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Exploring student perceptions of assessment feedback

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Introduction

It has become something of a truth commonly acknowledged that today's students often appear ill-prepared for higher education. (Jobbins quoted in Leathwood, 2005, p.314). Literature reviews reveal a widely expressed concern that A levels are too narrow to prepare students for higher education (Roberts and Higgins, 1992, cited in Lowe and Cooke, 2003, p.2) (McGaw Report, 2004, p.31).

Feedback, or more specifically feedback provided on assessment, is frequently cited as an antidote to this problem. There appears to be widespread acceptance of the role 'helpful' (Ramsden, 1992 quoted in Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.10) and/or 'appropriate' feedback (Chickery and Gamson, 1987, p.16) can play in assisting students in their learning (see also Weaver, 2006, p.382). However, although there has been much research that has focused on assessment feedback (e.g. Brown et al, 1997; Race, 2001; Mutch, 2003, cited in Weaver, 2006, p.1), there has been little which centres on student perception(s) of how they both 'receive' and 'respond' to assessment feedback. Furthermore, what exactly constitutes 'appropriate' feedback remains elusive, vague and poorly defined.

Our research project set out to explore level two and level three student perception(s) of assessment feedback within one Department of Policy Studies' and to determine how students in that department were receiving and using the feedback they were receiving. Of particular interest to us was whether students were using feedback as a means to 'feed-forward' (Race 2005).

Methodology

The research employed a variety of research methods which allowed us to investigate the topic of assessment feedback from a range of 'angles' and interpret the results from diverse perspectives, including those of members of academic staff and students. In addition, utilising a mixed methods approach allowed us to 'add flesh' to data gathered from quantitative questionnaires and ultimately resulted in a more thorough and comprehensive piece of research being completed (Hen et al. 2006, p.21).

The 'raw data' collected for the research project was gathered through a combination of self completion questionnaires, student focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with academic staff:

The data collection consisted of three phases:

1. An email questionnaire which was sent to 465 level two (51%) and level three (49%) students in the Department of Policy Studies at the University of Lincoln, with a 28% response rate.
2. Four recorded focus group interviews with 25 level two Policy Studies students.
3. Six semi-structured interviews with members of Policy Studies academic staff.

Literature Review : the role of assessment and assessment feedback

Regardless of whether we see our pedagogic role in higher education as a lecturer, a teacher, or a facilitator of learning, perhaps one of the most important aspects of our position is to assess our students (Race 2001, p.31). Assessment is an integral aspect of teaching and learning and is not only a mandatory requirement of most examining and validation bodies but is used to measure students' progress and allows them to assist in planning/shaping their own learning (Huddleston and Unwin, 2002, p.40). Assessment can take many different forms: exams, presentations, portfolios, essays, reports, and practicals (Race and Brown, 1998). Although the form can and does vary, assessment is often implicitly and explicitly perceived as a 'test' which allows the acquisition of information which measures student behaviour (Reece and Walker, 2001, p.49) (usually known as 'summative' (Light and Cox, 2001, p.170)) , or to give an estimate of achievement, which is then used to help in the learning process (usually known as 'formative' (Brown and Knight, 1994, p.15)).

Both assessment and assessment feedback play a fundamental role in underpinning student learning in higher education and as such should be an integral part of any teaching and learning strategies (Jordan, 2006). Indeed, it is frequently argued that assessment can be seen as one of the main driving forces behind student learning (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997 and Kneale and Colling, 1996, p.289).

The assessments we choose to offer students and the ways in which we elect to feedback can have a significant impact on the way lecturers and students communicate core values of learning. Indeed, for many academic staff and students, these processes may be the only indicative measures of how well the learner is doing in higher education. Consequently, it is argued, both assessment and assessment feedback are crucial communication tools. The issue, however, is what does each party think is being communicated?

