

What is feedback for? Using dialogic concept mapping to research academics' understanding of feedback.

Outline

The role and effectiveness of feedback within higher education has been considered extensively in a variety of domains. This has included the research literature (e.g. Hounsell 2007 and Nicol 2010), practice based guides (Sambell 2011), identification of guiding principles (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, Boud et al 2010) and the development of a student charter (NUS 2008). Assessment and the associated feedback can have varying. Much of this work has been driven by a sense that all is not well with assessment and feedback either from a student satisfaction perspective (Hounsell, 2005; Carless, 2006) or a theoretical point of view (Knight 2002). In the UK, the National Student Survey in particular, has brought pressure for lecturers to adopt departmental practices to create prompt, consistent and clear feedback. However, Bailey (2010) argues that practices to communicate written feedback to students more efficiently are often perceived by academics to create problems of their own and develop a sense of disengagement with feedback by staff. Such research into the teacher experience of feedback is relatively rare and there has been little research attention on academics' thinking and practice in relation to feedback.

More broadly, Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) have shown a link between conceptions of assessment and assessment practices. Those with a view of teaching as information transmission also believed that assessment should test the retention of facts and reported corresponding assessment practices. On the other hand academics that considered teaching as helping students to construct understanding focus on integrating assessment with teaching and using feedback to improve understanding and challenge misunderstandings. Research on staff conceptions of teaching has highlighted that a change in practices tends to be effective only if it is accompanied by conceptual change (e.g. Ho, Watkins and Kelly, 2001; Gibbs and Coffey, 2004).

Interviews with academics have been the traditional approach to collecting data on academics' thinking about teaching and assessment (e.g. Prosser et 1994 and Samuelowicz and Bain 2002). However, it is questionable as to the extent to which they can represent an individual's way of experiencing (Säljö, 1997) and that there is a potential disjuncture between described conceptions and claimed teaching practice (Murray and MacDonald, 1997). Therefore alternative methods to collect data on individuals' ways of experiencing a phenomenon may alleviate such problems and enable investigation of teaching and assessment in higher education from a slightly different perspective. Concept mapping provides one such alternative method and has been used for learning and teaching as well as research purposes in all sectors of education, including research on HE student learning and academic development. It has been argued that concept maps can be used to make tacit and abstract knowledge visible as well as conceptual development over time (Hay et al., 2008, Hay, 2007). In particular 'dialogic' concept mapping provides multiple opportunities to

construct maps complemented by interviews in which the reasoning behind the maps is explored. Therefore this paper aims to understand academics' thinking about feedback and how this is related to their practice through the use of dialogic concept mapping.

The data for this paper emerge from a wider research project, which used concept mapping to investigate the personal understandings of assessment and the assessment practices of HE staff. Data were collected from nine members of staff from two UK universities. They participated in a half-day workshop that guided them through the construction of their own maps about assessment. The maps could be amended before and during one-to-one semi-structured interviews that lasted on average one hour. Participants were also asked to bring 'assessment artefacts' to the interview, which were used to discuss their assessment practices and gain insight into the relationship between thinking and practices. Personal assessment practices were incorporated into the maps at relevant points as examples.

Within the workshops, interviews and maps feedback emerged as a common concept in relation to assessment for all the participants. However, how it was conceptualised, based on the hierarchical position or the relation to other concepts, was quite different between participants. For a number of participants feedback was low on the hierarchy and appeared to be at a 'dead-end' with limited links to other concepts or areas of the map. In such instances feedback appeared to be primarily about marking summative assessments. More sophisticated thinking about feedback was apparent in maps where feedback had a central role in thinking about assessment and the relationship between feedback and student learning was made more explicit. Such maps also tended to acknowledge the role of formative assessment for generating feedback that was less teacher-orientated and linked to the use of self and peer feedback.

Also a number of issues were identified in terms of the use of concept maps for research into teaching in higher education. Certain technical aspects of the maps such as unlabelled link lines, floating labels and lack of clarity in the hierarchy made the analysis of maps difficult. However, the maps provided a key focus for discussion of the relationship between thinking and practice in the interview and there was some evidence of participants re-conceptualising assessment and feedback during the research process. This would indicate that concept mapping is of value both as a tool for research into teaching in higher education but also as an educational development activity.

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