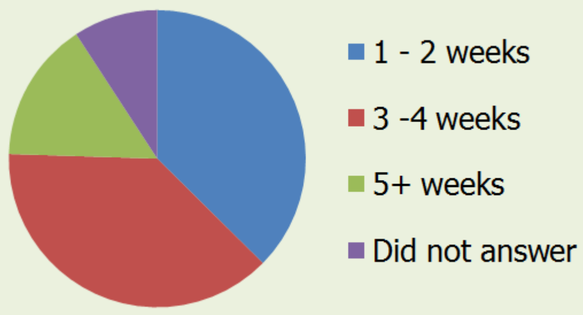

Fig. 1 Length of time for feedback on coursework/exams to be returned (n = 4870)[2]

In previous work, we developed and used some marking software to rapidly create and email electronic feedback reports incorporating comments selected from a statement bank. Students rated these as superior in various aspects to traditional 'red-pen' annotations on their work.[3] Even after adopting this approach, however, there is still the potential for tutors to return indistinct and monologic feedback that does not engage learners, a particular concern when students are receiving marked work on their own at a computer.

A study by Carless suggests that students want to learn from feedback, but that they are not sure how to go about this.[4] While dialogues with academics would be constructive, only 33% of students believe that these would be a useful way to receive feedback. A much greater proportion, 79%, think that written comments are beneficial.[2] IT systems can provide exercises to help students re-process written feedback, promoting discussions with tutors,[5] although these activities tend to be generic rather than being focussed on specific comments.

A new approach to e-marking

To address issues highlighted in the literature and student surveys, we have developed the 'Tweaktime' e-marking freeware. Although designed to work with Blackboard, it could be configured for other VLEs. To ensure returned feedback is personalised, students can indicate during upload where they want specific help. Tutors can edit statements selected from a comment bank to fine-tune remarks. The software then stores these tweaks, and they can be recalled for subsequent students to expedite marking. The tweak interface can be opened manually, or automatically by incorporating <tbt> within a pre-written comment, Fig. 2.

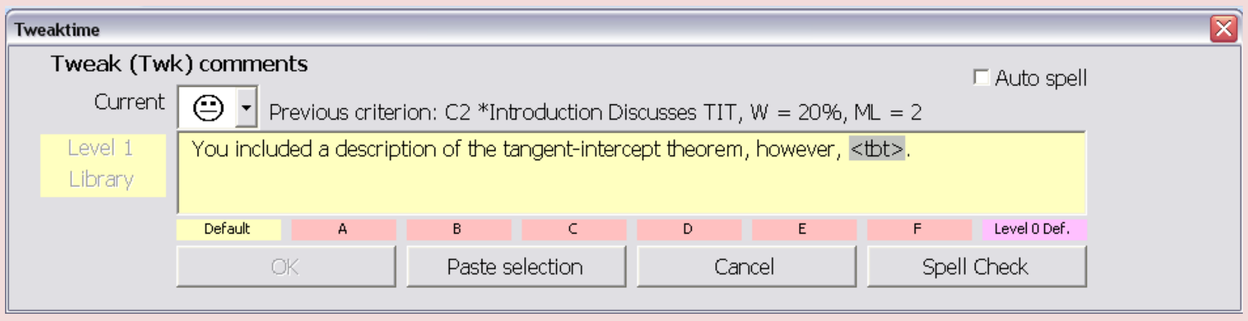

Fig. 2 Tweak interface. Tweaked comments A to F can be recalled. <tbt> = to be tweaked.

e-Marking tools that fixate on % marks discourage formative assessment. In computerised systems, numerical scores can be attached to feedback comments to ensure consistency. For formative assessments, Tweaktime can convert calculated marks to grades (e.g. "First class") before return to the student. Interactive feedback (side panel) is also possible.

Student response and impact on marks

A self-selecting student group answered online questions about their Tweaktime feedback during 2011/12, Table 1. Respondents said they liked the colour coding of comments but did not appreciate being asked to guess their grades based on the tutor's remarks.

Table 1 Response to the Tweaktime survey (n = 76) and 2011 NSS scores for context.

Question	Tweaktime	NSS[1]
Feedback on my work was prompt	68	62
I received detailed comments on my work	84	66
Feedback helped me clarify things that I did not understand	63	60

In a 2nd year module, one-half of 48 students chose to submit a formative laboratory report and they received interactive feedback. These students then attained an average mark that was 12% higher in a summative laboratory report that used the same assessment criteria. Their overall 2nd year performance was only 2% better than the other half of the class.

Interactive feedback

Dialogues with tutors are a productive way for students to make sense of their feedback and they typically include questioning to confirm understanding. These diagnostic activities can be incorporated within a macro-enabled MS Word feedback document using Tweaktime, exercises being embedded within each comment, Fig. 3.

