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# An investigation into written comments on assignments: do students find them usable?

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**Abstract**
Student response to the feedback they receive on written assignments is an important but relatively under-researched aspect of teaching and learning. This paper presents an analysis of over 3000 written comments made on 106 assignments in three course modules in a Technology faculty, and also the results of telephone interviews with 43 of the students whose assignment had been analysed. The interviews explored how usable students found the comments, including their response to specific comments that their tutor had made on the assignment. When the results from the interviews were matched to the types of comment found in the analysis, it became apparent that students find some types of comment considerably more usable. These findings are discussed in the light of the current state of assessment practice, and possible future avenues for research in this area are suggested.

## Background

Speaking of feedback on assignments, Ramsden asserts, 'It is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students' progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessment' (Ramsden, 2003, p. 187). Given that feedback to students on their assignments is such an important aspect of their learning, it could be expected that there would be a plentiful body of research into what constitutes effective feedback and how students respond to feedback. In fact, feedback on assignments in higher education is under-researched (Weaver, 2006).

This is not to say that there has been no research at all on the nature and quality of the feedback given on assignments in higher education. Some years ago there were several papers regarding what was then known as 'correspondence tuition' in the Open University, including both investigations into feedback practice (for example, MacKenzie, 1974) and discussions of what constitutes good feedback practice (for example, Cole *et al.*, 1986).

Subsequently, interest turned to feedback in the context of formative assessment, and Sadler (1989) and Black and Wiliam (1998) made significant contributions to conceptualising the topic.

Recently there has been renewed interest in written feedback on assignments in higher education. This has led both to publications relating to principles of good feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004–5, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004) and to research into the sorts of feedback provided on assignments (for example, Brown and Glover, 2006, Hyatt, 2005, Hyland, 2001, Ivanić *et al.*, 2000, Mutch, 2003).

Despite this renewed interest, there is still a relative dearth of published material relating to how students make sense of their tutors' comments on written assignments (Hounsell, 2003). Such papers as there are have taken a variety of approaches to the topic. Of particular relevance are Weaver (2006) and Chanock (2000). Both of these studies showed that students do not always understand the comments they receive.

Relatively little of the foregoing work has, however, examined critically what sorts of comments students find useful, indeed, what sorts are *usable* in the sense that students could in fact use them either to address their misconceptions or to improve their work in the future. Comments are often terse; they are 'little texts' (Mutch, 2003) that are intended to convey a great deal in a few words. But more than simply being brief, they may use terms or concepts in such a way that the student is unable to understand them, or they may make assumptions about the student's ability that are not borne out in practice, or they may conflict with the student's conceptions of the topic. In short, there are many ways in which students may not find comments usable. This paper describes research designed to discover what it is about comments that makes them usable, and whether comments given on students' written summative assignments in three modules were in fact usable.

*Defining feedback*
The term 'feedback' needs careful definition. Ramaprasad offers, 'Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). Sadler stresses that 'information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback *only when it is used to alter the gap*' (Sadler's italics) (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). He points out that if the data is 'too deeply coded' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121) then the student will not be able to use it to alter the gap. Therefore a necessary precondition for a student to act on a gap is that they are given a comment that enables them to do so: the comment must be usable by the student.

It can be argued that, to be usable by the student, a tutor's comment must do more than simply point a gap out; it must be designed to help the student to reduce or close the gap. The tutor must work at Biggs' 'level 3' theory of teaching (Biggs, 2003) and take a student-centred approach, discerning what in the student's concept of the relevant topics needs addressing and tailoring the comment accordingly. Hence to look for comments which are usable is to look for comments designed to help the student to reconstruct their knowledge, understanding or skill such that it is closer to what is desired. Mere 'transmission mode' statements of what is wrong, or even of what is expected, are considerably less likely to achieve this reconstruction than are comments which include an element of explanation of why the student's answer is incorrect, incomplete or inappropriate and of why what the tutor is suggesting is more acceptable. This is bringing a constructivist perspective to bear on commenting.

