

Using Narrative and Metaphor in Formative Feedback: Exploring Students' Responses

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I. INTRODUCTION

When I get feedback even when I've done something good they'll just write "good" . . . or they'll say "this sentence doesn't make sense" but in my head it makes sense; how does it not make sense? . . . or like a question mark . . . I'm like, I don't know what you're questioning!

These comments were expressed by a final-year undergraduate law student reflecting on her experiences of receiving formative feedback on various written assignments that she had submitted during her course of study. Inasmuch as they demonstrate a sense of frustration and miscommunication, this student's particular views may be seen as typical of many students' feelings about feedback.

The existing literature on feedback, both in higher education and in education more widely, is extensive. It demonstrates that both students and academic staff feel dissatisfied with many elements of the feedback process, and it has established that more needs to be done to ensure that university students' experiences of written feedback are meaningful.¹ However, as Margaret Price et al. observe, "There is a danger of merely trying to respond to student dissatisfaction with *more of the same*, but this is likely to exacerbate rather than address the problem."² There is, therefore, a need for something new, and in an attempt to enhance student engagement, alternative, more innovative modes of feedback have been tried. These include the use of

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1. For a recent example in this journal, see Elizabeth Ruiz Frost, *Feedback Distortion: The Shortcomings of Model Answers as Formative Feedback*, 65 J. LEGAL EDUC. 938 (2016). More generally, see David Nicol, *From Monologue to Dialogue: Improving Written Feedback Processes in Mass Higher Education*, 35 ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUC. 501 (2010) and Beth Crisp, *Is It Worth the Effort? How Feedback Influences Students' Subsequent Submission of Assessable Work*, 32 ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUC. 571 (2007).
2. Margaret Price, Karen Handley & Jill Millar, *Feedback: Focusing Attention on Engagement*, 36 STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC. 879, 879-80 (2011).

audio recordings and podcasts³ as well as online systems and tools.⁴ Through publishing this paper, we provide a novel addition to the literature in this field as we report the findings of an innovative, small-scale study that has explored students' responses to a deliberate incorporation of narrative and metaphor into formative feedback provided to them. Our hypothesis was a simple one: Since narrative and metaphor are both "pervasive in everyday life"⁵ and are the natural means by which humans communicate,⁶ students' engagement with feedback will be enhanced through the deliberate and obvious introduction of these two elements into feedback provided to them.

The study took place within the context of an undergraduate law degree at a university in the United Kingdom. However, we by no means consider its scope to be limited to this context. Indeed, we consider this to be a timely and relevant study for reporting in the United States in light of the relatively recent imposition of new standards by the American Bar Association requiring accredited law schools to incorporate formative feedback into their curricula.⁷ Furthermore, in both the UK and the United States, law schools are increasingly shaped and influenced by institutional and national accreditation and quality assurance requirements, and by the financial implications of noncompliance.

In this discussion we begin by describing what we mean by the terms "narrative" and "metaphor," and we go on to provide an overview of the literature that we have drawn on at the foundational stages of our work. We focus first on narrative and metaphor in education, followed by feedback and, more particularly, students' lack of engagement with it. This discussion of the literature provides the context for our reporting of the study and subsequent dissemination of our findings. We conclude by emphasizing the apparent potential benefits of the approach taken in this study, as well as suggesting possible further avenues of research and investigation.

II. NARRATIVE AND METAPHOR

There is no standard definition of a narrative, with views concerning both its structure and its constituent elements differing widely among narratology

3. See, e.g., Dave King, Stuart McGugan & Nick Bunyan, *Does it Make a Difference? Replacing Text with Audio Feedback*, 3 PRACTICE AND EVIDENCE OF SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUC. 145 (2008); Maggi Savin-Baden, *The Sound of Feedback in Higher Education*, 35 LEARNING, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY 53 (2010).
4. See, e.g., Ingrid Nix & Ali Wylli, *Exploring Design Features to Enhance Computer-Based Assessment: Learners' Views on Using a Confidence-Based Feedback*, 42 BRITISH JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY 101 (2011).
5. GEORGE LAKOFF & MARK JOHNSON, METAPHORS WE LIVE BY 3 (2d ed. 2003).
6. Roland Barthes & Lionel Duisit, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, 6 NEW LITERARY HISTORY 237, 237 (1975).
7. Frost, *supra* note 1, at 943-44.

experts.⁸ However (and while it is inevitably contested),⁹ Anthony Amsterdam and Jerome Bruner's "bare bones" explanation of the structuring of events that commonly feature in a narrative provides a useful starting point. We begin with an initial "steady state," or "the status quo." This steady state is interrupted by "trouble" or an unexpected event; actions are taken to remedy the unexpected event and the status quo is restored, or a new steady state created.¹⁰ Crucially, then, *something happens* in a narrative; and, for the purpose of this project, it is this disruptive element that distinguishes the narrative from the more prosaic recounting of facts or opinions that is more commonly found in feedback to students.¹¹

The word "narrative" derives from the Latin *narro* which means "to tell," and from *gnarus*, meaning "knowing"; and these two facets of the word explain the significance of narrative or storytelling as "a universal tool for knowing as well as telling, for absorbing information as well as expressing it."¹² Stories laced with important life messages played a significant role in communities of the past, where they were passed on from generation to generation,¹³ and they continue to be ingrained in the fabric of our society. They are a vehicle through which we, as human beings, make sense of ourselves and our lived experiences. Narratives help to shape our identities, our relationships, and our behaviors;¹⁴ "For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative."¹⁵

At its simplest, a metaphor can be described as a linguistic or rhetorical device whereby one thing is described in terms of another;¹⁶ but this simple definition obscures its more complex and dynamic nature. As Raymond Gibbs explains, "metaphor is not simply an ornamental aspect of language, but a fundamental

8. H. PORTER ABBOTT, *THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE* 12-35 (2002).
9. See, e.g., DIANA TIETJENS MEYERS, *VICTIMS' STORIES AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS* 65-102 (2016).
10. ANTHONY G. AMSTERDAM & JEROME BRUNER, *MINDING THE LAW* 113-14 (2002).
11. For an earlier and particularly useful discussion of narrative, metaphor and law, see Steven L. Winter, *The Cognitive Dimension of the Agon between Legal Power and Narrative Meaning*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2225 (1989).
12. ABBOTT, *supra* note 8, at 11.
13. Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* in *HANDBOOK OF INTERVIEW RESEARCH: CONTEXT AND METHOD* 121 (Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein eds., 2001).
14. Carey Philpott, *Narratives as a Vehicle for Mentor and Tutor Knowledge during Feedback in Initial Teacher Education*, 20 TEACHER DEVELOPMENT 57, 57-75 (2016).
15. Barbara Hardy, *Towards a Poetics of Fiction: 3) An Approach through Narrative*, 2 NOVEL: A FORUM ON FICTION 5 (1968).
16. The Oxford English Dictionary defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable".

scheme by which people conceptualize the world and their own activities.”¹⁷ Just as we observed in relation to narrative, views of scholars working in the field vary significantly;¹⁸ but in this study we have relied on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s so-called “cognitive linguistic view of metaphor,”¹⁹ set out in their influential text *Metaphors We Live By*.²⁰ On this basis, linguistic metaphors are the important means by which one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another conceptual domain. These are referred to respectively as the “target” and “source” domains (that which we are seeking to explain and that which we draw on to achieve this), and metaphorical linguistic expressions facilitate this process.

