

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION
TEACHING AND RESEARCH AWARDS ROUND 5
PROJECT REPORT

IPSATIVE ASSESSMENT AND MOTIVATION OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

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July 2010

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A report on a CDE funded study by Gwyneth Hughes, Kaori Okumoto and Megan Crawford

Summary

The purpose of this research is to explore the potential of using ipsative assessment (assessment based on previous performance) to motivate learners. A literature review has indicated that existing criteria-referenced assessment methods do not always provide learners with useful feedback and that ipsative assessment might improve the experience of learners, particularly those who do not readily meet the assessment criteria. Written feedback on a distance learning MA was analysed for ipsative approaches and learners and tutors on the programme were interviewed. The results indicated that feedback is criteria-led and that ipsative feedback to learners is minimal, yet learners and tutors alike view ipsative feedback as having motivational benefits. While feedback could be readily improved, there are operational issues to consider particularly for ipsative grading, which is less well supported.

Introduction

Developmental or formative feedback is widely recognized to be very important for distance learning and there is a growing body of studies on formative feedback in Higher Education. But, although many of these emphasize the importance of giving learners effective feedback, we believe that there are some problems with current assessment approaches which are predominantly criteria-referenced. Alternatives such as ipsative assessment have not been considered.

An ipsative assessment compares existing performance with previous performance. Many informal and practical learning experiences are assessed in this way such as sports coaching, music teaching and in computer games. A personal best in athletics is an ipsative assessment. By contrast, in much academic learning, where assessment is made in relation to external attainment criteria, credit is rarely given for how far the learner has advanced since the previous piece of work. While ipsative written or oral feedback may be provided as part of formative assessment, for summative assessment the student must meet the supposedly transparent assessment criteria to pass or reach a graded level.

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The aim of this study is to explore the potential of ipsative assessment to motivate distance learners through reviewing literature and through a small-scale investigation. The report firstly explores distance learning and distance assessment and suggests that the dominance of criteria and standards limits the effectiveness of the feedback which learners receive, while ipsative assessment has much potential to motivate learners. Secondly, to examine this potential, a study of a fully online distance learning Masters is presented. Interviews with learners and tutors are discussed as well as an analysis of written feedback on a sample of assignments to estimate the extent of ipsative feedback provision and to categorise the types of feedback provided. The findings indicate that ipsative assessment, although largely absent from this programme, could be useful to learners and increase motivation. The report concludes that some relatively minor changes in practice could begin to achieve this and that further studies using other programmes would be worth undertaking.

Distance learning, distance education and related terms

Learning at a distance has grown in significance and status internationally. Early pioneers of distance education persevered against the discourses of distance education as second-rate or marginal to develop a wide body of expertise in teaching and supporting learners at a distance (Burge, 2007).

There are a number of terms in use that relate to distance learning and it useful to provide some clarification. The two terms distance learning (DL) and distance education are often used synonymously but we interpret distance learning as covering the learning and teaching and assessment processes, while distance education refers to all the process and policies which underpin learning at a distance. In the same way, higher education is a wider field than higher learning, or, as it more usually phrased, 'learning and teaching in higher education'. Distance learning is often, but not always associated with open learning (as in the UK Open University, UKOU, which is often quoted to represent the 'gold standard'), or flexible learning where learners can learn at any time and pace as well as in a place of their own choosing. But, Kember (2009) argues in favour of distance learning cohorts rather than such individual flexible study modes, especially for overseas learners who do not fit the idealised UKOU student who is very self-reliant. Finally, now that the traditional print based approach has increasingly been superseded by use of e-learning both for delivery of materials and for communication, e-learning is also becoming synonymous with distance learning. Although DL has always had a reliance on appropriate technologies, Kember is sceptical about the potential use of e-learning arguing that contact via email provides less 'presence' than the face to face tutor contact which in general learners view very

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positively. However, he acknowledges that this may be because distance learners and tutors lack experience with e-learning methods.