A closer examination of the notion of 'altering the gap' indicates that comments may be used to reduce or close two sorts of gap. First, as just discussed, they may be used to alter a gap demonstrated in the assignment just submitted. They therefore can be used as *retrospective* gap-altering feedback on the assignment. Some comments, however, deal with more generic issues. For instance, they may be designed to help the student to structure an argument or to use and reference quotations from others' work appropriately. Students may be able to use such comments to reduce or close what can be thought of as potential future gaps – gaps that would otherwise have recurred in the student's work. These comments therefore can be used as *future* gap-altering feedback. Indeed, such comments may well be more valuable to

students, as they look beyond the assignment just submitted (which the student is unlikely to repeat) to future work.

*Other types of comments*
Not all comments made on students' written assignments are intended to address problems. They may be designed to praise a particular aspect of the answer or acknowledge a significant improvement from a previous assignment or otherwise praise and encourage the student. Although unlikely to be directly usable, such comments may well be important because appreciated by students.

*A means of classifying comments*
In order to analyse comments for their usability a means of classifying them was sought. The literature offered a small number of candidates (for example, Brown and Glover, 2006, Hyatt, 2005, Hyland, 2001, Ivanić *et al*., 2000, Mutch, 2003), all of which present different ways of thinking about comments made on assignments. For the research being described, the scheme introduced by Brown and Glover was selected as the most suitable for two reasons. First, it has the advantage of having been designed for the Sciences, whose assignments have many features in common with those in the author's subject of Technology, while the other schemes had been designed for essay-based subjects. Second, and more importantly, it incorporates a way of classifying the comments that relates directly to the concept of usability.

Brown and Glover's scheme allocates two codes to a comment. One code describes the category into which the comment falls. There are six possible categories, of which only the first three occur to any significant extent:

• *content* – that is, comments that relate to the substance of the answer, to the appropriateness of what the student has chosen to include, to the quality and/or accuracy of the material, to omissions, etc.;

• *skills development* – that is, comments about the structure of the answer (whether text, diagram or mathematical argument), about whether the question has been properly addressed, about the student's communication skills, etc.;

• *motivating* – that is, praise, encouragement and other comments designed to motivate the student;

• *de-motivating* – that is, using harsh language, judgemental;

• a mention of *future study*;

• a reference to a *resource* the student could use.

The same or similar skills tend to be required in many assignments, and so it is likely that skills development comments will be particularly useful to students for reducing or even closing potential gaps in their future work.

For comments in the content and skills development categories, the other classification (known as 'depth') in Brown and Glover's scheme works as follows. It codes each comment according to whether it offers:

• an *indication* of a content or skills problem;

• a *correction* for a content or skills problem;

- a correction for a content or skills problem, together with an *explanation* of the correction.

This classification relates to the four essential components of usable feedback on assignments, which can be deduced from Ramaprasad's definition of feedback (1983) given above and an analysis by Black and Wiliam (1998, pp. 47–48). They are:

1    information about the student's knowledge of, understanding of or skill in a topic, as displayed in an assignment (the 'actual level' of the 'system parameter');

2    information about the desired knowledge, understanding or skill (the 'reference level' of the 'system parameter');

3    a comparison of the student's knowledge, understanding or skill with the desired knowledge, understanding or skill, leading to information about some sort of a gap;

4    a way in which this information can be used to reduce or close the gap.

Thus a comment that is classified as an indication addresses only the first of the components of usable feedback: in indicating that there is a problem it provides information about the student's knowledge of, understanding of or skill in a topic, as displayed in the assignment. A comment that is classified as a correction addresses the first two of the four components: in correcting a problem it provides information about both the student's knowledge of, understanding of or skill in a topic and the desired knowledge, understanding or skill. It omits both the third and fourth components. The student will be able to infer that there is a gap, but is left to deduce (if indeed they can) how to reduce or close it. A comment that is classified as an explanation addresses all four of the components, and in particular it gives information about the gap and indicates a way of reducing or closing it. It is therefore likely that content and skills comments that include an element of explanation will be more usable that those that do not.

Brown and Glover's scheme also classifies motivating comments by depth, but this classification is slightly differently from that of content and skills development comments:

- an *indication* that something is praiseworthy;

- an *amplification* relating to the praise;

- an *explanation* of why the element of the work being praised is good.