Commonly the target domain is abstract in nature, and we draw on concepts from a more concrete or physical source domain to aid understanding.²¹ Lakoff and Johnson provide numerous examples of this happening in everyday discourse. For example, expressions such as “you’re *wasting* my time,” “living on *borrowed* time,” and “how do you *spend* your time these days?” are metaphorical linguistic expressions that demonstrate our tendency to understand the abstract concept of time (the target domain) in terms of the more concrete concept of money (the source domain). Notably, among the numerous examples that they give, Lakoff and Johnson identify how the more abstract concept of theory or argument (the target domain) is commonly understood as a building (the source domain) through the use of expressions such as “is that the *foundation* for your theory?,” “the theory needs more *support*,” “we need to *construct* a strong argument for that,” and “the argument *collapsed*.”²² Through paying close attention to the ways in which we already provide feedback to students on their assessments, we identified this same argument as building metaphor, demonstrated in expressions such as “work on your *structure*,” “the *strongest* part of your answer,” and “this is *well-structured*.” We observed also how expressions such as “more that you could have *explored*,” “your answer *went astray*,” “*signpost* your discussion,” “easy to *follow*,” and “*wandered off track*” demonstrate our tendency to describe the nature of students’ writing as a journey.

Having identified that we already describe students’ work in terms of these commonplace metaphors, we determined to introduce new, more obvious metaphorical expressions into the feedback provided to students, providing new source domains as concepts through which more abstract target domains such as writing style or argument might be understood. Just as with narrative, therefore, our intention with metaphor has been to disrupt the “normal way

17. RAYMOND GIBBS, *CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF METAPHOR AND THOUGHT* 3 (3d ed. 2008).

18. James E. Murray, *Law as Metaphor*, 34 J. LEGAL EDUC. 714, 715 (1984). For a recent discussion of some of these competing theories, see RAYMOND W. GIBBS, JR., *METAPHOR WARS: CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN HUMAN LIFE* (2017).

19. ZOLTAN KÖVECSES, *METAPHOR: A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION*, AT X (2d ed. 2010).

20. LAKOFF & JOHNSON, *supra* note 5.

21. Kövecses, *supra* note 19.

22. LAKOFF & JOHNSON, *supra* note 5, at 46.

of doing things” when providing feedback to students, and to explore how students respond to this disruption.

Although they both help us to make sense of our lived experiences, narrative and metaphor tend to be written and thought about separately.²³ Consequently, as Gábor Bezeczky points out, “the relationship that may or may not exist between them has not attracted the attention it deserves.”²⁴ Michael Hanne illustrates this as he observes:

Hayden White, Jerome Bruner, Roger Schank, Alasdair MacIntyre, and a host of others asserted that narrative is the principal faculty by which human beings interpret the world . . . while another team of scholars, under the captaincy of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson . . . made similar claims for metaphor, insisting that human beings are primarily metaphor-making animals.²⁵

This tendency for scholars to deal separately or distinctly with narrative or metaphor can also be seen in the context of law and legal studies. In their introduction to their edited collection *Narrative and Metaphor in the Law*, Michael Hanne and Robert Weisberg describe how scholarship in law and narrative has developed as a distinctive field during the past thirty years, demonstrated by the fact that they are able to refer the reader to works that would be considered as landmarks in this area.²⁶ They describe too how during this same time a strong but “much more fragmentary” interest in metaphor and the law has developed, with publications on this topic being fewer in number and far more wide-ranging in scope than their narrative counterparts.²⁷

Nevertheless, Hanne and Weisberg are able to identify in the context of law and legal studies a small number of academics who have given attention to

23. Michael Hanne, *Getting to know the neighbours, When knot meets plot*, 26 CANADIAN REV. OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE 35 (1999). For a noteworthy exception explicitly linking narrative and metaphor in the legal literature, see Winter, *supra* note 11; STEVEN L. WINTER, A CLEARING IN THE FOREST: LAW, LIFE AND MIND (2001).
24. Gábor Bezeczky, *Metaphor and Narrative*, 27 NEOHELICON 13 (2000).
25. Michael Hanne, *The Binocular Vision Project: An Introduction*, 44 GENRE 223 (2011).
26. NARRATIVE AND METAPHOR IN THE LAW (Michael Hanne & Robert Weisberg eds., 2018). Landmark contributions cited by Hanne and Weisberg include LAW’S STORIES: NARRATIVE AND RHETORIC IN THE LAW (Peter Brooks & Paul Gewirtz eds., 1996); GUYORA BINDER & ROBERT WEISBERG, LITERARY CRITICISMS OF LAW (2000) (highlighting chapter three *Narrative Criticism of Law*); Peter Brooks, *Narrative in and of the law in A COMPANION TO NARRATIVE THEORY* (James Phelan & Peter J. Rabinowitz eds., 2005); and Greta Olson, *Narration and Narrative in Legal Discourse in LIVING HANDBOOK OF NARRATOLOGY* (2014), <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narration-and-narrative-legal-discourse>.
27. *Id.* at 4. Hanne and Weisberg identify Katharine G. Young & Jeremy Perelman, *Rights as footprints: A new metaphor for contemporary human rights practice*, 9 NW. U. J. INT’L HUM. RTS. 27 (2010), and Linda L. Berger, *Metaphor and analogy: The sun and moon of legal persuasion*, SCHOLARLY WORKS PAPER 895 (2013) as being particularly significant to this field. They cite as outstanding books MILNER S. BALL, LYING DOWN TOGETHER: LAW, METAPHOR, AND TECHNOLOGY (1985); HAIG A. BOSMAJIAN, METAPHOR AND REASON IN JUDICIAL OPINIONS (1992); STEVEN L. WINTER, A CLEARING IN THE FOREST: LAW, LIFE, AND MIND (2001).

both narrative and metaphor;²⁸ elsewhere Hanne has identified scholars who have suggested or explored ways in which narrative and metaphor interact or relate to each other in disciplines such as medicine and politics.²⁹ In this latter field, for instance, Lori Bougher has argued that a “symbiotic” relationship exists between narrative and metaphor in which both devices are capable of structuring or guiding the other.³⁰ Hanne and Weisberg’s present intention is “to explore the roles played by narrative and metaphor *in combination* in all aspects of the law.”³¹ It is with this same aim in mind that we have sought to extend the scope of the lead author’s previous investigations concerning the role of narratives in law and legal education, through the deliberate incorporation of metaphor into this study.³²

Narrative and Metaphor in Education

A relatively small body of literature is concerned specifically with either narrative or metaphor in written feedback and, perhaps not surprisingly in light of the preceding discussion, no previous studies have sought to explore both elements in this context. This has led us to focus on literature that considers the uses of storytelling and metaphorical language in education more widely at the foundational stages of our work.

