

Closing the Feedback Loop: Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement With Remotely Delivered Feedback

VICKY ROUPA

The Open University (UK)

Abstract: The study presented here is concerned with the pedagogical and technical issues around the provision of feedback. More specifically, it looks at how feedback is received and interpreted by students and how it can become integrated in a comprehensive plan for supporting philosophy students and helping them develop critical and analytical writing skills. It is especially relevant in post-Covid-19 educational settings, where face-to-face contact is limited and feedback is delivered remotely, potentially opening a gap between instructors' intentions and student perceptions of the feedback they receive. I discuss tools for eliciting students' responses to feedback and argue that having a strategy for receiving feedback from students can have a lot of benefits: it provides a timely tool for instructors to check on the effectiveness of their feedback, helps solidify the learning partnership and circumvents some of the problems digital technologies pose for teaching and learning.

My aim in this article is to present the findings of a study I conducted as Associate Lecturer at the Open University (UK) in 2015 on the strategies that facilitate the bilateral flow of information between instructor and student regarding one key aspect of the teaching and learning process, the provision of remotely delivered feedback on student assignments. I am hoping that in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis – when many universities have had to move their teaching online – my research and associated suggestions will provide a resource for

philosophy instructors who are looking into new ways to support their students in the now ubiquitous online environment. The study concerns the pedagogical and technical issues surrounding the provision of feedback, and specifically looks at how feedback is received and interpreted by students, and how it becomes integrated in a more comprehensive strategy of supporting students with little or no previous experience studying philosophy and helping them develop critical and analytical writing skills. It is especially relevant in settings where face-to-face contact is limited, and where it is difficult for instructors to follow up on their feedback through office appointments, potentially opening a gap between their intentions and student perceptions of the feedback they receive. Starting from a very basic premise, namely how to ensure that the feedback provided by the instructor is read and hopefully acted upon by the student, I move to a more inclusive consideration of the various stages of the feedback process: how do we develop a comprehensive plan for delivering actionable feedback that fosters student growth? How can the instructor make use of available resources (or customize their own) with the aim of eliciting responses from students regarding the feedback they have received? Finally, what are some strategies for closing the feedback loop between instructor and student by providing a structured approach whereby the student is encouraged to report back queries, suggestions or requests in a way that sustains dialogue as a vital part of the student-teacher relationship?

Theoretical Framing

A pedagogical approach that has been gaining momentum in recent years is that feedback provided on student assignments is an invaluable part of the learning process, consolidating the course material, ensuring that learning outcomes are met, building on study skills, and identifying areas where further support is needed.¹ On this view, feedback is perceived not solely or primarily as a means of assessment but more holistically as a teaching and learning

medium. Student coursework also contributes to the student's course result, and therefore involves marking/grading. However, it is much more than that; as Atkins et al put it, it is "a student-led exchange in which your teaching starts with the student's work: it is *individual tuition* in the form of a dialogue between the student and you."²

It follows from this that effective feedback provision presents particular challenges to the practitioner and requires skills and techniques that are not necessarily intuitive or transferable from other teaching experience but have to be "acquired and developed."³ Some of these challenges have been identified in the relevant literature. Instructor comments can be "difficult to understand"; "lacking specific advice on how to improve"; be "difficult to act upon."⁴ In addition, philosophy assignments can present their own set of difficulties.

Philosophy assignments differ from assignments in other subject areas in that a philosophy essay is first and foremost an argument. A philosophy essay question will usually ask the student to consider a statement or philosophical thesis and take a position on it, which involves considering objections to the thesis or statement, counterarguments, refinements and qualifications.⁵ This is especially important in terms of the challenges students new to philosophy face; some students are reluctant to commit to a particular point of view preferring to give a broad survey of the subject matter instead. Others are less reluctant to voice their opinion on the assignment question but fail to consider the full array of implications, objections, and counterarguments to the position under consideration. It is the job of the philosophy teacher to explain the requirements to students and prepare them for tackling the philosophy assignment.

The provision of feedback, therefore, has to be seen as part of a broader teaching and learning plan which aims to support the emerging literacy skills of the learner. The instructor needs to

ensure not only that the feedback provided is clear and understandable, but also that it is perceived by the student as an invitation to engage further with the course materials and the learning objectives. To achieve this feedback needs to be geared towards forming an alliance or “learning partnership” with the student,⁶ avoiding the trap of judging “too much and too powerfully, not realizing the extent to which students experience our power over them.”⁷ Thus understood and practiced, the provision of feedback highlights forcefully the practitioner's professional values as it requires attentiveness to the individual learner's needs (there's no “one size fits all”) and ongoing reflection on the effectiveness of the feedback provided. It is therefore important that the instructor check regularly how the feedback provided has been received by the student and has accomplished its specified aims.