It is conceivable that motivating comments that explain are more usable than those that do not, because in making explicit to the student what constitutes praiseworthy work they enable the student to articulate what is required and so use it consciously in future tasks.

Three questions relating to the usability of comments arise from the foregoing discussion. One relates to retrospective gap-altering feedback, and is whether those content and skills development comments that offer an explanation will be more readily usable than those that do not. The other two relate to future gap-altering feedback. The first of these is whether skills development comments will be more readily usable than other categories of comments, and

the second is whether motivating comments that explain will be more usable than those that do not.

An examination of how students responded to the different categories and depths of comments was used to explore how usable they found the comments and thus to indicate the answers to these three questions.

**Method**

Three Open University course modules from the Technology Faculty were selected for this research. One is a 30 credit-point level-1 module from the engineering programme called *Engineering the future*. (Levels 1, 2 and 3 refer to the first, second and third years respectively of a 3-year undergraduate degree programme; 120 credit points equate to one year's full-time study.) The other two are both level-2 modules from the information and communication technologies programme: a 60 credit-point module called *Information and communication technologies: people and interactions* and a 30 credit-point module called *Computers and processors*.

In the Open University, a distance-teaching institution where typically several hundred students study a module each year, written assignments are marked and commented on by part-time associate lecturers who are appointed to tutor a group of around 20 students on a particular module. When marking, the tutors work to marking guidelines produced by the author of the assignment questions, who is normally a full-time lecturer. The tutors complete a standard cover sheet which is returned to the student with the marked assignment. This cover sheet has spaces for both marks and comments, and it is expected that the cover sheet will carry more general comments about the student's work, with more detailed comments going straight onto the student's written answer.

For this research, permissions were obtained to examine copies of some of the marked assignments which were being selected for the Open University's own quality control mechanisms. This enabled examination of one randomly chosen marked assignment per tutor on each of the three chosen modules, a total of 106 marked answers and accompanying cover sheets: 21 for the module *Engineering the future*, 51 for the module *Information and communication technologies: people and interactions* and 34 for the module *Computers and processors*. In each case the assignment had been submitted approximately half-way through the module, after the students had settled into study of the module but early enough that there were subsequent summative assignments before the final examination or small project.

The coding scheme as described above (Brown and Glover, 2006) was used to code the comments on the scripts and cover sheets. The two classifications in the coding scheme – category and, for some categories, depth – were applied to every comment or part-comment made on the 106 marked assignments and their accompanying cover sheets. In all, over 3000 items were coded. The results were then entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

In order to determine student response to the comments they had received, students were interviewed by telephone shortly after they had taken their end-of-module examination or, in the case of the module without an examination, had submitted their end-of-module project.

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The students eligible for interview were those whose commented assignments had been analysed except that: students who had not gone on to complete their module were removed as some of the questions would not have been relevant to them; students living overseas or serving in the armed services overseas were removed on practical grounds; on the largest population course a random subset was selected to reduce the numbers to something more manageable. Having obtained appropriate permissions in order to interview all of the remaining students, the author wrote to them immediately after their end-of-module examination or project, inviting them to participate in a telephone interview and telling them that information gathered from the interviews would be used to improve the effectiveness of assessment and feedback in the Technology Faculty. Those who agreed, 43 in all, were interviewed. These students were asked to have their copy of the relevant marked assignment and cover sheet (hereafter called the 'interview assignment') to hand during the interview, and the interviewer also had a copy.

On one of the modules the interviews were conducted by an associate lecturer who was a former tutor of the module, on another by an associate lecturer who was a current tutor on the module, and on the third by the author. No student was interviewed by their own tutor.

As preparation for the interviews, the two associate lecturers were briefed by the author both by telephone discussion and by two pages of written guidance notes. In addition, all three interviewers worked from printed interview record sheets. These sheets gave the questions to ask and provided space for student responses to be noted. As the two associate lecturers were part-time staff working from home the interviews were not recorded; the completed sheets served as the interview record. For consistency, the author used the same procedure.