Storytelling

The wider literature on storytelling as pedagogy³³ highlights several advantages of bringing story into the classroom. Joanna Szurmak and Mindy Thuna suggest that the power of narratives as a teaching and learning tool lies in their ability to concretize the abstract, contextualize new information to aid understanding, and evoke emotional responses.³⁴ Research has also suggested

28. They refer to the seminal works of JAMES BOYD WHITE, *THE LEGAL IMAGINATION* (1973) and STEVEN L. WINTER, *A CLEARING IN THE FOREST*, *supra* note 23; as well as LAWRENCE ROSEN, *LAW AS CULTURE: AN INVITATION* (2006); Linda L. Berger, *The lady or the tiger: A field guide to metaphor and narrative*, 50 *WASHBURN L.J.* 275 (2011), and L. David Ritchie, ‘Everybody goes down’: *Metaphors, stories, and simulations in conversations*, 25 *METAPHOR & SYMBOL* 123 (2010).
29. Michael Hanne, *supra* note 23.
30. Lori Bougher, *Cognitive Coherence in Politics: Unifying Metaphor and Narrative in Civil Cognition in WARRING WITH WORDS: NARRATIVE AND METAPHOR IN POLITICS* 250, 254 (Michael Hanne et al. eds., 2014).
31. *NARRATIVE AND METAPHOR IN THE LAW*, *supra* note 26. This edited collection consists of papers delivered at the Narrative and Metaphor in the law symposium that took place at Stanford University in January 2016.
32. See, for example, Dawn Watkins, *The Role of Narratives in Legal Education*, 32 *LIVERPOOL L. REV.* 113 (2011); Dawn Watkins, *Recovering the lost human stories of Law: Finding Mrs. Burns*, 7 *LAW & HUMAN.* 68 (2013); Dawn Watkins, *The Shaping and Misshaping of Identity Through Legal Practice and Process: (Re)discovering Mr Kernott*, 8 *LAW & HUMAN.* 192 (2014).
33. Cathy Coulter, Charles Michael & Leslie Poynor, *Storytelling as Pedagogy: An Unexpected Outcome of Narrative Inquiry*, 37 *CURRICULUM INQUIRY* 103 (2007).
34. Joanna Szurmak & Mindy Thuna, *Tell Me a Story: The Use of Narrative as a Tool for Instruction*, *ASSOC. OF COLLEGE & RESEARCH LIBRARIANS*, 546, 550-51 (2013), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/>

that the inclusion of narrative elements in the teaching and learning process can help students to form connections between prior and new knowledge in a familiar format, one that is known to stimulate the imagination.³⁵ Studies have shown that narrative can also be effectively used in higher education to engage and enhance students' learning.³⁶ In a study investigating the use of narratives in an undergraduate accounting course, Frances Miley found narrative elements heightened engagement and offered an everyday lens through which to view new knowledge.³⁷ The right story, she concluded, "can change the pace in a class, adding a fresh dimension to engage students."³⁸

Research in the field of legal education has also demonstrated that narratives have a great deal of pedagogical possibility. Dawn Watkins observed that law students derived enjoyment out of seminars with a storytelling component. The use of narratives also facilitated greater awareness of "the role that human actors play in legal proceedings."³⁹ Similarly, Michael Blissenden argues that using storytelling exercises in law teaching leads to "a more interactive and engaging learning experience for all concerned."⁴⁰

Collectively, then, the studies explored above suggest that storytelling has the potential to inject creativity, engagement, and innovation into the higher education curriculum—including the legal education curriculum—in a memorable way.⁴¹ It is our view, however, that the potential of storytelling in higher education has yet to be fully realized. Sarah Flanagan concurs, and highlights the need for increased support, recognition, and understanding of story as a pedagogical tool in higher education.⁴²

Metaphorical Language

Metaphors are, as Pete Boyd and Sue Bloxham observe, "powerful and practicable tools by which teachers are able to conceive of learning and shape

ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/SzurmakThuna_TellMe.pdf.

35. Stanley E. Fawcett & Amydee M. Fawcett, *The "Living" Case: Structuring Storytelling to Increase Student Interest, Interaction, and Learning*, 9 DECISION SCIENCES J. OF INNOVATIVE EDUC. 287 (2011).
36. For example, see Michele C. Everett, *Fostering First-Year Students' Engagement and Well-Being Through Visual Narratives*, 42 STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC. 623 (2017).
37. Frances Miley, *The Storytelling Project: Innovating to Engage Students in their Learning*, 28 HIGHER EDUC. RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT 357 (2009).
38. *Id.* at 367.
39. Watkins, *supra* note 32.
40. Michael Blissenden, *Using Storytelling as a Teaching Model in a Law School: The Experience in an Australian Context*, 41 THE LAW TEACHER 260, 264 (2007).
41. Jenny Moon & John Fowler, "There is a Story to be Told . . .": A Framework for the Conception of Story in 28 NURSE EDUC. TODAY 232 (2008).
42. Sarah Flanagan, *How Does Storytelling Within Higher Education Contribute to the Learning Experience of Early Years Students?*, 13 J. OF PRACTICE TEACHING & LEARNING 146 (2014).

their teaching practice.”⁴³ Lynne Cameron found the “learning affordances” of metaphors to include their ability to summarize and reformulate information and ideas.⁴⁴ She also reported that metaphorical language can play an affective part in the life of the classroom by helping to create a supportive learning environment and by mitigating the “potential threats” of negative feedback.⁴⁵ Similar findings are reported by Elizabeth Kemp, who explored the possibility of using metaphor for evaluating a higher education social work program. She found metaphorical language to be a powerful form of communication that worked to distance herself and her students from the “unpalatable” “through the veil of an indirect message or through humour.”⁴⁶ Extant research has also suggested that the act of relating a commonplace concept or object to one that is less well-known can help students bridge “the gap between implicit and explicit knowledge,”⁴⁷ as well as to comprehend “the less familiar.”⁴⁸ As suggested by Susan Carter and Rod Pitcher, metaphors can offer “a conceptual threshold into understanding.”⁴⁹

It is important to note, however, that some scholars sound a note of caution about attempting to incorporate the metaphorical into one’s teaching practice. Rod Pitcher argues that while metaphors are memorable and viewed positively by students, metaphors lack utility when dealing with more advanced concepts.⁵⁰ Graham Low emphasizes the need to recognize the cultural specificity of some metaphors.⁵¹ Furthermore, it has been suggested that, if used inappropriately, metaphors can obscure the very experiences they seek to illuminate.⁵² Throughout the pedagogic literature, therefore, thoughtful and appropriate use of metaphor is advised.