Fundamentally, for academic staff, assessment feedback is information and/or communication, which can be given in various forms, in response to an assessment and/or an individual's or a group's performance of a task(s) with the purpose of motivating the student(s) by informing them how well they have done and how to improve (Brown, 2001). This can be between tutor and student but is not limited to this relationship as it can also be between peers or colleagues (Hramiack, 2007). Thus, as well as looking back on what has or has not been done, assessment feedback should also be considered as 'feed-forward' which can be used by students and staff to inform what to do next to improve (Race, 2005). Thus, feedback is an essential part of assessment and is a key factor in underpinning successful teaching and learning strategies. The forms which assessment feedback takes are as numerous as the assessments, units/modules and programmes to which they relate. Universities, faculties, departments and staff are increasingly introducing imaginative innovations in written, electronic, oral, video, audio and peer assessment feedback in order to achieve 'feed-forward'.

Most academics writing about assessment agree that for assessment feedback to be most effective, it needs to be 'timely', 'relevant', 'meaningful', 'encouraging' and offer suggestions for improvement that students can 'grasp' i.e. which they see as realisable (Brown 2001, p.17). In addition to this, assessment feedback also needs to be 'personalised', so that it fits each student's individuality and personal educational needs (Race 2001, p.87). Equally important is that assessment feedback is 'manageable' for both students and academic staff, as it can be difficult for students to utilise and for staff to produce large amounts of assessment feedback (ibid).

Assessment feedback in practice

Our project revealed that there are a number of fault lines running through the prevailing models of 'appropriate' assessment presented in current literature and summarised above. In particular:

- The reality of assessment methods on offer may hide a multitude of flaws in student knowledge and behaviour (Laurillard, 1993, p .31).
- Staff should not assume that good grades equate with deep learning and low grades with surface learning.
- Sadly it appears that for some students "from A level to degree level 'is completely a new ball game…everything about it…'" (2nd year male student) and we must recognise and respond to this.

What knowledge of assessment and experience of feedback do students bring with them?

Many of the students interviewed as part of our research stated that their experience of assessment feedback pre-HE had been different to that in higher education:

'Yeah, it was different for us because you would hand your assignment in and they just gave you a mark, they didn't really explain it' (Respondent 3).

Indeed, students commented that their pre-HE experience of assessment feedback had either been non-existent or that they had been merely instructed in how to pass assessments:

'in A' level and GCSE I was just told what I had to write down and what I had to learn which was easy… [it was] just given to you on a plate… [the] teacher used to sit there and used to lecture, what's the word, dictate…' (Respondent 4)

Perhaps not surprisingly, there was evidence of the students in our survey gravitating towards the familiar by electing to go for summative rather than formative when give a choice. (Our research highlighted that 71.9% of students stated that they only studied topics which were being formally assessed).

However, what was also clear from our research was that students were looking to feedback for guidance, countering a concern voiced at staff focus groups that feedback was not being read.

90.5% of students stated that they either 'always' (42.5%) or 'often' (48%) took the time to read and think about assessment feedback. On first analysis this did appear to be conditional on a good grade, with 78.1% of students stating that the mark that they received made either 'a lot' (44.5%) or 'some' (33.6%) difference to the 'attention' they gave to their assessment feedback. Interestingly, one of the reasons cited by students for paying more attention to feedback attached to a 'good mark' was that they expected the assessment feedback given for a 'good mark' to be more 'positive' and thus they felt more inclined to read it. This raises the question of what students consider to be a 'good mark'. Clearly, this is subjective and what constitutes a 'good mark' will vary from student to student. However, there also seems to be a firm link between the mark and the interpretation of the 'tone' of the feedback. Students seem to have an associated perception that if the mark they receive is not a 'good mark' the assessment feedback will be in some way 'negative'. Moreover, it seems that when students receive what they consider to be a 'good mark' they pay more attention to their assessment feedback.

Responses to low marks and associated feedback were markedly different:

'I mean when you get a mark back it's just a mark isn't it? There is nothing you can do, you can't change it. Unless you get below 40% and you do an 'in-course retrieval', in which case the feedback is quite important' (Respondent 7).

Several commentators have argued that responses like this demonstrate a strategic approach to assessment (see Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997 and Kneale and Colling, 1996, cited in Fry et al, 2003, p. 289) or a simple desire to get the task out of the way with minimal effort and employing 'low-cognitive level activities', whilst appearing to meet course requirements (Biggs, 2003, p.14). Students are certainly adopting strategic approaches to assessment:

> *'There are 5 different topics in Criminology and the ones that I am more interested in I do more work in'* (Respondent 10).