While there is plenty of literature on distance learning and e-learning there is much less on distance assessment which is surprising because when learners are remote, concerns about persistence feature largely (Kember, 2009; Simpson, 2003). As there is much discussion about the importance of 'social presence and engagement' (Hughes, 2010) and learner support (Thorpe, 2002), we might expect a concern over getting assessment right too.

Distance assessment and its significance for distance learners

There are inevitably differences between assessment practice for on-site students and distance learners and provision of feedback is of particular significance. Differences between on-campus and distance assessment regimes are found in the administration of assessment, for example, submitting coursework remotely rather than in person or taking examinations in a distant location. Online courses which engage with a range of technologies may be more innovative in summative assessment methods, for example e-portfolios or blogs, but this will probably vary with discipline. Written feedback is almost always provided at a distance, often electronically, but feedback arising from face to face tutorials and from teachers and peers in class may not have a direct distance learning or e-learning equivalent.

It is increasingly agreed, particularly at school level, that assessment is a key part of teaching and learning and not a separate process for measurement of standards attained (Stobart, 2008; Black & Wiliam, 2003), and distance educators agree. Morgan & O'Reilly (1999) recognised that formative assessment is particularly important for open and distance learners who are more reliant on this aspect of learning if they do not have opportunities for feedback in a taught session. Continuous assessment, providing feedforward (or developmental feedback) and aligning assessment with learning outcomes are all strongly recommended. They argued that providing regular, engaging and constructive feedback is the most demanding and sensitive task for DL teachers.

Formative feedback and motivation under the shadow of assessment criteria

Assessment is strongly linked to motivation. Learners are motivated both by external rewards such as grades – extrinsic motivation - and by personal development in the subject or discipline - intrinsic motivation- although the extent of intrinsic motivation varies widely (Higgins *et al.*, 2002). Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) explored how good formative assessment has the potential to shift learners

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away from the extrinsic motivation associated with summative grades towards intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning.

However, general commentary by students and assessment experts alike suggests that there is little evidence of a widespread provision of effective feedback (Crisp, 2007; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Rust & O'Donovan, 2008). Although there is evidence that students value feedback, feel that they deserve it and sometimes claim to pay it close attention (Higgins *et al.*, 2002), there is little evidence that feedback is used effectively for learning. Studies from both the UK and Hong Kong suggest that that students and staff are confused about the purpose of feedback often linking it strongly to justification of a grade (Handley, et al 2008; Carless 2006). Staff claim to write good quality feedback but students disagree. To compound this, many students do not feel that they can approach their teachers to ask for clarification and advice, although this depends on their relationships with their teachers, teacher credibility and their own confidence (Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

While provision of regular formative feedback might be more developed than this in distance learning and in the OU learner satisfaction is high (Gibbs, 2010), there is no room for complacency. Simpson (2008) is critical of the widespread remediation approach to learner support where learners are given corrective feedback because it focuses on learner weaknesses. Instead he argues that motivation is the key to learner success. Motivating learners require a focus on strengths and build on these to improve learning skills rather than a negative focus on weakness. Only once strengths have been discussed and effort acknowledged, is it then appropriate to discuss lack of skills and address learners' fears. He cites a study in which such a 'strengths' approach to learner support –whether by telephone or email or letter-produced promising results in retention.

It may be that simply contacting the learners is motivational when support is proactive rather than reactive. Hughes, (2007) also provided evidence for the motivating effect of proactive support as well as peer support facilitated online. Nevertheless, Simpson's 'Proactive Motivational Support' does not appear to be widely applied to formative assessment.

As well as being motivational, feedback must be helpful to learners. Feedback can be generic and refer to transferable skills or be task specific and relevant only to the content of individual assignments. A model of effective feedback developed by Hattie and Timperley (2007) indicates how feedback at the generic level is much more useful to learners in the longer term than very task specific feedback. But, Walker's (2009) study from the OU suggests that much feedback is not useable, not only because

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learners do not understand it, but also because it is not clearly developmental and generic.

Developmental commentary –or feedforward -is only useful if accompanied by some explanation or detail which is often lacking. Generic skills development comments are most useable: these can be used for future assignments as well as improving on draft work, but these are not routinely provided to learners.