However, it is sometimes tempting for the instructor to ignore what the student brings to the table and concentrate instead on his or her own input. The reasons for this are varied; we, as teachers, have little control over what happens to the feedback we have provided once we return the assignment. Some online assignment management systems allow the instructor to check whether the student has downloaded their returned assignment, but without direct engagement with the student it is hard to know what they have made of the feedback provided to them. Educational research in the past 20 years has focused precisely on this aspect of the feedback process highlighting the differing perceptions of students and teachers towards assessment and marking;⁸ emphasizing the need to provide feedback that is *usable* by the student in order to alter the gap between actual and desirable level of achievement;⁹ and providing tools that instructors can use to elicit and evaluate student responses to feedback.¹⁰ Yet, national student surveys in the UK and Australia have highlighted feedback as “one of the most problematic aspects of the student experience”, whilst a study across universities in Hong Kong showed “that staff believed their feedback to be much more useful

than students did.”¹¹ Medical students surveyed in the US appear to be “persistently dissatisfied with the feedback that they receive”,¹² with trainees reporting that feedback is given infrequently and/or ineffectively, “whereas teachers themselves believe that they provide frequent and adequate feedback.”¹³ There is clearly evidence of a gap in perceptions between teachers and students regarding the feedback provided, and we can only expect that this gap will become wider as opportunities for discussing this feedback in a face-to-face setting become sparser. Digital technologies have certainly helped universities step up to the challenge of creating socially distanced campuses, but they are not without problems, especially regarding the need to perceive others (both teachers and students) as “real people”, avoiding “feelings of impersonality and disengagement.”¹⁴

The study reported in this article grew out of my practitioner inquiry (PI) undertaken under the OpenPAD scheme for professional development,¹⁵ and simultaneous involvement with the “Feedback on feedback” project led by Maria Fernández-Toro and Concha Furnborough, which aimed to help foreign-language teachers gain a better understanding of how their students respond to feedback through the use of specialized software.¹⁶ My own investigation centered on the feedback I provided to a group of philosophy students studying the level-2 Open University module A222 (“Exploring Philosophy”) on a blended tuition model which mixes face-to-face teaching with online platform teaching and learning (both synchronous and a-synchronous).

My investigation had a number of distinct components and aims; chief among these was the notion of assessment as a major teaching and learning medium rather than an external component which measures individual performance but does not literally feed-back into student learning. Continuous assessment is theoretically better placed to achieve this than

assessment at a single point in time, such as a final examination, but unless feedback flows in two directions (from teacher to student and back to teacher) rather than unilaterally (from teacher to student), we can only guess at its effectiveness.¹⁷ The challenge in this case is how to elicit input from students regarding their uptake of feedback in ways that are informative for the teacher (the teacher gets to better understand how well their feedback practices work), while at the same time reinforcing for the student the notion that teacher feedback is worth spending time on. In a traditional classroom setting, it is possible for the instructor to simply ask students for their responses following the return of assignments; however, in an online learning environment where not every student chooses to switch on their microphone and talk but may opt to contribute in the “chat-box” or not participate in an obvious way at all, the challenge is to devise an engagement tool that does not rely on individual presence and/or the individual’s level of confidence. There are a number of tools offering that, ranging from the use of surveys and questionnaires to specialized software that combines screen capture facilities with audio recording, allowing the student to point to specific comments and talk through their responses to them, but for the purposes of this inquiry written questionnaires were used.¹⁸

Being part of a practitioner inquiry – an investigation undertaken by professionals into an aspect of their own practice – my research involved a pronounced element of self-reflection. The key questions here are: how do I know I am providing effective feedback that the students find useful, but also what adjustments can I make to my practice to ensure better student outcomes and improve overall university performance?¹⁹ Feedback volunteered by students through end-of-course evaluation forms can provide some indications in those areas, but a PI can be a more sustained investigation that aims to make intuitive practices explicit and is in principle sharable with other practitioners in the field.²⁰

The Investigation

a) Tools and Methods

Two questionnaires were distributed to students at key stages during the course (following the return of Assignment 1 and then again following the last assignment of the module). The questionnaires targeted the student uptake of feedback with emphasis on clarity and understanding (“did you read/understand the comments you received on your assignment? Are you clear where you lost or gained marks?) but also the students’ *feelings* regarding the feedback they had received (“Has your tutor highlighted any strengths that you exhibited in your assignment? How did this make you feel? How do you plan to carry forward and build on these strengths in future assignments?”).²¹ In addition, the questionnaires included questions directed at improvement; in the first instance, improvement of the student himself/herself (“Will you use your tutor’s feedback when writing the next assignment?”), but also improvement of the tutor (“Are there any ways you wish your tutor would change or improve their comments?”). This was deemed necessary to reinforce student agency and convey a sense of learning as a collaborative, dialogical process where meaning “is not unilaterally determined by the teacher” but “(co-)constructed by the students through interactions and dialogue with each other, the teacher, and the relevant resources.”²² The second questionnaire was administered towards the end of the course, when students had had approximately six months of tuition, additionally inviting students to self-reflect on their journey and consider the extent to which feedback from the instructor had assisted them in exploring key philosophical concepts and questions. Students were asked to provide examples of gains they had made in understanding the course materials and in developing analytical and critical skills, such as reading critically, recognizing sound arguments and

appropriate use of evidence, developing their own arguments, and writing in a style appropriate to the discipline.