In one question the interviewers were asked to determine where on a four-point scale the response fell, but the other questions were open-ended. For one portion of the interview the interviewer prepared by selecting a small number of comments the tutor had made on the interview assignment, and then during the interview the interviewer pointed out each of these comments in turn and asked how the student had responded to it. The interviewer's tone was carefully controlled so as not to imply that any particular response was expected, and there was no prompting. The interviewer then noted the responses. These comments had been chosen such that, across all students being interviewed, they were split approximately equally among the content, skills development and motivating categories and were at a variety of depths. In all, the 43 students were asked for their response to a total of 125 comments.

When all the interviews were complete the forms were returned to the author for analysis. For the part of the interviews where the students' responses to specific comments were sought, a thematic analysis was carried out on the collated responses to identify themes. After identification of the themes, the categories and depths of the comments made were matched against the themes of the elicited responses to identify patterns and determine what sorts of comments had been found usable.

**Results and discussion**

Table 1 shows how all the comments made on all three modules were distributed across the six categories used in the coding scheme. Content comments were the most common, followed by motivating comments and then skills development comments. Comments in the other three categories occurred relatively rarely.

**Table 1 The distribution of comments across the six categories (*n* = 3095)**

| Category | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Content | 41.1 |
| Skills development | 21.0 |
| Motivating | 32.3 |
| De-motivating | 0.5 |
| Mention of future study | 1.7 |
| Reference to a resource | 3.4 |

Table 2 shows how the comments that fall into the content and skills development categories were distributed over the three depths used in the coding scheme. By far the largest proportion of the comments were of the correction type. Relatively few included an explanation.

**Table 2 The distribution of content and skills development comments across the three depths (*n* = 1921)**

| Depth | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Indication | 7.7 |
| Correction | 78.8 |
| Explanation | 13.5 |

Table 3 shows that the distribution of depths within the motivating category was rather different; here a third were of the indication type, reflecting the frequent use of unelaborated comments such as 'Good'.

**Table 3 The distribution of motivating comments across the three depths (*n* = 952)**

| Depth | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Indication | 33.3 |
| Amplification | 56.1 |
| Explanation | 10.6 |

To consider the usability of the comments, it is necessary to link the results given in Tables 1 to 3 to the three specific questions posed earlier.

The first of these questions asked whether, for retrospective gap-altering feedback, those content and skills development comments that offer an explanation would be more readily usable than those that do not. This focuses attention on the 13.5% of content and skills development comments that were of the explanation type: were they more usable than the remaining 86.5%?

The second question asked whether, for future gap-altering feedback, skills development comments would be more readily usable than other categories of

comments. This focuses attention on the 21% of all comments that related to skills development: were they more usable than the remaining 79%?

The third question asked whether, again for future gap-altering feedback, motivating comments that explain would be more usable than those that do not. This focuses attention on the 10.6% of motivating comments that were of the explanation type: were they more usable than the remaining 89.4%?

In each case it is a relatively small proportion of comments that might be found to be more usable. This suggests that there may be some problems with the usability of the comments being made. To discover whether this is the case, it is necessary to draw on findings from the student interviews.

Students were asked how much, on a four-point scale, the comments on the interview assignment actually helped them in their subsequent assignments, including the end-of-module examination or small project. 67% said that the comments were 'a lot of' or 'some' help to them. The remaining 33% chose 'not much' or 'not at all'. This suggests that while the majority of students are finding something usable in the comments they receive, a sizeable minority are not.

More detailed evidence can be drawn from the portion of the interview where students were asked how they had responded to specific comments. A thematic analysis of the 156 responses students made to the 125 comments revealed fifteen different themes. These themes will be referred to as 'response types' in what follows. Table 4 shows these response types, in decreasing order of occurrence. Only the top four items in this table were elicited by more than 10% of the comments.

**Table 4 The types of response found, in decreasing order of occurrence**

*Response type*

Lack of understanding of comment and/or need for more explanation or detail

Comment useful/helpful for future work

Student pleased/encouraged by comment

To grasp comment fully, student needed to cross-refer from cover sheet to answer

Comment much as expected

Comment useful/helpful in showing student where they had gone wrong

Student had not spent enough time

Student, though puzzled, did not contact tutor

Student had made a silly slip

Student responded defensively/negatively

Student referred to the module materials

Student felt there was a lot to remember

Student paid little/no attention to comment

Student contacted tutor because puzzled

Tutor had misdiagnosed student's problem

Three of the response types in Table 4 are particularly relevant to the idea of usability: the first, 'lack of understanding of comment and/or need for more explanation or detail'; the second, 'comment useful/helpful for future work'; and the sixth, 'comment useful/helpful in showing student where they had gone wrong'.