Such findings are not surprising because under a criteria-referenced regime learners cannot easily apply feedforward to other pieces of work when commentary is related to criteria which are specific to a particular piece. A further problem is that learners have little means of knowing whether or not their action on feedforward has been successful. A good grade might give some indication, but for those who have made progress but are not achieving highly, grades are more likely to be de-motivating. For continuity of progress, learners need feedback on their action on feedforward as part of a feedback-feedforward loop. Closing such a feedback loop can be more readily achieved with an ipsative approach to feedback focusing on the learner's progress over time rather than assignment-specific outcomes approach (Hughes & Crawford, 2009).

Ipsative assessment as an alternative to criteria-referenced assessment

We have suggested that much of the problem with current approaches to giving feedback, whether on campus taught courses or distance learning courses, is that it is underpinned by a summative assessment process which is criteria-referenced. The dominant role of criteria-referenced assessment is to encourage competitive marking or grading rather than motivation and enabling learning to take place over time (Broadfoot, 1996). But, ipsative assessment could offer a more motivational and more effective approach to assessment for all.

An ipsative approach to supporting learners could be applied to formative assessment, summative assessment or both. Ipsative feedback informs the learner how s/he has progressed since the previous assessment and how effective response to developmental feedback has been. Ipsative feedback provides opportunities to build on strengths and thus improve the motivation that Simpson (2008) recommends for distance learners. It also encourages a focus on progress which can be positive for all learners rather than outcomes which reward only the highest achievers (Hughes & Crawford, 2009). While ipsative feedback probably occurs to some extent when an assessor seeks to motivate through praise about progress rather than attainment or when learners self-regulate their progress, ipsative summative assessment is much less likely under current assessment regimes. Ipsative grading would be

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based on progress towards criteria rather than how far criteria have been met. A move in this direction would signal a much more radical change to current assessment practice than use of ipsative feedback.

An ipsative method also encourages generic feedback so that previous performances can be compared to the current one. This also requires feedback to be recorded so that progress can be monitored. An ipsative approach thus might be particularly helpful for distance learners who are highly dependent on recorded feedback. However, it is not clear how much, if any, ipsative feedback learners receive on distance learning programmes. While there is evidence that learners value developmental feedback –or feedforward–their responses to any ipsative feedback have not been studied. Hughes (forthcoming) has also suggested that ipsative feedback needs to be underpinned by at least some ipsative grading and learners' and tutors' views on this are also unknown.

This project therefore has the following two goals:

1. to establish the extent to which ipsative assessment (assessment based on previous performance rather than external criteria) is used on a distance learning Masters;
2. to explore both learner and tutor views on the benefits of using ipsative assessment on a distance learning Masters programme.

A study of ipsative assessment of distance learners: methodology

The distance learning Masters programme investigated was an *MA in Applied Educational Leadership and Management (AELM)*. It is delivered wholly online to a fixed cohort. The project focused on the tutors' feedback for the assignments of the two core modules 'Learning and Managing Educational Change and Improvement' and 'Leadership for the Learning Community'. First, a recruitment email was sent out to 35 students of the 2009/10 cohort, asking for volunteers for the project. 11 students responded to participate in the research. The permission to access tutors' feedback and final grades of the two module assignments was obtained from those 11 students.

For a distance learning programme, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) often plays a fundamental role in teaching and learning processes as is the case in the MA in AELM. Both a draft and a final module assignment are submitted to 'Assignment Dropbox' in the VLE, whereby tutors retrieve students' scripts. Once tutors have prepared their feedback, they upload it onto the same space so that students can receive it. Apart from assignment submission, the VLE enables access to participants' information, open discussions as well as access to course materials and reading lists and it includes a tutors' forum.