In the three subsections below I analyze and assess my strategies for providing feedback on Assignment 1 for which my A222 students were asked to write an essay of between 1,500 and 2,000 on the topic “Is Locke’s distinction between ‘man’ and ‘person’ useful for understanding personal identity?”²³ I then discuss the feedback I received and explore methods for increasing its effectiveness. In the fourth subsection I discuss the student responses to my second questionnaire which invited students to reflect on the feedback they had received on assignments throughout the course.

b) Providing Feedback

As preparation for marking the assignment I drew up a checklist to help me keep each script's qualities of writing and argument in focus. The value of checklists in providing assignment feedback is well-documented. Checklists help ensure that teachers’ responding practices won't be “haphazard” or “lack consistency or clear prioritization.”²⁴ However, generic checklists aimed at instructors without distinction of subject area tend to focus on language, structure and presentation characteristics, and do not always touch upon requirements related to the subject area, therefore it is best for the instructor to devise their own checklist incorporating subject-specific criteria. Key points in my own checklist for Assignment 1 included the following:

- Does the essay stay clearly focused on the topic throughout?
- Is it divided into paragraphs that address one theme? Is there a logical progression from one paragraph to the other?

- Are the various philosophical views expressed clearly and accurately? Are the supporting points developed with ideas from the readings, course materials, or other examples from the writer's own experiences?
- Have the students made an effort to think the matter through? Do they state their own point of view (as distinct from the views of the philosophers in the course materials)? Do they give reasons for this point of view? Do they consider objections/counterarguments?

In addition, the Guidance Note distributed to students for this assignment question offered useful pointers that had to be kept in focus whilst marking. The Note made clear to students that the assignment asked them a straightforward YES/NO question, and for that they had to state and defend their own responses. To this end, students had to explain Locke's key terms "man" and "person" and clarify why they are important in Locke's view of personal identity. Emphasis was put on the need for students to evaluate the usefulness of the distinction not only for understanding Locke's views but for understanding personal identity more generally. In other words, they should state whether Locke's view helps us understand personal identity.

A quick read-through of the students' assignments showed that most of the students had presented and structured their assignments well, staying focused on the essay question throughout. Paragraphing and logical progression were fine, and the presentation of Locke's views was clear and, for the most part, accurate. Most students had made an effort to think for themselves and had included objections to Locke's theory, criticisms, and counterarguments. Objections typically concerned Locke's thesis that personal identity hinges on continuity of memory and not bodily continuity. I made a point of commenting positively where the student had made an effort to criticize Locke's thesis or offer objections or counterexamples

to encourage critical thinking and scrutiny. However, students also needed to learn to distinguish between convincing, plausible, well argued-for criticism and mere assertion (e.g. “Locke’s distinction is not helpful because it splits body and consciousness apart; a more holistic account is preferable”; but the student does not explain what they understand by a “split” of body and consciousness or why a holistic approach is preferable). This is where I found students would benefit from constructive guidance. Once again, it needs to be emphasized that philosophical argument does not come intuitively as it involves strategies that have to be taught and practiced. Apart from criticizing the argument or thesis, such strategies include defending the argument against someone else's criticism; offering reasons to believe the thesis; giving examples which help explain the thesis or which help to make the thesis more plausible; discussing what consequences the thesis would have if it were true; revising the thesis, in the light of some objection.²⁵

My constructive feedback fell under three categories:

- 1) Where the student had concentrated mainly on presentation rather than evaluation of the argument, I pointed out that they additionally needed to articulate and develop their own thoughts on Locke's thesis. To help them with this I included a marginal comment at a suitable point on the script juxtaposing two quite diverging assessments of Locke's argument.

Thus:

the whole force of Locke's definition of person as a thinking intelligent being that can know itself as the same thinking thing in different times and places is designed to account for the fact that we are creatures who are capable of operating the machinery of the law. When contemplating an action, we can think that in the future we will be the same being who will be punished or rewarded for the course of action which we

choose. When being punished we can look back and see that we are the same being who committed the act for which we are being punished.²⁶

Conversely:

it matters a great deal whether the person being punished really is the person who committed the crime, whether the person in possession of the house really is the person who bought it.²⁷

My reason for doing this is that some students find it hard to think of objections and criticisms to the arguments under consideration, and I find it helps if they see the consequences of the thesis in sharp relief. Most students will be familiar with dementia as an illness either through reports or through experience with a family member. The implications of the disease for issues around personal identity make it a particularly strong candidate for highlighting the implications of Locke's theory of identity. It is indicative that in the aforementioned volume on dementia Locke's theory of identity remains a persistent frame of reference with contributors highlighting its counter-intuitive implications for law and ethics.²⁸ Despite the difficulties that memory loss creates for Locke's theory of identity, however, this theory continues to be an important instrument for understanding punishment, as highlighted by the first excerpt. By thus juxtaposing two diverging views on the matter, students are encouraged to consider a wider array of implications and objections than they might otherwise have done.

2) Where the student had provided criticisms of Locke's thesis articulated as assertions rather than reasoned claims I directed them to one or two of the strategies outlined above suggesting that they view the essay as an exchange or dialogue between themselves and a defender of Locke who listened to their objections and was keen to respond. Response might

take the form of refinement or modification of Locke's argument to take account of objections; what form did they envisage such a refinement/modification might take?