It is of concern that the most frequently found response type should be 'lack of understanding of comment and/or need for more explanation or detail'. 27.2% of all the comments used in the interviews elicited this response. A response that indicates lack of understanding cannot be consistent with the student finding the comment usable, so there is a strong indication that over a quarter of all comments were not usable.

When this response type is matched to the categories of the comments that elicited it, it becomes evident that most of the problem lay with content comments, in that 51.1% of the content comments elicited this response. The problem is rather less severe with skills development comments, with 12.8% of these comments eliciting this response. 14.6% of motivating comments elicited this response, and here it is worth noting that two thirds of the instances occurred where unqualified praise was given in connection with less-than-full marks for a short question or a part-question. Students felt that they were being given conflicting information about their performance and were therefore confused.

A matching of the response type 'lack of understanding of comment and/or need for more explanation or detail' to the depths of the comments shows that not a single comment that elicited this response was of the explanation type, a result that is significant at the 0.2% level.

The first specific question posed earlier was whether, for retrospective gap-altering feedback, those content and skills development comments that offer an explanation would be more readily usable than those that do not. The findings just described show that over half of all content comments and one in eight skills development comments cannot be usable because they are either incomprehensible or insufficiently detailed. However, comments that offer an explanation do not suffer from this problem. This indicates that those content and skills development comments that offer an explanation are indeed more readily usable, if only because more likely to be understood.

Further support for the conclusion that comments that offer an explanation are more usable comes from the response type 'comment useful/helpful in showing student where they had gone wrong', which was elicited by 9.5% of the content and skills development comments used in the interviews. 33% of the comments eliciting this response were of the explanation type. Although not a statistically significant difference, this is nevertheless double the proportion of explanatory comments found in all the content and skills development comments used in the interviews, and suggests again that comments that offer an explanation are more readily usable than those that do not.

The third relevant response type in Table 4 is 'comment useful/helpful for future work'. The comments that elicited this response were therefore usable, and they constituted 24.8% of the comments used in the interviews. A

matching to the categories of the comments shows that 64.1% of the skills development comments elicited this response, as against 11.1% of the content comments and 2.5% of the motivating comments. Students therefore found skills development comments more usable than other categories of comments.

For skills development comments, a matching of this response type to the depths of the comments shows no significant difference between the distribution of the three depths in the comments that elicited this response as compared with all comments used in the interviews.

The second specific question posed earlier was whether, for future gap-altering feedback, skills development comments would be more readily usable than other categories of comments. The foregoing result suggests that skills development comments are indeed more usable, and that – in striking contrast to the situation for *retrospective* gap-altering feedback – the usability of the comment is unaffected by whether the comment includes an explanation.

Further support for the usability of skills development comments is found elsewhere in the interviews. Students were asked if they could indicate a specific example of a comment they had used in a subsequent assignment, and an analysis of their replies shows that comments relating to skills development predominated. Indeed, only one student mentioned a comment that did not relate to skills development; a content comment had proved useful in the end-of-module project.

Overall, therefore, the findings do show that skills development comments are more readily usable than other categories of comments for future gap-altering feedback.

The third specific question posed earlier was whether, for future gap-altering feedback, motivating comments that explain would be more usable than those that do not. The single motivating comment that elicited the response 'comment useful/helpful for future work' was in fact one that explained, but this is insufficient evidence for any conclusion to be drawn on this question.

It is worth noting that by far the most popular response to motivating comments was that the student was pleased or encouraged by the comment; 73.2% of all the motivating comments that featured in the interviews elicited this response type. It seems that comments designed to motivate are welcomed and valued by students and are therefore useful in the affective domain.