43. Pete Boyd & Sue Bloxham, *A Situative Metaphor for Teacher Learning: The Case of University Tutors Learning to Grade Student Coursework*, 40 BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL 337, 339 (2014).
44. Lynne Cameron, *Metaphor in the Construction of a Learning Environment in METAPHORS FOR LEARNING: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES* 159, 174 (Erich A. Berendt ed., 2008).
45. *Id.* at 175.
46. Elizabeth Kemp, *Metaphor as a Tool for Evaluation*, 24 ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUC. 81, 86 (1999).
47. Maria Martinez, Narcis Saulea & Günter L. Huber, *Metaphors as Blueprints of Thinking About Teaching and Learning*, 17 TEACHING & TEACHER EDUC. 965 (2001).
48. Jacque Carpenter, *Metaphors in Qualitative Research: Shedding Light or Casting Shadows?* 31 RESEARCH IN NURSING & HEALTH 274, 275 (2008).
49. Susan Carter & Rod Pitcher, *Extended Metaphors for Pedagogy: Using Sameness and Difference*, 15 TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUC. 579, 588 (2010).
50. Rod Pitcher, *Getting the Picture: The Role of Metaphors in Teaching Electronics Theory*, 19 TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUC. 397, 404 (2014).
51. Graham Low, *Metaphor and Education in THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF METAPHOR AND THOUGHT* 212 (Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. ed., 2008) (citing Alice Deignan, *Metaphorical Expressions and Culture: An Indirect Link*, 18 METAPHOR AND SYMBOL 255 (2003)).
52. Carpenter, *supra* note 48.

III. FEEDBACK ON FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The term feedback in this paper refers to comments that a professor or other academic staff member has written in response to a particular piece of work that a student has submitted, rather than to generalized feedback or model answers.⁵³ As Elizabeth Ruiz Frost observes, this type of feedback can relate to two different forms of assessment: summative and formative.⁵⁴ In their influential work *Inside the Black Box*, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam explain the distinction between these two forms by describing them respectively as assessments *of* learning (i.e. summative: to judge performance) and assessments *for* learning⁵⁵ (i.e. formative: to determine where individual “learners are, where they need to go and how best to get there”⁵⁶).

Assessment for learning is argued to be among the most powerful tools we educators have for empowering learners and promoting success.⁵⁷ Indeed, in a subsequent publication, having reviewed over 250 publications focusing on formative assessment in the school and college classroom, Black and Wiliam conclude that this type of assessment improves learning and student outcomes across subjects and countries.⁵⁸ They state:

Significant learning gains lie within our grasp. The research reported here shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable, and . . . amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions If this first point is accepted, then the second move is for teachers in schools to be provoked and supported in trying to establish new practices in formative assessment.⁵⁹

Similarly, and specifically in higher education settings, formative assessment has been argued to be “the most powerful enhancement to learning.”⁶⁰ Therefore it is unsurprising that we have situated our study in the context of a formative assessment. However, it is interesting to note that some research suggests that formative and summative assessment need not be thought of as entirely distinct or incompatible. For instance, Wynne Harlen observes that, although formative and summative modes of assessment have different

53. For a discussion of the shortcomings of these more generalised forms, see Frost, *supra* note 1, at 945-47.

54. *Id.*

55. Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam, *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*, 80 PHI DELTA KAPPAN 139 (1998).

56. ASSESSMENT REFORM GROUP, ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: 10 PRINCIPLES 2 (2002).

57. ASSESSMENT REFORM GROUP, ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: BEYOND THE BLACK BOX 2 (1999).

58. Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam, *Assessment and Classroom Learning*, 5 ASSESSMENT IN EDUCATION: PRINCIPLES, POLICY & PRACTICE 7 (1998).

59. *Id.* at 61.

60. JOHN BIGGS & CATHERINE TANG, *TEACHING FOR QUALITY LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY* 64 (4th ed. 2011).

purposes, effective formative assessment can provide insights into students' progress and attainment. Furthermore, "good summative assessment will provide feedback that can be used to help learning."⁶¹ Likewise, in her study of high school students' perceptions of classroom assessment in the United States, Susan Brookhart found that, having received summative feedback, successful students "would carry with them and apply to future learning the lessons they had learned for that unit of instruction."⁶² This research suggests that both formative *and* summative assessment have a role to play in effective learning. Accordingly, we consider that the findings presented here have relevance to feedback provided to students as components of both forms of assessment.

Students' Lack of Engagement with Feedback

Scholars suggest that feedback in higher education can have a positive influence on learning. It can help students evaluate their academic progress and develop as self-regulated learners.⁶³ Nevertheless, the evidence also suggests that the extent to which feedback actually influences students' learning varies according to how the feedback is received and acted upon by the individual student. As Neil Duncan reports, the attention that students pay to feedback varies significantly and ranges "from looking at the grade only, to reading it thoroughly to see where they had done well/not so well, then reviewing it before the next essay."⁶⁴ From the professor's point of view, it is tempting to dismiss low levels of engagement with feedback as being attributable to the student's innate characteristics, such as their unwillingness to learn or their inability to take criticism. However, considerable literature, across a range of jurisdictions and disciplines, indicates that students have high expectations that are not being met through the feedback process. Studies also show that students' failure to engage with feedback emanates at least partly from these unmet expectations.

Through his large-scale study carried out in Hong Kong, David Carless found that students expressed a real sense of wanting to learn from feedback comments but were not always able to do so. He reports that "in interviews, several students stated, unsurprisingly, that they would look first at the mark awarded, but also noted that they wanted to improve and were interested in tutors' responses to their work. Some of them also revisited their assignments

61. Wynne Harlen, *Teachers' Summative Practices and Assessment for Learning—Tensions and Synergies*, 16 *THE CURRICULUM JOURNAL* 207, 215 (2005).
62. Susan M. Brookhart, *Successful Students' Formative and Summative Uses of Assessment Information*, 8 *ASSESSMENT IN EDUCATION: PRINCIPLES, POLICY & PRACTICE* 153, 167 (2001).
63. David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick, *Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice*, 31 *STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC.* 199, 208 (2006); Nicol, *supra* note 1, at 504.
64. Neil Duncan, *'Feed-forward': Improving Students' use of Tutors' Comments*, 32 *ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUC.* 271, 275 (2007).

over time.”⁶⁵ He later remarks, however, that “although students wanted to learn from feedback, they often found this difficult. A number of students commented that they could not improve much from the lecturers’ comments because they were specific to a particular assignment and so did not provide support to do better in another assignment for a different module.”⁶⁶ Further, in their study of undergraduate students’ and staff’s perceptions of feedback in three business schools in universities in the UK, Margaret Price et al. found that “many students became progressively disengaged with feedback during the course of their university programmes, as a result of repeated unsatisfactory experiences.”⁶⁷