3) In some cases, I thought that the student had failed to appreciate the relevance of Locke's thesis for a modern theory of law and morality. In those cases, I used examples to highlight how much we still rely on a notion of personhood that essentially derives from Locke. Thus, we praise a child because we want to reinforce a particular behavior; if the child had no memory of that behavior (or could not relate it to his or her "self"), would there be any point in praising the child? Philosophers often use examples drawn from everyday life to illustrate a theory or as a means of articulating objections, so bringing examples in my comments was not only intended by way of clarification but also as a means of teaching students how to write philosophy essays.

c) Receiving Feedback

I received two types of feedback for the assignment feedback I had provided, feedback from my monitor, a central academic member of staff, and feedback from the students. Feedback from the monitor was provided as part of the university's quality assurance and marking standardization process. Whilst appreciative of my feedback, the monitor also made the recommendation that I make more suggestions in my marginal comments as to how students could improve their essays or overcome the problems they ran into. Feedback from students was provided in the form of replies to the first questionnaire appended to this paper. Out of 17 students invited, six agreed to provide feedback by completing the questionnaire and providing consent, whilst two students emailed feedback informally. Out of the six students who completed the questionnaire:

(a) all students had read the comments provided on the assignment and had found them clear and understandable.

(b) four students were quite clear and two were reasonably clear where they had lost or gained marks.

c) students generally found it helpful to have their strengths highlighted in the feedback; two students further commented that they had found this aspect of the feedback confidence-boosting as this was their first philosophy essay.

d) two students would have liked more feedback on the style and structure of their writing; two students would have liked additional “feed-forward” on how to improve their grades.

e) finally, all students planned to make use of the feedback provided in future assignments.

d) Reflection and Acting on Feedback

The responses to my questionnaire showed that students had read and that they valued instructor feedback, which was in accordance with the findings of other research.²⁹

Commenting on strengths was appreciated by students because it boosted their confidence and identified areas where they had done well. Both the monitor’s and the students’ responses made it clear that more constructive feedback was needed on how students could improve their work. Looking back at the comments I had provided I wondered whether there was an overall imbalance between “feedback” and “feed-forward” with the emphasis placed squarely on how the student had performed in the assignment. Although it is a formal requirement of assignment marking to correct and explain errors and omissions, I asked myself whether my feedback was “heavy” on students’ weaknesses and did not offer enough guidance on how the students could put these right. I also wondered whether this could be partly rectified by phrasing my comments differently. Research on instructor feedback has highlighted the importance of language;³⁰ in line with this, I wondered whether a comment suggesting, for

example, that the student look at how Locke (or a Lockean) might respond to their criticisms might be phrased more productively as a “feed-forward” strategy to be applied in subsequent assignments (e.g. “anticipating our opponent's counter-arguments / engaging in a dialogue with them is something we often do in philosophy; maybe you could consider doing more of this in your next assignment?”)

To act on my monitor's suggestion about offering more constructive “feed-forward” type of comments I devised a system of organizing my marginal comments as “corrections”, “omissions”, “suggestions for improvement”, “food for thought”, “clarifications” and “grammar”. The reason for this is that students might not be altogether clear whether a comment I had provided was made by way of correcting a misunderstanding or indicating an omission (which had an impact on their grade), a suggestion for improving the assignment, or as an interesting idea they might want to explore in future assignments. Clarifying the intent of the comments and ensuring there was a balance of comment types in my feedback would enhance, I hoped, the effectiveness of my feedback.

I also planned and offered students an online activity on how to write a philosophy essay following the receipt of feedback from students. The aim of the activity was to clarify the requirements of writing in philosophy and familiarize students with the skills and strategies that would enhance their philosophy writing. I structured the activity around Jim Pryor's “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” and offered students two exercises; in the first exercise, students were asked to consider a philosophy article (“An Amoral Manifesto” by J. Marks) and examine whether and how the paper exemplified Pryor's guidelines (does the author make a “reasoned claim”? How does he argue for this claim? Does he use any of Pryor's guidelines?).³¹ For the second exercise students were invited to think back to their

earlier submitted work and consider whether they had used any of these guidelines; they were then asked to consider how they might use these guidelines in a future assignment. Feedback from students who participated suggested that the activity was helpful in communicating the subject area requirements for this level of study as it illustrated some of the strategies used when writing a philosophy essay. It makes sense to time the activity carefully; I scheduled it just after the return of Assignment 1 so that students could use the feedback from that assignment in the activity, but it may be more beneficial to offer it before students start work on their first assignment so that they familiarize themselves with the requirements of the philosophy essay. Although in this particular instance the activity was offered in the context of a synchronous online meeting in which students worked collaboratively in small groups (“breakout rooms”) to work through the exercises, the activity can equally well be offered in the form of an (a-synchronous) forum post or as a wiki where the instructor posts an activity and individual students add their contributions in response to the activity successively. Though not a dialogue developed around an original post by the teacher, a wiki can be a useful resource for students as it brings together student replies to a theme or topic (in this case, essay writing in philosophy) in a form where information is easy to share and keep organized.

e) End-of-Module Feedback

Student uptake for the second questionnaire was lower than the first, however, this could be due to the proximity of the final examination, which understandably was the students’ focus. The second questionnaire also made higher demands on student time as it asked students to reflect on the feedback they had received over many assignments. It is important, therefore, for the instructor to time this questionnaire carefully in order to receive as much feedback as possible.

