

It's good to talk? Developing feedback practice

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Feedback practices have recently come under increasing scrutiny, most notably because of the impact of the National Student Survey. This paper draws on the initial work of a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme funded project - 'It's Good to Talk: Feedback, Dialogue and Learning' - that seeks to identify, evaluate, develop and promote ways to improve feedback to students within the disciplines of History and Politics/International Relations (IR). At the centre of the project is the issue of encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning by drawing on feedback approaches in three universities, underpinned by the research literature. This paper will focus on student-student peer feedback as one potential model for a feedback-dialogue.

Introduction

Feedback is widely perceived to be of enormous intrinsic value, impacting upon student learning, motivation, self-esteem, and improvement (Sadler, 1989). However, there is a gap between what students and tutors desire, and their everyday experiences. The shortcomings appear to lie in the area of communication. Many studies highlight that students find feedback difficult to understand, and that staff often find it difficult to explain what they mean (Lea & Street, 1998; Chanock, 2000; Higgins *et al.*, 2001; Maclellan, 2001). Other research supports the view that students value sessions which create opportunities for dialogue with tutors (Parmar & Trotter, 2004). This point was reinforced in the Times Higher Education (THE) article which outlined that 'students commented that they needed a good relationship with their tutor to get verbal help, but such relationships were rare' (THE, 2008, p.11).

In light of the problematic nature of engagement with feedback, assessment research has made several significant recommendations for good feedback practices, for example Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p.205) recommend that feedback should be a collaborative process that 'encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning'. Peer feedback can be defined as 'a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards' (Lui & Carless, 2006, p. 280). Strategies for promoting peer feedback include: engaging students with criteria and embedding peer involvement within normal course processes. Research by Lui & Carless (2006) and Bloxham & West (2004; 2007) have trialled peer feedback strategies.

The inclusion of peer feedback allows students to develop concepts of standards and criteria and is a way tutors can encourage student engagement with feedback (Liu and Carless, 2006). Twenty-five per cent of assignment marks were awarded for the quality of the peer marking in the Lui and Carless (2006) study. They argued that

this would provide an extra incentive for students to think carefully about the assessment criteria and the feedback process. However, even without the motivating incentive of extra marks, students do attempt to engage with peer feedback. The Bloxham and West (2004) study found that students recognised the benefits of peer marking for their own learning development. In a follow up study Bloxham and West (2007) found that the peer feedback processes students had engaged with previously had influenced their approach to learning, such as encouraging them to be more reflective and using their peers informally for feedback on draft assignments. These two studies suggest that students are willing to engage with peer feedback dialogues and that students understand the benefits it can have to their learning.

Project background

Our research project is underpinned by an action research methodology. Action research has historically adopted the approach of practitioner as 'doer' in the fields of educational research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). This has encouraged improving educational practice by enabling practitioners to be in control of the research (Kemmis, cited in Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Reflective action research is very much about the practitioner being in control and making changes to their own practice. However, technical action research tries to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of practice.

A popular action research methodology combines reflective and technical aspects (Swann & Ecclestone, 1999; Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Munns & Woodward, 2006). In this scenario a team of researchers work closely with a team of practitioners enabling them to collectively identify where and how changes to practices could be made. After implementing these changes practitioners are then able to reflect upon the effectiveness of these changes before implementing any additional alterations in the next cycle. This collaborative approach has been used by several research teams focusing on assessment (Swann & Ecclestone, 1999; Munns & Woodward, 2006).

The fulcrum for this approach will revolve around the principle of encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning. The key problems being addressed are:

1. how to replace the simple 'transmission' model of feedback, which is linked very closely to student grading, with a model of feedback linked directly to learning and reflection;
2. how to implement more dynamic approaches to feedback, by developing practical strategies for encouraging dialogue between staff and students which enables discussion, reflection, internalisation and action, and which acts as a lever to promote student learning and to enhance student motivations to learn.

The institutions involved in the project have been chosen for their contrasting contexts: pre- and post 1992, single and joint honours cohorts, different entrance requirements. Central University will focus on peer feedback in written coursework in single honours History, joint honours Politics/International Relations (IR) and joint honours History/Politics (small cohorts, UK students). City University will focus on

audio approaches to feedback with Politics/IR students (large cohorts, many non-UK students). The University of Westshire will focus on feedback on examination performance of History students and History/Politics students (large cohorts, UK students, higher grade tariffs). However, for the purpose of this paper the initial (and tentative) pilot-study findings from the two Post -1992 universities, Central and City, will be discussed.