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Data collection involved a questionnaire to students, an analytical tool applied to feedback and an invitation to tutors to respond to the findings. The tool (see appendix 1), which was developed based on the Hattie & Timperley (2007) model for effective feedback in a pilot study, distinguished between feedback on current performance and feedforward for the next assignment as well as between task-specific and more generic comments. The tool also identified criteria-based and ipsative feedback pertinent to this study and distinguished between directive and indicative feedforward categories which are not present in the model but were significant in the pilot. The tool was applied to 31 pieces of formative and summative feedback from three tutors. The most frequently used types of feedback were identified and samples of typical comments were sent to students to reflect upon in an email questionnaire. The email questionnaire (see appendix 2) also aimed to obtain details about experiences of receiving feedback at a distance and views on ipsative feedback and grading. A summary report of the analysis on the feedback was uploaded on to the tutor's forum on the VLE to invite comments. Finally, the Programme Leader was given an opportunity to respond to the report and was interviewed about possible future use of ipsative assessment.

The student data was systematically organised for interpretation through thematising and summarising. The data was analysed around the following six themes in particular:

1. Views on formative feedback current practice (including its usefulness, encouragement and motivation)
2. Recognition of progress (including self feedback, autonomy, confidence in self assessment)
3. Ipsative feedback
4. Ipsative grades

These themes were then cross-referenced with themes emerging from the feedback analysis.

A study of ipsative assessment of distance learners: findings and discussion

In this section three sets of data are presented and discussed with links drawn between them: student interviews, tutor feedback on written work, tutor's responses to ipsative assessment.

1. Analysis of student interviews

Student views of formative feedback

Nearly all participants responded that they would like to receive feedback on how well they are learning by a combination of written comments and grades. They commented that 'specific' formative feedback which includes examples was useful:

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“I found [one of the tutors’] feedback most useful, [the tutor] explained through examples and encouraged me to do better.” (Student 8)

Feedback which encouraged the learner’s ownership of their work was also appreciated:

“It [the comment] encouraged me in the sense that my own research was acknowledged as valid by the tutor but I was shown a more effective way of including it in my essay. I followed the advice.” (Student 1)

However, there were cases where the feedback was vague or failed to convey clear messages, which directly affected students’ motivation:

“[the feedback] was subject to my interpretation, it did confuse me on the direction to take to improve the assignment paper. In this state of confusion, the levels of encouragement and motivation were found to be low.” (Student 2)

Recognition of progress and ipsative feedback

Autonomous learning was well understood, but this does not necessarily mean practising it was easy and here ipsative feedback could help. Nearly every participant welcomed ipsative feedback which indicates how student’s work has improved or not improved since the previous piece of work:

“..it is always constructive to know whether one’s work has improved or not. It’s very motivating and encouraging.” (Student 3)

Some students would value ipsative feedback across assignments since it would clarify whether the student has ‘addressed issues raised from original feedback’ (Student 1):

“if someone would read my first and second assignment and examine my progress as a paper writer and give me general comments about how I did or didn’t improve and what I needed to focus on that will be very helpful.” (Student 9)

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Ipsative grades

There were suggestions that there is sometimes a mismatch between the grade and the effort the learner put in:

“I was slightly disappointed not to improve my score on Module 2 as I worked extremely hard to try and take the Module 1 feedback into account.”(Student 4)

Ipsative grading would reward such effort; however, the response to ipsative grading was mixed. In answering the question, ‘could such a grade [ipsative grade] replace some of the achievement grades you are given on this programme?’, half said yes, and the other half said no. An example of the positive comments on ipsative grades was:

“It is a good idea to have grade for progresses. If the work is assessed, I believe that I would obtain better grades in my work.”(Student 6)

The common argument from those who did not favour ipsative grades was that they are unfair:

“I feel strongly that it is entirely unfair for outstanding student who achieves an ‘A’ on account of the excellence of their work to be compared to a student whose work is much lower in quality but, due to starting out at a much lower level, was able to make more progress.”(Student 4)

Moreover, a danger of encouraging people to cheat was pointed out:

“It will also allow students to ‘play’ the system by putting in a poor quality first piece, so as to maximise their potential to progress on the next piece.”(Student 1)

Students may be conservative and wish to keep the current assessment methods to maintain quality of outcomes rather than a focus on process. One of the participants clearly expressed this:

“I fully appreciate that my final grade will not be based on my efforts, motivation or progress but simply on the work I submit, and that students who seem to have made far less effort may end up with better final grades if their work is of a higher quality. That is the nature of academic

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qualifications and it should remain this way if the end qualification is to maintain its current status as a well-respected academic certificate.”(Student 4)

Such views indicate that ipsative grades would need to be introduced alongside criteria-referenced grades and not replace these so that academic standards can be assured.