Out of four students who returned the end-of-module questionnaire,

(a) all students said that they had made progress as a result of the feedback they had received although progress was more pronounced in certain areas than in others depending on their interests. One student commented on the helpfulness of the commenting scheme, and especially of comments under the category “food for thought” for further exploring philosophical ideas and concepts.

(b) students reported moderate to good gains in understanding the concepts taught in the course as a result of feedback. It is notable, however, that students who had had the opportunity to discuss the feedback with me over the telephone or through an online conferencing facility highlighted this as an example of where they had made the most gains.

(c) moderate to good gains were reported in all four areas highlighted in the questionnaire with development of reading ability being the area where students had gained the least as a direct result of instructor feedback. One student noted that she had appreciated the praise she had received on specific points but would have additionally liked a bit more detail on why her work was being praised, thus giving her the opportunity to reinforce positive work habits.

(d) finally, students highlighted areas addressed in instructor comments; one student said they would have liked more constructive guidance on the style and format appropriate to writing in philosophy to help them practice to the appropriate standard.

Conclusions

Eliciting feedback from students (through written questionnaires, screen capture software or video) has been explored as a means for addressing potentially differing perceptions of the feedback provided by philosophy teachers on student assignments. This issue is likely to be compounded by the adoption of distance-learning methods as a response to the coronavirus

crisis. As opportunities for face-to-face meetings between teachers and students become sparser, tools and methods that bolster the bilateral flow of information between student and teacher are likely to increase in importance. At times like this, the experience from distance-learning institutions and online or blended models of tuition could become more relevant.

The responses from students discussed here have confirmed that students value teacher feedback and are keen to use it to sharpen their critical skills and deepen their engagement with philosophical concepts and debates. It could be objected that only a small number of the students contacted provided feedback; though true, this should not be taken to mean that only a small number of students read and engage with feedback. It is possible that the formal nature of this study (which required informed consent) discouraged some students from participating. In addition, the part-time nature of study at the Open University means that most students combine study, work (often on a full-time basis) and family commitments, thus making these students particularly time-poor. It is quite possible that instructor requests for informal feedback in the setting of a full-time institution will prompt a higher number of responses, thus offering the instructor a valuable tool for understanding the reception of their feedback.

Given the small number of participants, it would be important to examine comparative data from similar studies and check for convergence with the conclusions presented here. I was able to identify two recent, large-scale studies conducted in the Open University and Liverpool John Moores University, UK. The first of these surveyed 736 foreign language students and 96 tutors regarding areas of potential misalignment between instructors and students in relation to assignment feedback. Analysis of the survey results showed that the vast majority of students were keen to see their feedback. In addition, student respondents

identified “seeing what they got wrong” as the most important aspect of feedback; tutors, by contrast, assumed that students were primarily concerned with the grade they received. The study revealed further discrepancies between tutors and students regarding attitudes to and perceptions of feedback. Tutors were more confident than students that the feedback they provided helped students understand why they got the mark that they did, but markedly less confident that students made efforts to act on feedback than students themselves.³²

Conversely, whilst there was almost universal agreement amongst tutors that feedback helped students understand what they got wrong, students were less sure than their tutors that the feedback helped them identify what they got wrong or, crucially, how they could improve in future assignments. Similar results were reported in the second study which surveyed 194 students and 26 members of staff in the School of Built Environment.³³ They, too, found discrepancies in the expectations of students and tutors regarding student responses to feedback. The authors report that the vast majority of staff felt that students were more interested in the grade than the qualitative feedback, whereas only 55% of students agreed with that statement. Whilst these studies rely on self-reporting and therefore inevitably incorporate a subjective element, both highlight the finding that students take a genuine interest in their teachers’ feedback but may not always see how to make use of that feedback for improvement purposes. It is possible, in fact, that teachers could be underestimating the importance feedback has for students whilst overestimating student ability to make that feedback work to their benefit.

This is not to suggest that teachers are not providing quality feedback on assignments, or that the time and effort they put into this aspect of their work is not considerable. Indeed, as Ferris has noted, providing written comments on students’ work is probably the most challenging and time-consuming aspect of the teacher’s job.³⁴ However, it is entirely possible for the

teacher to provide quality feedback which the student simply does not know how to use effectively (hence the term “student feedback literacy,” which has been proposed to connection with this issue).³⁵ As Handley, Price and Millar put it, ‘[f]eedback on students’ assignments may be comprehensive and well-constructed as a result of careful thought from tutors trying to identify and address students’ needs, but its usefulness depends on the response from students.’³⁶ Eliciting feedback from students is an attempt to address this issue by acting proactively with the aim of enabling uptake of feedback and deepening student engagement with the subject matter and the learning objectives.