Data collection

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with five lecturers and eight students at Central University. Three of the students were over 21 and were studying a combination of single and joint honours. Semi - structured interviews ascertained students' experiences of written and verbal feedback within History and Politics and where appropriate made comparisons to their experiences within their other discipline. The students were from level 4, level 5 and level 6. Six out of the eight interviewees were male, but this perhaps reflects the gender balance within these subjects. A focus group was conducted at City University with five Politics/IR students. After interview transcripts had been given to students for 'member checking' (Denzin, 1978 cited in Cresswell and Miller, 2000), they were thematically analysed. The students' interview comments were analysed through an interpretive lens. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

In addition to interviews a survey questionnaire was conducted and garnered 119 responses from Central and City University. Students were asked to answer 24 statements, such as 'I receive verbal feedback on my assignments', 'I receive verbal feedback on my examination scripts' and 'I approach my tutors informally to discuss assignment feedback before or after class sessions' with the response choices 'frequently', 'sometimes', 'never' and 'don't know'. The survey also included open ended questions, asking students' for written comments about what they perceived to be 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' feedback. The responses collected to date are part of ongoing research and do not provide a complete picture of our first round of data gathering in the 2009-10 academic year. Of the responses collected, the majority at Central University have been level 5 students (96.2%, 51 students). At City University responses have been obtained across all levels, albeit with a propensity towards level 5 students (44.4%, 28 students). For the sake of this paper, our questionnaire analysis will be limited towards a comparative survey of level 5 students in both universities. This provides an opportunity to examine the views of students based on experience over a longer period of time with, for instance, the ability to look at feedback practices on assignments taken in previous years. A more detailed analysis across all levels would nevertheless provide an opportunity to compare such issues as the expectations of level 4 students and whether students become 'acclimatised' to existing feedback practices in subsequent years of study.

Findings and discussion

At the basic level of feedback on assignments, our initial findings emphasise that while there are notable distinctions between the two universities in terms of the regularity of written and verbal feedback on assignments, student views regarding verbal feedback being of benefit to their learning is remarkably strong. 74% of

students at Central and 61% of students at City both agree that verbal feedback 'frequently' improves their learning. But despite this view that verbal feedback is of intrinsic benefit, students are less clear about their ability to approach staff to obtain this feedback in either a formal or informal setting.

At the same time, students in these disciplines are invariably assessed on extensive essay writing and the use of examinations. The latter often contribute in excess of 50% of a module mark and tend to be devoid of feedback to students. For instance, 32% of students at Central and 68% of students at City indicate that they do not receive written feedback on exams, while 45% at Central and 82% at City indicate that they do not receive verbal feedback on their exams. Whereas students were keen to gain feedback after exams, they wanted more verbal feedback provision prior to the submission of assignments. It is our argument that there is a mismatch between student evidence about the importance of verbal feedback and the willingness of staff to respond to this situation. Verbal feedback can encompass a wide range of scenarios, from encouraging peer feedback among students to general feedback discussions in seminars and tutorials.

Students were keen to have feedback on draft essays so that they had a clearer idea of what was expected from them, recognising that the timing of feedback is significant and this was supported by interview comments from students. They wanted the opportunity to develop their strengths and weaknesses before receiving summative feedback:

So before we make these mistakes we can be aware of what the dangers are. I guess it's like having something before the essay to point in the right direction. (Interview, Jamie, Politics, Level 6)

For instance, students felt that increased dialogue opportunities before submission, such as discussing exemplar essays would give them a better guide to what is required from them:

If we were shown essays from the past that were done well...obviously that's difficult, but it would have been helpful. So you knew what they were looking for, you knew what to aim for. (Interview, Robert, joint honours, Level 5)

Furthermore, comments from students interviewed in our study and others (Orsmond *et al.*, 2002) suggest that the type of feedback opportunities that they want may well be met by the processes of peer feedback, for example the opportunity to discuss essay exemplars. Peer feedback could be viewed as one way of facilitating Biggs's (1999) concept of 'constructive alignment' (teaching activities are aligned to learning outcomes; see Biggs, 1999, p. 57). For example by giving a student (a peer) feedback in relation to the intended learning outcomes of an assignment (in this instance the assignment criteria) the teaching and learning activities are closely aligned. One student 'teaches' another student about how closely they have achieved the assignment criteria and how they could amend their assignment to further achieve the criteria. This feedback could then enable the student 'learner' to amend their assignment to meet the assessment criteria more effectively. Additionally, this process of peer feedback would help to reconceptualise assessment into a two step process with students' responding to formative feedback before submitting assignments for a summative grade.