The source of students’ expectations concerning feedback can vary; some studies have concluded that students emotionally and financially invest in their written assignments and, as consumers, expect high-quality feedback in return for their “investments.”⁶⁸ Alternatively, after conducting semi-structured focus groups with university applicants, teachers, and first-year undergraduates and their tutors, Chris Beaumont et al. found that students had very different experiences of feedback at school and college, and that this had influenced their expectations about the feedback they would receive at university. The authors found that first-year undergraduates “expected detailed guidance, while university tutors frequently cited the importance of independent learning.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, the authors suggested that “most university tutors perceived feedback primarily as a *post-submission summative event*, rather than as a process of discussion starting with the assignment brief and marking criteria and following through with in-task guidance.”⁷⁰ Lynne Urquhart et al. concur,

65. David Carless, *Differing Perceptions in the Feedback Process*, 31 *STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC.* 219, 225 (2006). A large-scale questionnaire survey was conducted with 460 staff and 1740 students across eight universities. Two focus groups were conducted with staff. In a further stage of the project, fifty-two third- and fourth-year bachelor of education students completed a survey, and then fifteen students took part in semi-structured interviews. A further six interviews were conducted in Cantonese. Five themes were identified: (1) differing perceptions of students and lecturers (the focus of this particular article—this theme tends to focus on the quantitative data collected); (2) using feedback for improvement; (3) comprehensibility of feedback and criteria; (4) judgments, power relations, and bias; and (5) emotions, grades, and failure. The final four themes draw primarily on the qualitative data collected.
66. *Id.*
67. Margaret Price, Karen Handley & Jill Millar, *Feedback: Focusing Attention on Engagement*, 36 *STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC.* 879, 888 (2011).
68. Richard Higgins, Peter Hartley & Alan Skelton, *Getting the Message Across: The Problem of Communicating Assessment Feedback*, 6 *TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUC.* 269 (2001); Richard Higgins, Peter Hartley & Alan Skelton, *The Conscientious Consumer: Reconsidering the Role of Assessment Feedback in Student Learning*, 27 *STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC.* 53 (2002).
69. Chris Beaumont, Michelle O’Doherty & Lee Shannon, *Reconceptualising Assessment Feedback: A Key to Improving Student Learning?* 36 *STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC.* 671, 683 (2011).
70. *Id.* at 682. Interestingly, students identified as defining features of high-quality feedback two characteristics that were consistent with their previous school experiences, namely “the opportunity for discussion (especially one to one) and relevant, meaningful feedback that could be acted on.”

referring to the divergent perceptions of academic staff and students as “the feedback gap.” They argue that tutors would benefit from helping students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of feedback and “to feel that they are not alone in their experiences.”⁷¹

The literature also reveals that students can misunderstand staff comments⁷² and that a lack of concrete and actionable feedback can affect students’ confidence in themselves as learners.⁷³ Commenting on students’ understanding of feedback, Higgins et al. concluded that learners perceive “feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful, if it is too impersonal, and if it is too general and vague to be of any formative use.”⁷⁴ Another central theme in the literature is the variable quality of the comments university students receive from their tutors and lecturers. As Nicol points out, “student satisfaction surveys and course reviews invariably find that students would like more detailed feedback comments from their teachers,”⁷⁵ and across the UK, assessment and feedback have been “. . . consistently rated the lowest in terms of student satisfaction” since the National Student Survey (NSS) started in 2005.⁷⁶ More particularly, it is interesting to note from the 2016 NSS data that the phrase with the lowest score from both part-time and full-time students in the assessment and feedback section is “feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.” Therefore a real argument can be made for a mode of feedback that helps to bridge this understanding gap and allows students to make confident next steps.⁷⁷

IV. CONDUCTING THE STUDY

The hypothesis was tested in the context of a final-year undergraduate law module, equity and trusts, with a group of twenty students who had submitted formative assessments for marking by the lead author. The assessment consisted of a problem-based scenario that students were required to answer in up to 1800 words. It commenced with a description of the client, Priya, as being named the sole executrix in her uncle’s will. Students were given details concerning a series of transactions that took place before the uncle’s death, creating some uncertainty about the extent of his estate. Some uncertainty

71. Lynn Urquhart, Charlotte Rees & Jean Ker, *Making Sense of Feedback Experiences: A Multi-School Study of Medical Students’ Narratives*, 48 *MEDICAL EDUC.* 189, 200 (2014).

72. Kate Chanock, *Comments on Essays: Do Students Understand What Tutors Write?*, 5 *TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUC.* 95 (2000).

73. Carless, *supra* note 65.

74. Higgins et al., *supra* note 68.

75. Nicol, *supra* note 1, at 508.

76. Anne Crook et al., *The use of video technology for providing feedback to students: Can it enhance the feedback experience for staff and students?* 58 *COMPUTERS & EDUC.* 386, 387 (2012).

77. *National Student Survey Results 2016*, The National Archives, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/2016/> (summarizing data).

also existed about the validity of two will clauses set out in full. Students were asked to “advise Priya” with reference to the relevant case law.

The assessments were marked in accordance with usual practice, with the provision of in-context comments on the assignment itself, accompanied by a standardized feedback sheet used for all undergraduate coursework assessments in the department. This consisted of check boxes to indicate the classification of discrete elements of the work identified in the assessment criteria,⁷⁸ followed by space for the addition of the marker’s free text to describe “overall assessment and steps for improvement.” In addition to this, the lead author provided further free text that she described as “additional experimental feedback,” where narrative and metaphor were deliberately utilized as means to explain any particular strengths and weaknesses of the student’s work and to indicate what steps might be taken to improve in the future.

The Experimental Feedback

Perhaps because the assessment was framed as a request to give advice to a client, the narrative that was most frequently adopted in the experimental feedback was the story of the imagined interaction between the lawyer and the client. Indeed, this approach was adopted in some sixteen of the twenty assessments. For these, the experimental feedback commenced with a statement explaining that “when marking this essay I have imagined myself as Priya, sitting in your office as you explained this situation to me.” From here, the story or narrative developed in a variety of ways. For example:

I got really excited when you suggested that I had been made the sole beneficiary of the will because I thought that you must have discovered some new information—and I am going to be rich! But it looks as if you were mistaken here, which is pretty disappointing.

I would have appreciated it if you could take a little more time to “state the obvious” in places. After all, what appears obvious to you will be “news” to me as your client.

I can imagine you pulling out hard copies of law reports and piling these on your desk as you are speaking to me, saying, “this is relevant . . . and this is relevant . . . oh yes, and this also is relevant,” and eventually I think you might not be able to see me anymore because of the huge pile of law reports that is now standing between us.