Again, this has a subjective element; it may be that students feel they are not getting the kind of feedback they were hoping for, but it is also possible that students sometimes have unrealistic ideas about feedback and/or grades. Inviting responses from students can help clarify expectations and standards although, obviously, this depends on students actually taking the time to engage with the teacher’s questionnaires or other methods for eliciting feedback. The opportunity to give feedback establishes a personal rapport with the teacher, which is important at a time when distance learning becomes the norm, at least provisionally, with all the attendant issues of depersonalisation this entails. In addition, the fact that this feedback is provided eponymously alters the dynamics of the relationship (in comparison to surveys or other monitoring tools where data is collected anonymously). Knowing that they are being heard signals a shift in how the student perceives the act of receiving a grade/feedback in a way that is, hopefully, beneficial for their further development.

To achieve this, it is crucial that feedback-eliciting questionnaires *not* be seen primarily as satisfaction surveys. Such surveys have their place in higher education and are usually

administered at the end of each course, with responses provided anonymously. For the purposes outlined here, however, questionnaires need to be formulated in such a way as to encourage students to engage cognitively with the feedback provided, and therefore see the feedback as a learning medium, and not as a mere a box-ticking exercise. Questions that encourage students to explain *how* they are going to carry forward and build on the teacher's feedback or ask them to bring examples of gains made aim to get students to think closely about making use of feedback to achieve desired outcomes. In this sense, the purpose of feedback-eliciting practices is to help students "internalize" instructor feedback, as suggested by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, i.e. interpret and build on it, thus hopefully bringing about "cognitive, motivational and behavioral" changes in the way students approach their studies.³⁷

An alternative method would be to assign a reflective activity where students are asked to revise an earlier assignment in light of comments from their teacher. Now incorporated in a wide variety of courses, reflective assignments require students to demonstrate that they have made use of instructor feedback in revising their work. In some cases, students are also required to write a reflective commentary explaining the changes they made to their piece and identifying areas for improvement.

This method of reinforcing instructor feedback has a lot to recommend it; students get to look back at their work with a fresh pair of eyes and engage more thoroughly with the grading criteria, thus potentially leading to improved outcomes. In addition, making this part of the course assessment circumvents the problem of low participation identified above. Students are required to read and act on instructor comments, thus hopefully establishing productive work habits. These two methods (graded assignment vs. ungraded, optional questionnaire)

need not be seen as competing alternatives, though. Where compulsory reflective assignments excel is in initiating a process of reflecting and acting on feedback, thus hopefully effecting cognitive, motivational and behavioral changes. Where course length or other constraints do not allow for the adoption of a compulsory reflective assignment, ungraded questionnaires can provide a useful tool that imparts information about the usability of the instructor's comments, reinforces the sense of community between teacher and student, re-balances the power dynamics of the learning partnership and promotes student agency and self-regulation.

To conclude, eliciting feedback from students has several advantages for the philosophy instructor; it provides a timely means for teachers to check on the effectiveness of the feedback they provide. In addition, it can encourage students to adopt a "deep approach" to learning as they feel that their contribution is being acknowledged and valued.³⁸ It might be argued that students who already approach their studies "deeply" are the ones most likely to respond to instructor requests for feedback. It is equally possible, however, that the perception of the teacher as an active partner in learning rather than an authority that bestows grades remotely will have a beneficial effect on how students approach their studies inasmuch as it contributes towards learner empowerment within a personalized context of teaching and learning. On a departmental or university-wide setting, actively seeking student responses to feedback and using these responses as a basis for reflection and professional development will match a student body that is now finding they need to be more in charge of their studies and more assertive in how they manage their learning. In the new online environment where most of the teaching takes place from a distance, the gap between teacher and student can become worryingly wide; it is the task of the teacher to take steps to narrow this gap by adopting methods and techniques that reinforce student agency, give students

“ownership” and investment” over the feedback process, and promote the learning partnership between student and teacher.³⁹

APPENDIX
Philosophy Assignment 1
Feedback Questionnaire

[Adapted from the e-Feedback Evaluation Project Briefing Note to Students
<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/efep>]

1. Did you read your tutor's comments and suggestions on Assignment 1?
2. What did your tutor comment the most about (presentation, content, writing, etc.)? Is there any area you feel you would like more feedback on?
3. Were there any comments that you did not understand?
4. Has your tutor highlighted any strengths that you exhibited in your assignment? How did this make you feel? How do you plan to carry forward and build on these strengths in future assignments?
5. Are you clear where you lost or gained marks? Has your tutor highlighted any aspects of your assignment as needing improvement?
6. Are there any ways you wish your tutor would change or improve her comments?
7. Will you use your tutor's suggestions when you write your next TMA?

Philosophy Assignment 6
Feedback Questionnaire

You have now submitted six assignments covering a wide range of topics in philosophy (philosophy of mind, ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of religion, the self).