2. Analysis of feedback on written work

31 pieces of written feedback given to 11 students were analysed and of these 9 were of formative feedback on draft work and 22 were of summative feedback on final submissions. The work was marked by 3 different tutors. In some cases work may not have been submitted for formative feedback or it might have been submitted informally and not via the VLE. Attempts to recover ‘lost’ formative feedback were only partially successful and some pieces could not be tracked down. In any case, feedback categorised as summative frequently provided recommendations which might be used for the next assignment and thus was also formative. Therefore a distinction between formative and summative feedback is not made in this analysis.

Feedback on current performance

Feedback on current performance can be either related to assessment criteria and standards or a comparison with previous performance (ipsative). The criteria used may be implicit or explicit.

Typical comments comparing the work with assessment criteria and standards were:

“Have a look at the Assessment Criteria P. 37 to 39 of the Course Handbook: 1) Criteria A: you show a good level of understanding of the key issues and have begun to present extracts from the relevant literature..” (Tutor B)

“What then might have taken the assignment to the next grade level? ... you might have engaged rather more in a critical analysis of material in this field.” (Tutor A)

An ipsative comment comparing the work with past performance was:

“You clearly took to heart the advice provided on the basis of your draft submission.” (Tutor A)

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The analytical tool also distinguished between generic comments on processes and skills which are general enough to apply to other assignment and task level or content comments which apply only to the current assignment. This gives four possible categories for feedback-see table 1.

Table 1. Numbers of comparative feedback statements

| | Total statements at task level | Total statements at generic level |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| Comparison with assessment criteria or standards | 5 | 19 |
| Comparison with past performance (ipsative) | 1 | 1 |

Researchers did not always agree on categorising of feedback and some comments were ‘multiple message’ and difficult to classify. Thus, the numbers of statements are presented below as a profile rather than numerical data – see fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Feedback statements profile

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Criteria-related Task-orientated | Criteria-related Generic |
| ipsative Task-orientated | Ipsative Generic |

The shaded box represents the most common type of comment for these modules

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The feedback about meeting criteria was mostly generic. This is helpful in that students can apply the comments to other assignments as well as future drafts (Walker, 2009). However, feedback was often a reiteration of generic assessment criteria with a request that learners consult the handbook which could be why some students found comments vague. For learners who find it difficult to interpret the assessment criteria and relate criteria to their work some task related examples might help and the student interviews indicated the importance of examples to support generic comments.

There was very little feedback to learners on their progress (ipsative feedback). As a result it is not surprising that learners use grades to assess their progress rather than feedback and are disappointed if their effort is not recognised. In the interviews learners suggested that more explicit ipsative feedback might help them with self-assessment and might be motivational. Giving ipsative feedback is proactive rather than reactive and these findings are in keeping with Simpson's (2008) suggestion that proactive tutoring is motivational.

Thus, a recommended profile of feedback might look more like fig 2:

Fig. 2 Feedback statements recommended profile

| | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Criteria-related Task-orientated <i>for</i> <i>examples</i> | Criteria-related Generic |
| ipsative Task-orientated | Ipsative Generic |

The depth of shading here represents relative importance of feedback categories

Feedforward statements

Feedforward statements inform learners of what to do next. These can be directive and instruct the learner what needs to be or should be done e.g.

“..you need to be absolutely clear that the assignment is about planning and managing a change...” (Tutor A)

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“The assignment would improve further if you had: 1) made your paragraphs more distinguishable by allowing an extra space; 2) formatted your assignment differently to allow for different subsections; 3) followed the guidelines on referencing, outlined in your Handbook” (Tutor C)

Alternatively, statements can be indicative when the tutor suggests what the learner might do or could do and so begins a dialogue with the learner to encourage autonomy e.g.