The way in which you discussed the issues—setting them out clearly, step by step—gave me a strong sense of confidence that you know what you are doing. Occasionally I felt myself drifting off as you tended to go into meticulous detail about certain issues—and I couldn’t always see how these applied to me. But in a strange way this increased my confidence in you even more. You

78. These are: argument and identification of issues (extent to which the answer identifies issues relevant to the question and engages in critical analysis); knowledge and understanding (extent of knowledge and understanding of relevant principles and their use in answering the question); structure (extent to which discussion is organized, balanced, and logical; points linked and ordered appropriately; strength of introduction/conclusion); research (extent and appropriateness of use of recommended readings); and writing and referencing (writing style; presentation; citing conventions; grammar; punctuation; proofreading).

reminded me of Sherlock Holmes wearing a tweed deerstalker hat as you applied your expertise to the matter in hand.

Occasionally, this structure also facilitated the story of an imagined interaction between the marker and the student:

When marking these essays I have tended to imagine myself as Priya, sitting in your (the writer's) office as you explained this situation to me. However, when reading this particular essay I tended to imagine you—the writer—as a scientist in a white coat, in a lab, conducting a series of experiments in a logical order in order to resolve the problems that you have been presented with. This is certainly not a criticism—it meant that you adopted a meticulous approach to the analysis and you took care to explain each test that you had applied, as well as its outcome.

When marking these essays I have tended to imagine myself as Priya sitting in your office as you explained this situation to me. In this instance, however, I am led to imagine that I am Priya's solicitor and I have sought advice from counsel and been provided with an expert opinion, expressed in terms that both Priya and I can understand and appreciate.

This imagined interaction between marker and student was also facilitated in other ways; for example:

When I came to mark this essay I felt as if you were inviting me to dive straight in to a huge, deep pool of water—and I felt very reluctant to do so.

As is evident from these examples, metaphorical expressions were incorporated into these narrative accounts as a means of facilitating students' engagement and understanding of the concepts that the marker was seeking to convey. The last example demonstrates how in some cases the metaphor was designed to be as vivid as possible; and here a series of metaphorical expressions were used deliberately as a means of conveying an abstract concept. The experimental feedback continued:

It felt that I would need to be willing to swim under water for quite some time and I wasn't really sure that I could hold my breath for that long, to be honest! You were already in the water and quite accustomed to it, but I didn't feel at all confident about following you in . . . Nevertheless I did jump in (it is my job, after all), but I felt disoriented in the discussion about the share transfer.

Here, the abstract concept of writing style (the target domain) is explained in terms of the physical experience of swimming under water (the source domain). For other students, the abstract concept of a superficiality in an answer was described in alternative, physical terms:

If this answer was part of a cake, it would be just a thin layer of white icing on the top—beautifully presented and carefully crafted by a highly skilled baker—but needing a good deal more substance underneath it to make it complete.

. . . a pencil sketch drawn by an artist who is capable of producing a much more daring and colourful work of art. I sense that on this occasion the artist wasn't feeling too inspired by the commission and most probably had quite a lot of other commitments to deal with. But I like their style and I'd certainly be interested to see more of their work.

A lack of consistency in an answer was explained in terms of a physical experience:

This was a roller-coaster of an answer—quite a few ups and downs and twists and turns, but overall an enjoyable experience!

Marking this essay was really quite an adventure. We set off into a forest, and to begin with I felt very unsure because we were in very unfamiliar surroundings. However, you seemed to know where you were heading to, so I felt reasonably confident to keep following you. We spent quite a lot of time clambering through the brambles and the thickets but occasionally we would reach a clearing and this was really exhilarating. The sky was clear and we could see for miles. But then we'd be back in the woods again—encountering a few scary moments when I feared that we might lose our footing altogether—but then suddenly we'd find ourselves back in a clearing again.

This latter example represents an attempt to make more vivid the commonplace students' writing as a journey metaphor that had already been identified in the standard feedback.

Gathering Student Feedback on the Feedback

Ethical clearance was obtained for the study from the University's Ethics Committee, and informed, written consent was obtained from all participating students. Feedback was e-mailed to all students together with their marked assignment, and at this stage they were thanked for their willingness to "provide feedback on my feedback" and asked to fill out a short questionnaire. In relation to both standard and experimental forms of feedback, students were invited to rate via a Likert scale the extent to which "the comments on my work helped me to understand where I had done well" and "the comments on my work helped me to understand where I could improve." These quantitative data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistical methods, together with inferential, nonparametric tests, to investigate how students responded to two or more questions in a significantly different manner.

Given the small sample size, our analysis of the quantitative data provides merely an interesting "snapshot" of student responses, and we make no claims concerning the generalizability of the findings from these data. However, in addition, students were invited to provide information in free-text format, identifying up to three positive features of either form of feedback and up to three aspects of either form of feedback that could be improved. Thereafter nine students participated in focus group discussions (in two separate groups), and some extracts from the feedback were provided to students as a focus for the discussion. This allowed us to gain an insight into the ways students responded to the feedback collectively and to gain a richer understanding of how they think or feel about feedback more generally.⁷⁹ Qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire and from transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed using a thematic approach "to find repeated patterns of meaning."⁸⁰

79. RICHARD A. KRUEGER & MARY ANNE CASEY, *FOCUS GROUPS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR APPLIED RESEARCH* 4 (3d ed. 2000).

80. Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, *Using thematic analysis in psychology*, 3 *QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY* 77, 86 (2006).

V. The Findings

The findings suggest that the approach taken in this exploratory study was very well-received by students. Both in terms of how far it helped them to understand where they had done well and where they could improve, students scored the experimental feedback highly, with mean averages of 4.25 and 4.45 (out of a possible highest score of 5), respectively. Similarly, the qualitative data indicate there are many benefits of using this experimental approach to feedback, and a great deal of positivity was shown toward the approach taken in this research project. This will be discussed in more detail below, within two broad themes of cognitive and affective engagement. However, we also go on to explain why this broadly positive finding must be tempered by certain reservations in the data. There were indications that the overt use of metaphor and narrative in feedback may be best used as part of a suite or tool kit of approaches, as opposed to being used exclusively and in isolation from other more traditional forms.

This accords with the finding from the quantitative data that students rated the standard feedback provided to them also very highly,⁸¹ and that *both* types of feedback have been perceived as very helpful to inform students where they did well and where they could improve.⁸² Finally in this section we consider students' own use of metaphors when discussing their experiences and perceptions. In many ways, this exemplifies the prevalence of metaphorical expressions in everyday communication and how familiar students are with metaphorical language. However, we also suggest the language used by students here emphasizes the dynamic nature of feedback, as well as the potential power of metaphor to affect students' thinking, both positively and negatively.

Cognitive Engagement

In the data we identified three main themes that relate to students' cognitive engagement: (1) visualization, or "seeing the big picture"; (2) recall and memorability; and (3) clarity and familiarity.