1. Looking back to those assignments, have you felt supported to explore philosophical concepts and ideas and develop your own views? Has your tutor's feedback encouraged you in this direction?
2. As a result of the feedback you have received, what gains have you made in your understanding of the concepts taught in the course? No gain? A little? Moderate gain? Good gain? Can you give an example of where gain has been made? Conversely, can you provide an example where little or no gain was made?
3. As a result of the feedback you have received, what gains have you made in developing the following skills:
 - a) reading material critically and evaluating the author's views
 - b) recognizing a sound argument and appropriate use of evidence
 - c) developing a logical and convincing argument

d) writing in a style and format that is appropriate to the discipline (philosophy)

4. What areas has your tutor addressed in the feedback they have provided (essay structure, argumentation, use of resources, use of appropriate style and register, addressing the assignment question effectively)? Are there any areas you would like more feedback on?
5. Has your tutor's feedback helped you improve? Is there any advice you could give your tutor?

Notes

¹ See for example Naomi E. Winstone et al., “Supporting Learners’ Agentic Engagement With Feedback: A Systematic Review and a Taxonomy of Recipience Processes,” *Educational Psychologist* 52, no. 1 (2016): 17–37; Margaret Price, Karen Handley, and Jill Millar, “Feedback: Focusing Attention on Engagement,” *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 8 (2011): 879–896; David Carless and David Boud, “The Development of Student Feedback Literacy: Enabling Uptake of Feedback,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 43, no. 8 (November 17, 2018): 1315–25; Felicity Small and Kath Attree, “Undergraduate Student Responses to Feedback: Expectations and Experiences,” *Studies in Higher Education* 41, no. 11 (2016): 2078–2094; Rachelle Esterhazy and Crina Damşa, “Unpacking the Feedback Process: An Analysis of Undergraduate Students’ Interactional Meaning-Making of Feedback Comments,” *Studies in Higher Education* 44, no. 2 (2017): 260–274.

² P. Atkins et al., *Supporting Open Learners Reader* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2002), 40.

³ Atkins et al., 39.

⁴ See the summary of the relevant literature in David Carless et al., “Developing Sustainable Feedback Practices,” *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 4 (2010): 395.

⁵ This is emphasised in several guides recommended in philosophy departments around the world. The need for students to appreciate the nature of argumentative writing is also highlighted in Scott D. Wilson, “Peer-Review Assignments,” *Teaching Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2006): 327–42. Coe further elaborates on this approach to writing philosophy assignments: “Part of the process of getting students to write arguments is affirming at a practical level the idea that critical thinking and effective writing cannot be about expressing whatever first

comes to mind, in whatever form it first takes. In a Kantian sense of autonomy, it is only by understanding conflicting positions, analyzing the reasons behind those positions, and defending our own claims that we realize the possibility of intellectual maturity.” Cynthia D. Coe, “Scaffolded Writing as a Tool for Critical Thinking: Teaching Beginning Students How to Write Arguments,” *Teaching Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2011): 39. A particularly useful introduction to argument analysis is offered in Maralee Harrell, *What Is the Argument?: An Introduction to Philosophical Argument and Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

⁶ Atkins et al., *Supporting Open Learners Reader*, 46.

⁷ David Boud, “Assessment and Learning: Contradictory or Complementary?,” in *Assessment and Learning in Higher Education*, ed. P Knight (London: Routledge, 1995), 43.

⁸ David Carless, “Differing Perceptions in the Feedback Process,” *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 219–33.

⁹ Mirabelle Walker, “An Investigation into Written Comments on Assignments: Do Students Find Them Usable?,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 34, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 67–78.

¹⁰ María Fernández-Toro and Concha Furnborough, “Feedback on Feedback: Eliciting Learners’ Responses to Written Feedback through Student-Generated Screencasts,” *Educational Media International* 51, no. 1 (2014): 35–48.

¹¹ Carless et al., “Developing Sustainable Feedback Practices,” 395.

¹² Margaret L. Boehler et al., “An Investigation of Medical Student Reactions to Feedback: A Randomised Controlled Trial,” *Medical Education* 40, no. 8 (2006): 746.

¹³ Subha Ramani and Sharon K. Krackov, “Twelve Tips for Giving Feedback Effectively in the Clinical Environment,” *Medical Teacher* 34, no. 10 (October 1, 2012): 787.

¹⁴ Karen Kear, Frances Chetwynd, and Helen Jefferis, “Social Presence in Online Learning Communities: The Role of Personal Profiles,” *Research in Learning Technology* 22 (2014):

1. The authors call this the problem of ‘social presence’.

¹⁵ The OpenPAD scheme (now Applaud) aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (UKPSF) and was accredited by the Higher Education Academy. The aim of the scheme was to provide a route for practitioners to attain professional recognition within the Open University and also external recognition as an Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow, Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

¹⁶ Fernández-Toro and Furnborough, “Feedback on Feedback.”

¹⁷ David Boud and Elizabeth Molloy, “Rethinking Models of Feedback for Learning: The Challenge of Design,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (September 1, 2013): 698–712.

