Case Study: Implementing Active Self-Feedback in Teaching

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Course information

In Autumn 2024, Jonathan Hourigan taught two courses: "Genre and Theme", a postgraduate course for MA Screenwriting students, and "Introduction to Screenwriting", a third-year undergraduate course for BA English and BA English and Creative Writing students. These cohorts consisted of 18 postgraduates, and 11 undergraduates.

The implementation of active self-feedback was used as a formative tool to prepare students for the submission of summative assessments. In preparation for the submission of each summative assessment, the previous years' submissions were made available. As a formative assessment, students submitted written answers to a questionnaire where they were asked to compare their predecessors' submissions, and then to make comparisons with their own work-in-progress.

In addition to submitting their comparisons, students were also asked to write some reflections on the comparison task. As a result, this activity generated a large quantity of feedback from students on the active self-feedback approach.

The task

Throughout the course, students received lectures on layout and format, dramatic structure and were given specified readings. Additionally, time in class was given to reading feature screenplays, viewing short films and discussing them, as well as the discussion of students' original ideas and collaborative work in development with peers.

Students were asked to draft a short, professionally formatted screenplay – the undergraduate cohort were asked to submit 12-15 pages, while the postgraduates were asked for 10-12 pages.

Students were given access to their predecessor's screenplays, alongside the specific assessment feedback of those screenplays – though marks were omitted. They were then asked to submit their written answers to a questionnaire as follows:

1. *Can you identify by student number the two strongest and two weakest scripts you read and how and why did you make these judgments? Can you then also specify the three principal strengths of the strongest scripts and the three principal weakness of the weakest scripts?*

2. *What learning were you able to take from this exercise and in addition, was any of it unique and unavailable through the lectures, reading, viewing and class discussions?*

3. *Have you been able to analyse and compare your own work in relation to the screenplays you have been provided with? What conclusions have you arrived at and how will you use these insights as you continue to develop your work prior to final submission for summative assessment in early 2025? You might find it helpful to think here about (i) generating viable original ideas, (ii) the deployment of screenwriting conventions and finally, (iii) using professional layout, format and use of English.*

4. *Is there anything else you'd like to offer or observe about the experience and value of reading, analysing and comparing last year's output as you work on your own assignment?*

Please don't feel obliged to answer every question, or to respond at great length. Your honest impressions will be of great value.

In addition to this screenwriting task assigned to both cohorts, which comprised 50% of marks for the course, aspects of the active self-feedback approach were implemented for other summative assessments.

- The undergraduate students completed an exercise in which they wrote a Film Analysis essay (1000 words), reviewed the previous years' submissions, and then answered a similar set of questions.

- The postgraduate students were tasked with creating a Feature Film Portfolio, a preparatory and exploratory document prior to writing their own feature screenplay. Their predecessors' FFPs were made available to be reviewed, and the students were asked to submit their answers to a similar set of questions.

Comparators

For all tasks, the previous years' submissions were used as comparators, alongside the written assessment feedback for each piece of work – though marks were omitted. Therefore, students had quite a large pool of comparators (around 8-15), which varied quite widely in quality.

When reflecting on the comparators used, some interesting common themes included:

- The variety in quality was helpful.

- The inclusion of lower quality scripts was a valuable new experience, as students were used to mainly reading scripts at a professional standard.

- This also had a positive effect on some students' confidence.

- Several students explained that the inclusion of assessment feedback as well as the comparators themselves was also helpful. This may be a useful tool to help those students who are less confident than others at making comparisons.

Reflections by teaching staff

Since both the academic and professional settings of screenwriting frequently implement wide reading and comparison when working on screenplays, some of the techniques of active self-feedback are already common when teaching screenwriting, especially the use of comparators.

However, the step of making one's feedback explicit was a new introduction to these courses, and was reported by the lecturer to have been a useful new component to the task:

> *"It's been a great exercise for me. I've learned a lot about the range of learning approaches and experiences that students value. It should enhance their learning and output and also, my teaching."*

Reflections by students

In addition to the student views included above, a variety of notable student responses are included below. These were taken from responses to Q3 and Q4 of the questionnaire.