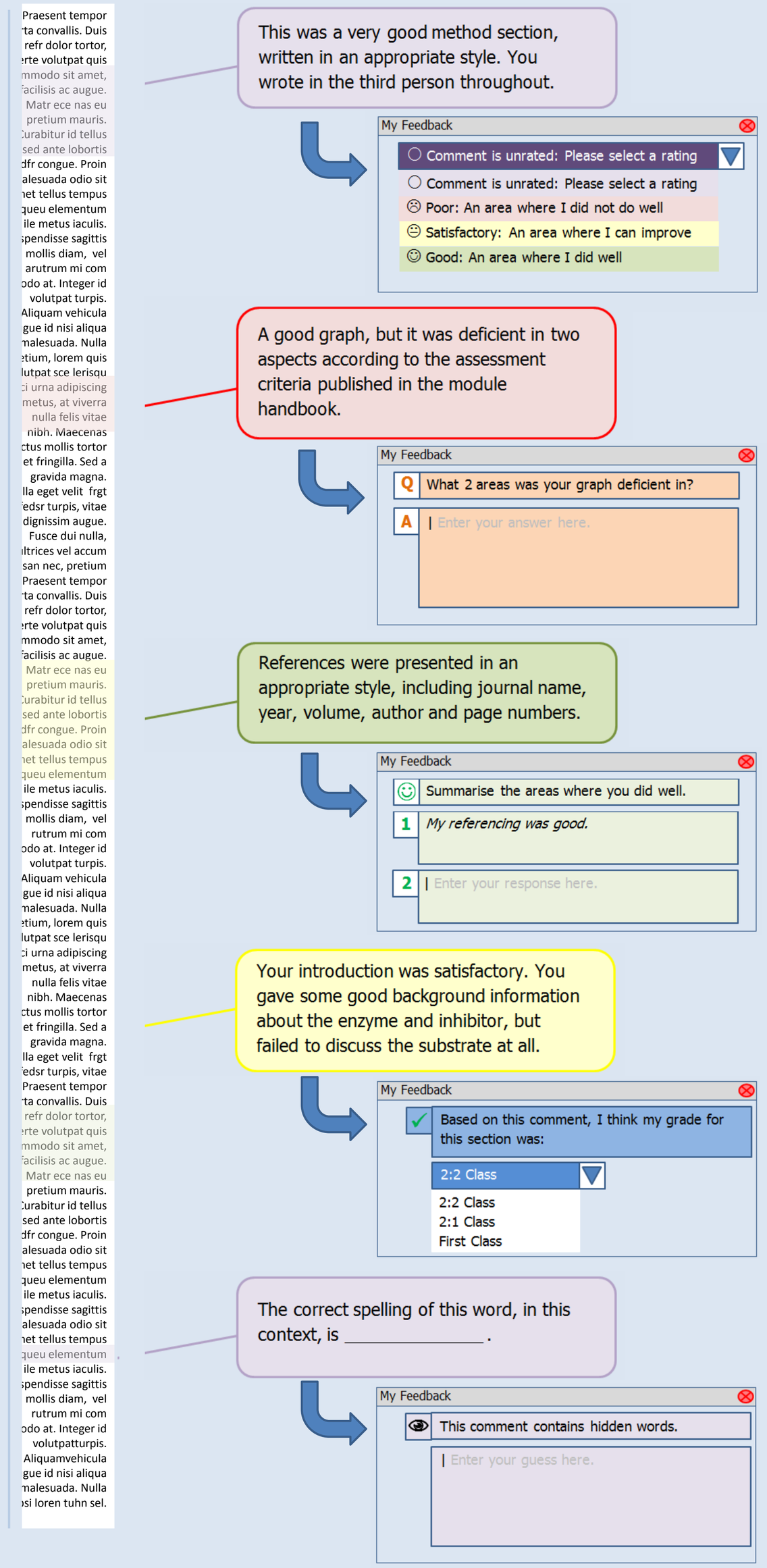

Fig. 3 Illustrative Tweaktime interactive feedback

Within a file of work marked by Tweaktime, clicking the 'My feedback' button opens a reviewer tool that guides students through each comment when interactivity is enabled. The student's responses to these activities, and the tutor's preferred answers to set questions, are summarised at the end of the document. This then provides an excellent starting point for subsequent feedback dialogues.

Conclusion and Collaboration

This work is at an early stage but tangible benefits are evident. Please contact p.denton@ljmu.ac.uk about the Tweaktime e-marking freeware.

References

1. HEFCE (2011) National Student Survey, HEFCE.
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