81. With mean averages of 4.15 and 4.6 (out of a possible highest score of 5), respectively.
82. In terms of the type of feedback that could help students to understand where they had done well, the experimental approach appears better, given the higher average (mean = 4.25) as compared with standard approach (mean = 4.15). Conversely, in terms of the type of feedback that could help students to know where they could improve, the standard approach fared better (mean = 4.6) as compared with experimental (mean = 4.45). However, statistically the difference is not significant (as shown by Wilcoxon Signed Rank test: Standard_Well vs. Experimental Well: $Z = -0.632$ ($p > 0.05$), Standard_Improve vs. Experimental improve: $Z = 0.557$ ($p > 0.05$). Median scores Standard_well = 4.0; Standard_improve = 5.0; Experimental well = 4.0; Experimental improve = 5.0).

(1) Visualization, or “seeing the big picture”

Numerous references were made to “vision,” “painting,” and “pictures” in the qualitative data; students reported that they were able to “visualize” the experimental feedback they received as part of this project.

I enjoyed the practical application of my feedback in the experimental feedback as it enabled me to see where I had gone wrong (Questionnaire)

I'm picturing it in my head I can see it clearer now (Focus Group 2)

Helped me to really visualise the flaws in my essay and how to improve (Questionnaire)

This could suggest (a) that students perceived this feedback as a more creative enterprise than other forms of feedback they have received in the past; (b) that this form of feedback requires a more creative/metaphorical response; and (c) that this form of feedback is potentially engaging students in ways that more traditional feedback does not. More particularly, the images conjured up by the experimental feedback appear to have engaged students' visual senses and helped them to see the “big picture”—that is, the overall impression and impact of their writing. There is a sense in the data that students can often get lost in the detail of their writing and lose sight of its overall direction, and the data suggest that the experimental feedback helped students to step outside of this detail and consider their writing in a more holistic way.

The use of metaphors in the beginning of the experimental feedback was effective in helping me understand the overall picture that the marker had of my essay (Questionnaire)

The experimental feedback allowed me to make a vision in my mind of what works and what needs more substance (Questionnaire)

(2) Recall and memorability

It is notable that many students reported having vivid memories of the experimental feedback, despite having received it sometime before, and we consider this aspect of the findings to represent an interesting avenue for further research. It was described as attention-grabbing and being easier to recall than more traditional feedback they had received.

I like that because from almost all the feedbacks I got throughout the years this is the one I remember the most because of the narratives in the beginning (Focus Group 1)

I do remember the experimental feedback more than I would the normal feedback (Focus Group 1)

I remember the experimental I don't remember the normal feedback (Focus Group 1)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, numerous references were made to examinations and revision throughout the data. There was some indication that more experimental feedback would be easier to recall in the context of a stressful exam, and again we consider that this offers potential for further research and development.

I think when I'm sitting in the exam I would remember that you said for example "I'm not thinking of Priya" I would remember that I wouldn't need to remind myself so that's good (Focus Group 2)

(3) Clarity and familiarity

Several students indicated that they found the metaphors and narratives used in the experimental feedback helped them understand how to improve their work. There was a real sense that the language used when giving this form of feedback was clear and, perhaps, closer to the language they themselves used.

... it helps you understand it more because language like this can be a bit complicated and this is like you're just talking to me and I can understand it now (Focus Group 2)

Experimental feedback was easier to understand as it was more colloquial and clear (Questionnaire)

The experimental feedback is much more relatable and interactive (Questionnaire)

The narrative structure of the feedback was also commented on as aiding understanding. Overall, the data indicate that this feedback felt familiar; it was easier to engage with and relate to. It was also suggested that this form of feedback was more interesting to read than more traditional forms.

Was generally far more interesting to read (Questionnaire)

Experimental feedback seems to make it more clear (Questionnaire)

... it was easier to engage with the experimental feedback (Focus group 1)

Affective Engagement

The affective or emotional dimension of the feedback process is a key theme that we identified in the data. For instance, there were numerous references to "crying" over poor marks or feeling hurt by feedback perceived as being too "harsh" and detached. Students are emotionally invested in their studies, and the affective dimension of feedback is very important. Within this theme, there were two distinct but similar dimensions: relating and relationships.

(1) Relating

There was some indication in the data that the experimental form of feedback aided communication between staff and students. Students reported having a better understanding of the "examiner's mind" and being able to see their work from the marker's point of view. It seemed to offer a different perspective on the feedback process.

It gives us a better picture of how the marker sees our essays because sometimes we forget that the person that reads the essay doesn't have in mind what we have so I think it just gives a better understanding, for example I like the example with the pool of water I think it was a really good illustration of the way the marker saw it (Focus Group 1)

It puts you in the examiner's mind instead of just the students mind so I'm seeing it from your point of view now (Focus Group 2)

Interestingly, students also reported being able to better relate to the client featured in the assignment question. It seemed to help them see the human and real-world aspects of their studies.

... when you say you imagine yourself as Priya that makes sense because a lot of the time we don't answer the question as if we are responding to the client but the fact that you said that reminds us that we should put out the law all of the time. You forget that there's a person we need to respond to (Focus Group 2).

(2) Relationships

Some of the data suggested that the experimental feedback helped to foster more positive relationships between academic staff and students. For some, receiving feedback in this way helped to see themselves as part of a supportive conversation with the marker.

I like the support that's given, it's almost as if you're there and you've spoken to us which I like but the problem for me though is with feedback I never feel like I have enough support given in the feedback but ... it's like I actually care to give you this feedback and I've made an effort and you can come and talk to me after and so on. So it's about the support given along with it (Focus Group 2)

I like how the experimental feedback is sort of conversational like you're just speaking to me and the other one is sort of generic but the experimental one is like it applies specifically to me like you're talking to me so it makes more sense in my head (Focus Group 2)

It makes it a bit more personal (Focus Group 2)

In this sense, it appears that a positive outcome from using this form of feedback is that it weakens or at least challenges the hierarchical relationships that can exist between professor and student and hinder communication.

There was some indication in the data that students appreciated the effort involved in producing such feedback, and that the use of narrative and metaphor helped to deliver criticism in a "nicer way."

... for example in the second example in the normal feedback it says "my main concern relates to your writing style and structure" that just seems a bit too serious but when you explain it in the narrative it just seems a bit nicer (Focus Group 2)

There were also some suggestions this was a more positive, friendlier form of feedback than that received in other modules.

The assessor's saying "well this could have been improved it's up to you now to work it out and improve it" but sometimes I just get a bit disheartened because I don't even know where to go or what to do then it actually discourages me from going about the topic if I haven't got it fully (Focus Group 1)

Metaphor and Narrative as Complementing more Traditional Forms of Feedback

As the preceding discussion has shown, the data suggest many benefits of using this experimental approach. There are, however, certain reservations in the data indicating that the use of metaphor and narrative in feedback (at least

in this very overt and “extreme” form) may be best used as part of a suite or tool kit of approaches, as opposed to being used exclusively and in isolation from other more traditional forms. Those who participated in the research project felt it was important to reiterate that students have different learning styles and preferences, and there is the suggestion that personalization and multiple approaches to feedback would be beneficial to meet their diverse needs.