No students expressed any negative feedback about the activity, though it should be noted that their responses were submitted non-anonymously to their lecturer. One student gave a neutral view of the task (included below), and all other students who commented on the task said it was a positive activity and should be continued in forthcoming years. Many students engaged at length with reflecting on the task itself. Some students did not give much/any feedback on the task, focussing their answers on their own work and comparisons.

Quotes from BA students

> *"A lot of the insights I gained from the exercise had already been mentioned in class, or teased out through discussion and private reading prior, but it felt more concrete and applicable seeing it spelled out in practice across other students' work."*

> *"Having the feedback has also been helpful as it shows where my initial reactions to some of the examples differ to what the marking says."*

> *"This information is unavailable in class because it is the actual execution of the task given." (Film Analysis exercise)*

Quotes from MA students

"It will help in my efficiency of writing as we continue on because I will be able to identify those weaker parts."

"It was good to look at each of these [scripts] with certain questions in mind."

"It was valuable to read other students' scripts instead of professional ones, which is an aspect of screenwriting studies that isn't generally offered."

"It's great to have these scripts as points of inspiration and comparison for my own, giving me a better sense of what works and what might not."

"It's helped me to re-evaluate my own script; the objective perspective that I have when reading someone else's work, and seeing their flaws, makes it easier to see the flaws in my own work […] it's good to get an amateur perspective."

"It's also helped me understand what you mean by dramatic storytelling. I've managed to decipher how it how it works, against scripts where it doesn't work. Although in theory I understood what you meant in class, I don't think I've fully grasped that until now, undertaking this exercise."

"Coming at scripts from a fresh, reader's perspective gives some form of objectivity to what's being read and has helped me to find aspects of writing not consistently thought about in my own and incorporating them or looking for similar pitfalls that predecessors have also fallen into."

"It really highlights the impact of certain either forgotten or successfully done things in screenplays and makes self-evaluation much easier and more accurate in relation to where you are currently in study."

"The extra time to sit and assess these pieces of work that you normally would not in a lecture setting gives much more chance to assess them more deeply and critically, making the outcome of actually reading them much more useful."

"Answering this questionnaire has helped to quite a large degree, as before I had compared the previous year's work to pretty much just my own and not really each other."

"I think this is a worthwhile and useful process and worth keep part of the course. It has been incredibly helpful in the way of solving imposter syndrome and (at least for me) help me justify my own place on the course and my confidence in being part of a such a prestigious university's very select group of writers."

"The access to the cohort of short screenplays was definitely useful when thinking about my own writing for this assessment - especially when paired with the feedback provided for each script."

"There was as much to learn from the weaker examples as from the stronger ones."

"Honestly, it was encouraging to see the range of quality of the scripts. As someone who is really starting from the beginning of the screenwriting craft with this course, it was reassuring to see that not all of last year's scripts were masterful."

"The exercise was useful as I think with discussions, I have a habit of being a bit more tentative and polite. However, by putting strongest and weakest on paper and justifying why, it helps me to really pinpoint my ideas and thoughts."

"However, I believe nothing I have learnt is unavailable to me through lectures, reading, viewing or class discussions, and instead has served to reinforce what I have already learnt. "

"Generally, I find reading the scripts and then the feedback more beneficial than if I were to have read the scripts by themselves. While I can make my own judgments and generate my own feedback (which I do use to support my own writing) - it is helpful to understand what the marker is looking for and to understand any area of criticism I may have missed."

Feature film portfolio

"I wonder if the story I have chosen channels my own unique voice in this way, and if I can speak with enough authority on the subject matter. Whether or not I can, this exercise is clearly useful for making me ask these questions at this stage."

"As said on the previous feedback form about last year's short films, I found this exercise of writing on and comparing our work very helpful in this format specifically. I would definitely suggest continuing this with future years."

"Whilst Jonathan's instructions were clear, it adds an even greater precision and understanding when we can look through them ourselves."