“You could start with an introductory section that could also introduce into the structure of your assignment stating what you will discuss.” (Tutor C)

“..in your next assignment, you might like to compare and contrast some of the relevant literature also.” (Tutor B)

Table 2 Analysis of feedforward statements

| | Total statements at task level | Total statements at generic level |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| Feedforward (directive) e.g. need, should | 47 | 71 |
| Feedforward (indicative) e.g. could, might | 26 | 20 |

Directive feedforward was more common than indicative and there was a tendency for directive feedback to be generic, but often directing learners towards the generic assessment criteria and standards (see table 2 and fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Feedforward profile

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Directive Task-orientated | Directive Generic |
| Indicative Task-orientated | Indicative Generic |

The learners did welcome this, but directive comments also encourage tutor dependency, a concern discussed further in the next section. It might be clearer to learners to use directive comments only where the learner is not meeting criteria and will likely fail without remedial attention, and use predominantly indicative feedforward which opens up a sense of dialogue to give learners a sense of autonomy and ownership of their work in keeping with principles for good feedback practice (Nicol & Macfarlane, -Dick, 2006). As before, the very valuable generic comments could be illustrated with task specific examples (see fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Feedforward recommended profile

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| Directive Task-orientated <i>for remedial action</i> | Directive Generic |
| Indicative Task-orientated <i>for examples</i> | Indicative Generic |

3. Tutor's responses to ipsative assessment

Three tutors including the programme leader responded to the project summary report. They all welcomed the idea of ipsative assessment which considers 'individual progress' and acknowledged it would 'enrich the learner's experience' (Tutor B). They suggested that, if one tutor supervises the whole

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process of an assignment from the draft to the final submission, then 'ipsative assessment can be included fairly easily' (Tutor B).

However, several potential difficulties seem to lie when an assignment is undertaken 'over longer periods of time' (Tutor A). Firstly, 'tutors "swop [sic]" students and may not appreciate their learning history within the programme overall' (Tutor B). At the same time, 'the transfer of relevant information about the student across different tutors would be v. [very] burdensome' (Tutor B). This leads to an issue of tutors' workload and the programme leader was concerned that resources were not available for any additional tutor time. If ipsative assessment is to be added to the current tutoring and double marking arrangements, which are already demanding for tutors, some innovative means to access evidence of learner progress is required perhaps using the VLE.

Secondly, tutors may also need advice and staff development on implementing any new assessment scheme and again the programme leader was concerned about asking tutors for additional time-intensive requirements when there are already extras which arise from external examiner's remarks. The programme leader agreed that putting the emphasis on to learners to record their progress perhaps on assignment submission forms might be a solution.

Thirdly, the programme leader felt that distinction between directive and indicative feedback is 'down to tutor style'. She agreed that directive feedback might be more appropriate for:

"the weaker students (who) haven't grasped the formula and you have to start pushing them before you can do anything else."

However, she was also concerned about tutor dependency which highlights the problem of getting the balance between directive and indicative feedback right:

"From time to time I have students who become really dependent on my feedback...Some students don't have the confidence to take my feedback and do things for themselves.... I don't know why some students behave in that manner."

Finally, as with the students, ipsative grading appears to raise more controversy and is a new and radical suggestion which needs much more consideration. The programme leader commented:

"It (ipsative grading) is a radical proposal and. I could see the point of the A grade student saying 'what would motivate me to do better..?In fact it might de-motivate me.' It might motivate

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(lower achievers)...the only way I would see it working is if they get a grade for effort and for achievement. But I doubt that the effort would count towards the final mark. I haven't had enough time to think about it."