¹⁸ B. Brick and J. Homes, “Using Screen Capture Software for Student Feedback: Towards a Methodology,” in *Cognition and Exploratory Learning in Digital Age: Proceedings of the IADIS CELDA 2008 Conference*, “IADIS CELDA 2008,” 2010, 339–42, <http://www.iadisportal.org/celda-2008-proceedings>. See also Fernández-Toro and Furnborough, “Feedback on Feedback”; Steve Mann, “Using Screen Capture Software to Improve the Value of Feedback on Academic Assignments in Teacher Education,” in *International Perspectives on English Language Teacher Education: Innovations from the Field*, ed. Thomas S. C. Farrell, International Perspectives on English Language Teaching (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 160–80. The use of video feedback for philosophy teachers has been explored in Tanya Hall, Dean Tracy, and Andy Lamey, “Exploring Video Feedback in Philosophy: Benefits for Instructors and Students,” *Teaching Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2016): 137–62. Video feedback could also be used for feeding information back to the

instructor, especially as mobile phones with video capabilities have now become very common.

¹⁹ Data analysis of the UK's national student survey highlights feedback as one of the most problematic areas of student satisfaction with their degree. See Adrian R. Bell and Chris Brooks, "What Makes Students Satisfied? A Discussion and Analysis of the UK's National Student Survey," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42, no. 8 (November 17, 2018): 1118–42.

²⁰ Vivienne Baumfield, Elaine Hall, and Kate Wall, *Action Research in Education: Learning Through Practitioner Enquiry*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2013).

²¹ This is in line with research highlighting the relevance of emotions in student uptake of feedback. For example, Ryan and Henderson argue that students 'are more likely to reject or ignore comments if they evoke negative emotional responses'. Tracii Ryan and Michael Henderson, "Feeling Feedback: Students' Emotional Responses to Educator Feedback," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 43, no. 6 (August 18, 2018): 880.

²² Esterhazy and Damşa, "Unpacking the Feedback Process," 261.

²³ I do not for the purposes of this paper go into questions related to grading and/or grading models. For a discussion of issues around grading see Linda L. Farmer, "Grading Argumentative Essays," *Teaching Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2003): 125–30. For a discussion of the value of rubrics in grading see Maralee Harrell, "Grading According to a Rubric," *Teaching Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2005): 3–15.

²⁴ Dana Ferris, "Feedback: Issues and Options," in *Teaching Academic Writing*, ed. Patricia Friedrich (London: Continuum, 2008), 104.

²⁵ Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper," 2012, <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>.

²⁶ William Uzgalis, “Supplement to John Locke: The Immateriality of the Soul and Personal Identity,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2012, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/supplement.html>.

²⁷ Harry Lesser, “Dementia and Personal Identity,” in *Dementia: Mind, Meaning, and the Person*, ed. Julian C. Hughes, Stephen J. Louw, and Steven R. Sabat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56.

²⁸ See, for example, John McMillan, “Identity, Self, and Dementia,” in *Dementia: Mind, Meaning, and the Person*, ed. Julian C. Hughes, Steven J. Louw, and Steven R. Sabat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64.

²⁹ Melanie R. Weaver, “Do Students Value Feedback? Student Perceptions of Tutors’ Written Responses,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2006): 379–94.

³⁰ Weaver, 381.

³¹ Joel Marks, “An Amoral Manifesto (Part II),” *Philosophy Now*, no. 81 (2010), https://philosophynow.org/issues/81/An_Amoral_Manifesto_Part_II.

³² María Fernández-Toro and Concha Furnborough, “Evaluating Alignment of Student and Tutor Perspectives on Feedback on Language Learning Assignments,” *Distance Education* 39, no. 4 (2018): 548–567.

³³ Emma Mulliner and Matthew Tucker, “Feedback on Feedback Practice: Perceptions of Students and Academics,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 42, no. 2 (February 17, 2017): 266–88.

³⁴ Dana Ferris, “Preparing Teachers to Respond to Student Writing,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 16, no. 3 (September 2007): 165.

³⁵ David Carless and David Boud, “The Development of Student Feedback Literacy: Enabling Uptake of Feedback,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 43, no. 8 (November 17, 2018): 1315–25.

³⁶ Karen Handley, Margaret Price, and Jill Millar, “Beyond ‘Doing Time’: Investigating the Concept of Student Engagement with Feedback,” *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 4 (2011): 543–44.

³⁷ David J. Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-regulated Learning: A Model and Seven Principles of Good Feedback Practice,” *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)* 31, no. 2 (2006): 202.

³⁸ For a discussion of “surface,” “deep” and “strategic” approaches to learning see Ann J. Cahill and Stephen Bloch-Schulman, “Argumentation Step-By-Step: Learning Critical Thinking through Deliberate Practice,” *Teaching Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2012): 41–62.

³⁹ These elements were also emphasized in a recent webinar discussing the challenges faced by the HE sector during the current Covid-19 crisis. See Advance HE, *Moving Assessment On-Line: Key Principles for Inclusion, Pedagogy and Practice*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/advance-he-membership-benefits/resources-support-you-during-covid-19-pandemic#socialdistancing>.

Vicky Roupa has taught philosophy and humanities courses at the Open University, UK, and is Honorary Associate in Philosophy at the Open University. She is the author of Articulations of Nature and Politics in Plato and Hegel, published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.