However, as we have seen the equation of 'good mark' = engaged learner versus low mark = disengaged learner is too simplistic. Respondent 7 quoted above knows that getting a low grade also makes 'the feedback important'.

How are students interpreting and using feedback?

Our research suggested that students' levels of interpretations of assessment feedback is also dependant on several 'barriers to the utility of feedback', which may be outside the students' sphere of control (Higgins et al, 2002, p 53). 21.1% of students did not understand either 'partly' (19.5%) or 'at all' (1.6%) the assessment feedback they received from their tutors. For instance one student complained about her repeated receipt of the same feedback advice that her work 'lacked structure' but protested somewhat legitimately that if they keep telling her that, then surely they must realise that she doesn't know how to address this. In addition, nearly 1 in 10 students commented that they felt their assessment feedback had not helped them to improve their academic performance in later assessments. This was further fleshed out by students in the focus groups who commented that at times they could not understand the language being used by members of academic staff, including words such as 'analysis' and 'argument':

> *'I mean sometimes, I have to go check the dictionary every other word so I just don't bother. It should be in student speak or something'* (Respondent 15).

A central concern was the belief that in some instances assessment feedback was only specific to a single piece of work and could not be used to help in future assignments.

The majority of students interviewed in the focus groups suggested that they would find a personal one-to-one feedback session with the tutor who had provided the written feedback very useful as a means of providing a more personal element as well as to explaining any difficult terms/ideas used and showing how the feedback could be used to improve future assignments.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Despite the 'best intentions' of students to use assessment feedback at a later date over half of students currently do not (Swithenby, 2006).

The following conclusions and recommendations have emerged from the project and from feedback from delegates at an associated event where the project findings were presented.

- Students are varied and do not react in the same way to assessment feedback. What may be a devastating blow for one student may be good advice to another (McDowell ,2006).
- Staff and students could benefit from explaining what assessment feedback is for and how to use it by integrating it more clearly into the teaching and learning process. This is especially true in the light of some of our students' experience of assessment feedback pre-HE which ill-prepares them for the demands of higher education. This would allow academic staff to

induct students into an iterative process of engaging in modes of thinking, which allow them to construct and formulate general conceptions (Fry et al 2003, p.10) of how assessment feedback can and should be used in higher education.

- Students are ill-equipped to respond effectively to feedback and as such it is necessary to teach students how to make use of assessment feedback (Brown 2007, p.17).
- There are considerable variations of 'good' feedback and effective feedback which are being widely deployed in HE but what some students value some others may reject. There is not and cannot be one model of so-called 'appropriate feedback'.
- Offering diverse methods of assessment and feedback will benefit all students (Race 2001, p 87).
- Students may benefit from clear instruction in respect of their roles/responsibilities in Higher Education and in regard to feedback i.e. their need to become active and independent learners.
- What students like should not dictate the nature and form of feedback and we must be prepared to defend unpopular but effective feedback.

Materials developed

The project team created a PowerPoint presentation which colleagues could easily embed in lectures and/or seminars in response to the project's findings. The presentation:

- Defines assessment feedback – what it is for.
- Offers examples of how students can use assessment feedback effectively.
- Outlines staff responsibilities regarding assessment feedback.
- Outlines student responsibilities regarding assessment feedback.
- Offered examples of the types of feedback students could expect on assessments.

In addition, the Department of Policy Studies decided to add guidance about the purpose of assessment feedback to its coursework presentation and marking guide. Students were also provided with the opportunity to have a one-to-one feedback session with members of academic staff about their work and the assessment feedback provided.

Staff found the presentation easy to administer and students appeared enabled to think more about the assessment feedback they received. (The NSS scores for assessment feedback in criminology went up by 0.2% which we would attribute in part to the changes introduced as a result of the project). Although time consuming, one-to-one sessions focused on feedback were useful ways of finding out more about how students were approaching their assignments and interpreting feedback. Staff also found that the short presentation was a good way of sharing generic examples of feedback as well as providing guidance on how to use it.

A case study including links to the presentation can be accessed via the SWAP website www.swap.ac.uk/resources/publs/casestudies/cslmccanngsaunders.html.

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