Thus, discussion of ipsative grading might raise awareness about differences in motivating higher and lower achievers and prompts a rethink the whole assessment process.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that ipsative assessment is little used on this distance learning programme and tutors are not proactive in informing learners of progress. However, while learners may be self-assessing on progress, they indicate that they would find ipsative feedback helpful and motivational. Tutors tend to provide generic feedback that is very criteria focussed suggesting that obtaining a good grade is viewed as the primary purpose of assessment, but learners find much of the feedback vague and specific examples of what to improve might be more useful for their learning. Tutors write more directive than indicative feedback and learners might become more independently motivated if there was a shift towards more indicative feedback while reserving the directive feedback for very task – specific points which are essential for passing. Finally, although tutors recognise the benefits that ipsative assessment provides for learners they are more sceptical about its implementation. It is unclear how much a shift towards ipsative feedback could take place without some element of ipsative grading to push it, including a built in mechanism for recording learner progress. More research is needed on piloting use of ipsative assessment for distance learners and campus based learners too so that the benefits suggested by this study can be better understood.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Generic feedback is helpful, but, when it is given in relation to marking criteria, it might be more helpful to learners to give an example from the current assignment to illustrate meeting (or not meeting) the criteria.
2. A shift towards ipsative feedback might help learners with self –assessment and could reduce dependency on grades and performance as the measurement of progress. Learners find this idea motivating.
3. The balance between directive and indicative feedback could change in favour of indicative feedback which encourages dialogue and learner ownership of their work.

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4. Directive feedback could be used only if the learner is in danger of failure to meet criteria and once again task-specific examples would also be helpful to learners.
5. Ipsative grades could be introduced to motivate all learners, but would need to be carefully explained to learners who are very familiar with the more dominant criteria-referenced system and concerned about fairness. Ipsative grades could not replace criteria-referenced standards completely where quality assured certification takes place.
6. Any ipsative assessment should be incorporated into the assessment regime so that it does not add additional work for the assessors.
7. Assessors may need staff development to appreciate the benefits of ipsative assessment and to be able to provide ipsative feedback within an adjusted assessment framework.

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APPENDIX 1:

The questions asked in the email questionnaire:

1. How do you prefer to receive feedback on how well you are learning, e.g. written or verbal, formal or informal feedback, grades or comments on your assignments?
2. Is receiving feedback at a distance a problem for you? If so, what is the problem?
3. Who gives you useful feedback, e.g. your tutor, other students, or do you prefer to give yourself feedback?
4. What is the most useful feedback you have received on the core modules?
5. Here is some feedback you were given: *[An example of a task-specific comment]* Was this helpful? Did this motivate you or encourage you? How did you act on it?
6. Here is another piece of feedback you were given: *[An example of a generic comment]* Was this helpful? Did this motivate you or encourage you? How did you act on it?
7. Did your work improve during the core modules?
8. What or who informed you about the progress you made, e.g. you think about this yourself, the tutor directly told you, written feedback informed you of your progress, your grades improved?
9. Would you like to receive clear comments from your tutor about how your work has improved or not improved since the previous piece of work?
10. Did tutors inform you when you have not addressed the issues raised in previous feedback? If so, have you got an example?
11. Do you think being given a grade for 'progress', which reflects how your work has improved or not improved since the previous piece of work, would be a good idea? Could such a grade replace

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some of the achievement grades you are given on this programme? [Someone who might get a C in the current system could get an A or B in the system where progress is assessed because they are progressing well even though they have not reached the highest standard yet.]

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APPENDIX 2:

Ipsative Feedback Tool 2009/10

A statement = a single idea or point which could be expanded upon. For repeated similar statements indicate the number of repeats as x2 if a statement appears twice and x3 if it appears three times etc. Provide at least one example in each category.

| | Feedback comments | | | |
|---|--|----------------------------------|--|--|
| | Comparison with assessment criteria or standards | Comparison with past performance | Feedforward (directive) e.g. need, should, do | Feedforward (indicative) e.g. would, could, might |
| Formative: Assignment 919760010_1 | Task (content) level | Task level | Task level | Task level |
| Leading and Managing Educational Change and Improvement | Generic (process and skills) level | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level |
| Summative: Assignment 919760010_1 | Task level | Task level | Task level | Task level |
| Leading and Managing Educational Change and Improvement | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level |
| Formative: Assignment 919760020_1 | Task level | Task level | Task level | Task level |
| Leadership for the Learning Community | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level |
| Summative: Assignment 919760020_1 | Task level | Task level | Task level | Task level |
| Leadership for the Learning Community | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level | Generic level |

Tutors: (A); (B); (C)