



Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Penalty, Feedback and Support System in Addressing Grammar, Spelling and Academic Writing of Sport Students

**Dr Linda Allin, Northumbria University (project leader)
Gordon MacFadyen, Northumbria University**

INTERIM REPORT

Introduction

The aims of the project were to:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of a combined penalty, feedback and support system in raising student awareness and engagement with issues of grammar, spelling, and appropriate academic writing.
2. Evaluate the use of the penalty, feedback and support system from a staff perspective in relation to, for example, the consistency of implementation and the issue of using a penalty.
3. Highlight to the sector the merits and disadvantages of making an explicit attempt to address issues of grammar, spelling and academic writing in student work.

The objectives were to:

1. Survey level 5 and 6 students' (level 4/5 in 2005-6) views and experiences of the penalty, feedback and support system 2005-6 in terms of drawing their attention to grammar, spelling and referencing, their use of the feedback and enhancement of their skills.
2. Use focus groups to gain student understanding of the importance of grammar, spelling and academic writing and their use of the feedback and support provided.
3. Use a staff workshop to gain a better understanding of the issues involved in implementing the penalty and feedback system.
4. Disseminate findings within the university and across other sport divisions in the sector through workshop and conference output.

Progress to date

The first three objectives of the project have been completed.

Level 6 students (who had experienced the system as level five students the previous year) (n = 89) and level five students (who had experienced the system as level four students) (n=113) completed a short survey on their views and experiences of the system during a meeting with their programme leaders in Semester 1 2006-7.

Focus groups were then used to gain a deeper understanding of the importance students placed on grammar, spelling, referencing and presentation, together with their experiences of the system, including take up of support and learning from feedback. Following initial requests, which yielded only four participants, it was agreed that payment could be offered to participate in the study, and this led to the recruitment of a further seven students. The initial four students were contacted and informed that they would now be eligible to claim payment. A total number of 11 students therefore took part in focus groups. Two students from level six identified themselves as dyslexic, and one was a mature student. This enabled us to explore the impact of the system in relation to the needs of different learners.

To ascertain staff views on the penalty, feedback and support system, and to explore the effectiveness of its implementation from a staff perspective, a staff workshop was held during the first semester of 2007. The workshop included an exercise where all staff were asked to mark the same piece of work, using current Divisional marking criteria, plus the current feedback sheet, which included the number of specific marks deducted for technical aspects of writing as above. This was followed by a staff discussion on their views of the merits and disadvantages of the system in place. A further staff workshop was held in Semester Two on 2nd May 2007, to disseminate the findings from the student perspective and discuss implications for practice.

Specific activities carried out

Next stages

- An abstract has been submitted and accepted for the Northumbria Conference in September to disseminate findings across the University.
- Decisions concerning any changes to the system and materials arising, to be made in July 2007.
- Final evaluation and write up of project and case study.

Any initial findings / materials that may be of use for dissemination purposes

The results of the questionnaire survey indicated that over three-quarters (77.5%) of students who were now in level six, plus 69.9% of students who were now in level five, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that marks were deducted from their work in the previous academic year due to grammar, spelling, punctuation, presentation or referencing as identified on the assessment feedback sheet. 69.5% of level six students and 66.3% of level five students 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they paid more attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, presentation or referencing during 2005-6 because they knew there was a specific penalty identified for this. An almost

identical percentage, 69.6% and 66.2% respectively, responded that having specific marks deducted for grammar, spelling, punctuation, presentation or referencing identified in the feedback sheet influenced them to look more closely at this aspect in subsequent work. 58.4% of level six students and 65.5% of level five students felt their work improved over the year in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, presentation or referencing. Overall, only 4.5% of level six, and a higher figure of 19.4% of level five students 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement that they were influenced to look more closely at aspects of their work subsequently if they had marks deducted. This difference may reflect the greater diligence of students at level five, or it may be influenced by the fact that marks at level five for these students can potentially contribute to their final degree classification, and therefore more importance is placed on marks achievement.

The findings from the focus groups indicated that all the students interviewed considered the areas addressed by the penalty as important ones, with the majority supporting the view that the skills identified should be addressed whilst they were at university. Overall, most students in the focus groups perceived a need for having a system in place in relation to improving grammar, spelling, referencing and presentation, and held a generally positive attitude towards having the combined system. Seven out of the eleven students on balance explicitly supported the system at the beginning of the focus group (indeed two students suggesting that the penalty could be higher), with a further two expressing support that such a system was needed, but not explicitly in its current form. One student felt that the system was 'unnecessary' and further that she 'did not like it'. Issues related to dyslexic students were also discussed in the focus groups and these particular issues are discussed elsewhere. One dyslexic student supported the current system, whilst the other did not, suggesting that being dyslexic did not, in itself, mean opposition to the system.

Briefly speaking, the students in focus groups identified:

- The need for a system, but not necessarily in its current form.
 - Need for boundaries.
 - Contextualising the importance.
 - Hard work vs good spelling.
 - Marks deducted in Level 6 in relation to degree classifications.

There was much discussion in relation to the merits and disadvantages of the system and its impact on standards. Areas that emerged were:

- It is hard to measure actual impact (subsequent project needed).
- Most indicated that they paid more attention to grammar, and looked more closely at subsequent work as a result.
- All perceived that they had improved academic writing and written communication.
 - Contributory factors: Reading journals, Writing essays, Practising, Dissertation
- Conflict between checking through work before hand-in, laziness (by admission) and time management in terms of their writing of assignments at the last minute.

Other issues

- Interpretation of marking criteria.
- Consistency of implementation.

Feedback

- Perceptual gap' between markers' comments and students' interpretation.
- Students were not always clear why they had lost marks.

Support

- Recognised personal responsibility to get help/support.
- But of 11, only 1 (a dyslexic student) had actually been to the Study Skills Centre.
 - Not always clear on how to follow up on direction for support.
 - Some happy to go to tutors for help.
 - Others embarrassed, stigma of study skills, or found tutors "dismissive" of problem.

Suggested Improvements

- The penalty
 - Altering negative consequences or potential negative perceptions.
 - Only feedback and support? Opportunities for practice (assessment for learning?).
 - Different at different levels?
- The feedback
 - Clearer, more consistent feedback.
 - Altering feedback sheet?
 - More opportunities for receiving individual feedback.
- The support
 - Culture of support - Avenues for support being more welcoming.
 - Not separate from learner development.
 - Make it easier to get help.

To this, the staff perspective and overall evaluation needs to be added and full write up completed.