... if someone doesn't get a very high mark they just want to know where they went wrong and they might struggle to understand straight away if you use a metaphor (Focus Group 2)

... it depends on the person (Focus Group 2)

There was some suggestion that some students may get “lost” in a metaphor and this may be confusing.

With the first one I thought that I needed to read the original feedback to understand the experimental feedback, just on its own I feel like I'd be a bit confused but with the second one you followed it through relating it back to the essay which made it make more sense so like in terms of diving into the deeper water and you don't just stop there because you relate it back to the essay, it's similar to the feedback on top so it makes a bit more sense (Focus Group 2)

I would intertwine the additional experimental feedback with the original feedback because it would be easier for me to understand where I need to improve specifically (Questionnaire)

Interestingly, one student suggested that some students may lack the interpretative skills required to fully engage in this form of feedback.

The experimental feedback may not be understood as it must be interpreted (Questionnaire)

Certainly, then, while students welcome the deliberate incorporation of metaphor and narrative into feedback, they consider this as an approach that complements, rather than replaces, more traditional and familiar forms.

The Vivid Nature of Students' Responses to Feedback Generally

Students used a range of metaphors when discussing their experiences and perceptions of the feedback provided to them in this study. As we have seen, painting, artwork, and images were referred to throughout the data, which illustrates the visual power of metaphors and phrases such as “clear picture,” “picture it in my mind,” “paints a picture,” and “paint an image” were also common. There are also numerous references in the data to the “life” of the mind and the mind as engaging in physical activity: “springs to mind,” “your mind starts to wander,” and “get your head around it” were examples. Interestingly, students adopt metaphorical language also to describe their experiences of feedback more generally. For example, one student describes a previous experience of receiving harsh feedback as a “slap,”⁸³ and another makes reference to the text of feedback as “a little bit of flesh,” which almost sounds as if it is alive. Overall, the language used emphasizes movement

83. *It was in Contract and it made me so sad in first year, I think it was one of my first ones and it was just... the feedback was very short and it sounded like he was angry with me the whole time and then the whole time was, question marks 'what do you mean?' I'm so confused and I'm just like slap me why don't you. It was very horrible (Focus Group 2).*

and activity, and describes feedback as a dynamic and powerful process, as opposed to a static, inanimate entity. This suggests that feedback has the potential to powerfully affect students, both cognitively and emotionally, even *without* the deliberate incorporation of narrative and metaphor. Since we now know that the intentional use of narrative and metaphor can serve to heighten this impact, it becomes necessary here to caution against using these devices recklessly or inadvertently.

Feedback and Negativity

Students also demonstrated in the data a tendency to associate feedback with negative comments, or to understand the term “feedback” as being synonymous with an explanation of “where I went wrong.” For example, students observed:

... it was easier to engage with the experimental feedback but I agree with what she said that sometimes it is too general and it's not too focused on any particular area in which you got the answer wrong (Focus Group 1)

I enjoyed the practical application of my feedback in the experimental feedback as it enabled me to see where I had gone wrong (Questionnaire)

It is likely that such negative associations come from students' experiences of receiving feedback; indeed, this is confirmed by students who state:

... typically feedbacks don't focus on where you've gone right it's more of a criticism of where you've gone wrong (Focus Group 1)

I want to know like exactly where I've gone wrong and what to do which is what the normal feedback kind of provides but also it's quite good to have a general idea of where you've gone wrong as well (Focus Group 1)

However, we suggest that it is also at least possible that the term “feedback” is itself a metaphorical term with inherently negative connotations, and that this hitherto concealed metaphorical aspect of feedback might even in some way be framing and limiting its effectiveness. Through exploring its etymology, we have found that “feedback” derives from the field of audio electronics.⁸⁴ In the 1920s it was used to describe “the return of a fraction of an output signal to the input of an earlier stage”—that which we continue to recognize as the unwelcome, high-pitch screeching or whistling sound that emanates when sound from a loudspeaker is picked up by a microphone that is feeding the speaker.⁸⁵ It is not until 1955 that its transferred use as “information about the

84. Louis Goossens et al. state that “Feedback . . . was originally a metaphoricalisation of the use of energy in an (electric) circuit” in LOUIS GOOSSENS ET AL., *BY WORD OF MOUTH: METAPHOR, METONYMY AND LINGUISTIC ACTION IN A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE* 129 (1995). Black and William also affirm: “Originally, feedback was used to describe an arrangement in electrical and electronic circuits whereby information about the level of an ‘output’ signal (specifically the gap between the actual level of the output signal and some defined ‘reference’ level) was fed back into one of the system’s inputs.” See Black & William, *supra* note 58.

85. Source: https://www.etymonline.com/word/feedback#etymonline_v_33055.

results of a process” is attested.⁸⁶ While accepting that such a view is likely to be contested,⁸⁷ we suggest that the widespread and continued use of “a term whose origins were legitimately associated with an awful noise”⁸⁸ to describe a process that is intended to be instructive and supportive is at least potentially problematic and worthy of further investigation.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that there are significant potential benefits to deliberately incorporating narrative and metaphor into feedback, and that providing this form of written feedback to students may indeed help to bridge “the feedback gap” that has been identified in the literature. Recognizing that this study was conducted on a small scale, we consider that a larger-scale empirical study is necessary to endorse these findings; but from a practical point of view, and drawing especially on students’ comments, it seems likely that this more novel form of feedback will be most effective when it is incorporated or merged within standard forms of feedback with which students are familiar.

In the course of the discussion we also have identified discrete areas that we consider to be worthy of further investigation and research, such as the memorability of the experimental feedback and the potential utilization of narrative and metaphor as an aid to revision. Taken together, though, we consider that our findings relating to the themes of cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and students’ vivid responses and/or negative conceptions indicate the dynamic and potentially powerful nature of written feedback upon our students. As such, we suggest that as well as further investigating the impact of deliberately “adding in” narrative and metaphor to feedback, a focus on existing “unadulterated” feedback may also be beneficial. Through conducting a wide-scale review of written feedback across a range of jurisdictions, perhaps via the adoption of a corpus linguistics methodology, it would be possible to identify and categorize the words, phrases, narratives, and metaphors that are already used in feedback, and so potentially to discover yet more new understandings of the feedback process.

86. *Ibid.*

87. See for example the views of one blogger, who maintains that the word is no longer inherently negative. *The Etymology of Feedback*, MANAGER TOOLS, <https://www.manager-tools.com/blog/sunday-march-2nd-2008-948-am/etymology-feedback>.

88. *Id.*