At the end of the interview, students were asked what sort of comment they would like to ask their tutor for, if given the opportunity. Two themes emerged strongly. One was that they wished to be told what they had got wrong, and why, and how to do better. It should be noted that the 'why' indicates a wish for an explanation. The other was that they would appreciate being given things to work on or watch out for in future assignments, or just receiving general suggestions for their future assignments. Both of these themes relate to gap-altering feedback: the first to retrospective feedback and the second to feedback for the future. Students would therefore welcome comments that are genuinely usable feedback.

Although the results presented here cannot necessarily be taken as representative of wider practice in commenting on written assignments in higher education, they do indicate some features of interest, and not

necessarily only in a distance-teaching institution. Indeed it is interesting to compare the results presented here with those for two 'conventional' universities, as given by Weaver (2006) and Chanock (2000).

Weaver found that students value positive comments on their written work, and the research presented here corroborates this finding, with nearly three quarters of motivating comments resulting in pleasure or encouragement. An exception, however, is praise that students feel is unmerited, as when a less-than-full mark for a short question or a part-question is accompanied by an unqualified praise comment. This sort of praise elicited at best puzzlement and at worst annoyance. Weaver also found that students acted on suggestions to improve their work, and again the research presented here both agrees with this and shows that it is skills development comments that are most likely to be usable for future work. Both Weaver and Chanock found that students did not understand or misunderstood some comments, and once more the research presented here agrees with their findings. It has, however, gone further and indicated that the problem lies principally with comments about the content of the answer and that the problem is unlikely to occur if the comment includes a correction supported by an explanation.

The research presented here is therefore consistent with some other work on feedback on written assignments, but this paper has taken the work further, both in conceptualising the comments in terms of their usability and in looking at the relative usability of different categories and depths of comments.

**Conclusion**
This paper relates the written feedback given on assignments to Sadler's assertion that 'information about the gap between actual and reference levels is to be considered as feedback *only when it is used to alter the gap*' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). It indicates the importance of the comments being such that students are in fact able to use them to alter the gap – that is, the importance of the comments being *usable* by students. It suggests that students may use comments to alter gaps in two different ways: retrospectively for the assignment they have just submitted, or to avoid exhibiting a gap in future work. It presents results from student interviews to indicate that students find skills development comments the most usable in future work, and that they find comments that include an element of explanation more understandable, and therefore usable, for gaps exhibited in an assignment just submitted. It has shown that a relatively high proportion of comments made on assignments are, however, very unlikely to be usable.

This work raises an interesting question: why are tutors providing such a high proportion of comments that are unlikely to be usable? A reason may be that they have never discovered that the comments *are* unlikely to be usable, but beyond this facile explanation (which may nevertheless have some validity) two other possible answers suggest themselves. One is that the tutors are working at Biggs' 'level 1' or 'level 2' theory of teaching (Biggs, 2003) and so do not understand the need to help students to reconceptualise a topic. The other is that the their practice is prompted by the nature of the marking guides with which they are supplied; in which case it may be that those setting the questions and writing the marking guides are working at Biggs' 'level 1' and 'level 2'.

Shepard (2000) puts forward the view that assessment practice is in an uneasy transition stage between the old theory of behaviourist learning and the newer theories of learning that are replacing it. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004) are of the same opinion, deploring the fact that, although thinking about learning in higher education has undergone a shift towards a constructivist perspective, thinking about comments on assignments has not seen the same shift. The present findings would tend to corroborate this, and also suggest three fruitful avenues for further research. One would be to investigate the theories of teaching and learning held by tutors, and how these theories influence their commenting practice. Another would be to investigate the extent to which marking guides influence the nature of tutors' commenting practice. And the third would be to investigate the theories of teaching and learning held by those who prepare the assignment questions and associated marking guides, and how these influence the way they write the questions and guides.

There is also work to be done on the issue of how to use the results of this research to improve practice in commenting on written assignments through increased use of skills development comments and comments that explain corrections. How can this change in practice best be achieved? How much staff development is needed? Is it possible to change commenting practice without also changing the questions and the marking guides? Is it possible to change questions, marking guides or commenting practice without also changing the underlying theories of teaching and learning? In one of the course modules that were the subject of this research, the style of the marking guides has been adjusted to place more emphasis on commenting, and in all three modules work has been undertaken with the tutors to encourage more skills development and explanatory comments. The outcomes of this work will go some way to answer the foregoing questions.

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