Peer feedback seems to be a potential remedy in not significantly increasing pressure on lecturers, whilst enabling students to engage more with feedback. Larger classes have meant an increased marking load for staff (Hounsell, in Slowey & Watson, 2003). The result is that teachers have less time to write detailed feedback and there is less opportunity for dialogue around feedback within tutorial sessions. The students in our study, who had had opportunities to be involved in peer feedback, felt that it was a beneficial and positive experience. The comment below suggests that students' can give each other praise, and this may motivate a student to engage with constructive comments that enable them to progress further:

Well on one of the modules with *lecturer* we did a couple of things. We did seminar papers in the second year. I passed my essay and that was posted on the online message board and we discussed it in the seminar and this year we did a Wiki project so we could have a go at that...there were people commenting on my work on the Wiki project online that said it was good so that made me feel nice about it and then the seminar paper was good because other students brought out some of the things that were lacking and we discussed it so that I got different views about it. (Interview, Martin, Level 6, joint honours)

Through the use of formative peer feedback (and not requiring students to grade each other's work) it has been found that in many cases students are able to provide effective feedback on each other's work (Falchikov, 2005). Peer feedback may then be one potential model to explore further for developing feedback-dialogues for our project.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that structured peer feedback could potentially be effective in supporting student understanding of academic criteria and encouraging a more inclusive approach to feedback. Furthermore, it has the opportunity to provide the interim feedback on draft assignments that students want to ensure that they are 'on the right track'. However, it is paramount for lecturers and students to understand the pedagogic benefits of peer feedback if it is to have a positive impact on student learning and development.

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A reflection on Blair and McGinty's feedback practice, by Dr Mark Pulsford

Blair and McGinty's paper introduces a research project focusing on student assessment and feedback, which gathered data from across three universities during the 2009-10 academic year. The wider project sought to aid the development of techniques that could replace a 'transmission' model of feedback, which is closely aligned to (and often simply a corollary to) the grade awarded, and move towards a more dynamic approach to feedback that encourages reflection, discussion and the promotion of student learning. In particular this paper uses quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data generated from interviews and focus groups to explore how Level 5 (second year undergraduate) students engaged with and evaluated the feedback they had received from tutors at their university.

The authors focus their discussion on the role of verbal feedback. The students in the research felt this to be especially beneficial, yet were less confident in how to seek (and whether they would obtain) this sort of commentary on their work from tutors. As Blair and McGinty note, university staff workload - especially around assessment and feedback - often inhibits such personalised face-to-face meetings with each student following each assignment. Given this pressure, as well as these participants' ideal scenario to receive verbal feedback *prior* to assignment submission, the authors tentatively elaborate on the notion that *formative peer-to-peer feedback* may offer some benefits. In order to increase the amount and nature of assessment-based dialogue, tutors might facilitate opportunities for students to give feedback on each other's work, doing so with reference to the assignment criteria and possibly alongside exemplar assignments. Grading of work should be avoided, and as such Blair and McGinty suggest that this can lead to effective formative feedback - and may also motivate students.

For me, this suggestion leads to a number of crucial questions; whilst there is clear logic to the idea of formative peer-to-peer feedback, its use and execution in practice require critical reflection.

First, experience suggests that whilst such peer feedback may help and motivate some learners, there is surely significant potential for the opposite impact. It is difficult to give feedback in sensitive and constructive ways if you are a novice - what effect might poor (and poorly delivered) peer feedback have on students who are fraught with anxiety because they don't yet understand, who have a learning difference, or who have an educational history that may have disenfranchised them? What unhelpful learner identities and social hierarchies might peer feedback cement?

Second, peer feedback mechanisms cannot sit in a vacuum - it must take heed of the individualised and competitive contemporary educational environment. How willing might students *really* be to share their work prior to submission, especially on essay-based assignments when the questions are pre-defined? Mutuality and

collectivism are prerequisites for authentic and meaningful formative peer-to-peer feedback, and it would take significant efforts to develop this against a culture that prioritises individual attainment and, in effect, the ranking of students by grade. Moreover, in this keenly felt competitive environment, would formative peer feedback alone be acceptable to students? Might students *still* seek validation from lecturers prior to submitting their assignments?

A final concern might be that such peer feedback tends to work within, rather than countering, the focus on grades. Since a clear objective of feedback on assignment drafts would be to improve the work (e.g. to help it get a better mark), there is an argument that whilst dialogue is increased this is in the service of instrumental aims rather than to enhance reflection and learning in a more holistic sense – perhaps this feeds into a much broader discussion about the relationship between learning and assessment: How can assessment tasks best capture the learning achieved *throughout* a module? What methods suit this, and therefore what ways of feeding back to students are most appropriate?

To close this brief reflection, it occurs to me that an emerging zeitgeist - that of *co-creation* – may go some way towards addressing the concerns outlined above. If students are involved in shaping their assessment tasks and criteria, and if they are invited to curate their course and module curricula, then dialogue, engagement and ownership are in-built. Promoting student reflection and motivation to learn can be encouraged at an earlier stage than reviewing draft assignment work.