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Understanding Student's Conceptions of Feedback to Improve the Student Learning Experience. (0172)

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Abstract:

Feedback is evaluative and provides a student with knowledge of their performance in a given task (Hounsell, 1987). Feedback is usually given by academics to facilitate a students improvement (Hester, 2001), yet often it does not have the desired effect and is unpredictable in terms of enhancing a students motivation, self-confidence and subsequent effort in future assessments (Young, 2000). The present study analysed social science students' (n=18) conceptions of feedback through the use of drawings (Kearney & Hyle, 2003) and semi-structured interviews. Eight broad dimensions were revealed from the data, suggesting varied conceptions of feedback within the participant group. Delegates will be presented with selected examples of students conceptions of feedback. Implications for practitioners when giving students feedback, to improve the student learning experience will also be discussed.

Paper Title: Understanding Student's Conceptions of Feedback to Improve the Student Learning Experience.

Background Information

The evaluative nature of feedback precludes that a student will receive knowledge of their performance in a given academic task or experience (Hounsell, 1987). Whilst at University students will experience many instances of feedback on their work. Quite often such feedback is facilitated by academic staff in the hope that the student will utilise this and improve in their next assessment (Hester, 2001). The literature relating to feedback has seen many shifts in supported conceptual and theoretical understanding in recent years. In particular, there are current debates relating to what the exact purpose of feedback is. In changing times within Higher Education, a focus upon how students utilise the very tool

designed to help foster their learning is essential, in order to improve the student experience. Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick (2006) indicate an emergence of the term "student centred learning" (p3). Such terminology assumes that the responsibility for learning and engagement lies with the student (Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003). However issues relating to feedback, in this environment, have been uncovered. Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that lecturers are still in control of the quantity and delivery of feedback. Consequently such feedback is perceived as transmission focused. The issues associated with such a process centre on the marginalisation of self-regulation skill development, which can improve student learning (Boud, 2000). Further, the transmission process assumes that students readily understand and process feedback comments. However Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) argue that in order for a student to regulate their learning they need to be able to understand and process feedback comments from lecturing staff. Such a viewpoint indicates that a dialogue with lecturers may facilitate this. Finally Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that the students' motivational belief s may play an influential role in the processing of feedback comments. Such a premise centres upon the environment in which feedback is received.

The present research therefore sought to consider the accepted literature from an alternative perspective; whereby conceptions of feedback are viewed in a more holistic sense taking into consideration; the students achievement orientation, conceptions of ability and competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem levels, emotions at the time of receiving the feedback and capacity to self-regulate. The present research is therefore striving to better understand how the constructed learning environments lecturers create affect students comprehension, utilisation and behavioural response to feedback received.

Methodology

The primary aim of the present study centred upon participants explaining their emotional thoughts and feelings at times perceived as stressful or upsetting. Many people perhaps may find it hard to express such emotional responses in oral form. Pictorial representation through drawings was therefore used. The use of drawings as a medium for collecting data on the emotional and relational aspects of human experience has been generally accepted within the literature (Kearney & Hyle, 2003: 24). Stiles (2004) confirms such a viewpoint

arguing that, drawings are well positioned as the methodology of choice for those interested in collecting this kind of data. Within the area of Education, drawing research methodology is in its infancy, however within areas such as design research (Valentine, 2003), art pedagogy (McKillop, 2006), and media audience research (Gauntlett, 2006) increasingly the literature reflects an adoption of drawing as a tool to collect data. It was expected that drawing would afford research participants the opportunity to remember and articulate implicit emotional and relational aspects about assessment that otherwise might have been missed out had more conventional research methods, such as one-to-one interviews, been used alone.

Eighteen final year undergraduate social science students took part in the study. The breakdown of gender reflected male (n=9, 22.66 years) and female (n=11, 21.66 years). The participants were given large pieces of A2 Flip chart paper and a selection of coloured marker pens. Three warm-up activities (not related to the research question) were administered so participants could become comfortable with the process. In the final exercise participants were asked to pictorially depict their experiences of feedback during their degree. Following the completion of the drawing exercise participants engaged in a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to explain their drawing to the researcher to promote discussion. The researcher also had pre-determined areas to discuss. These areas included; emotions, conceptions of ability, interpersonal focus, academic grades, use of feedback, confidence and attributions. Following verbatim transcription the interview data was inductively thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Implications

The data collection revealed eight broad dimensions: emotions, efficacy cognitions, lecturers, draft work, effort, motivation, grades and feedback cognitions. Within these dimensions twenty-four sub themes were revealed. The results indicate that students' conceptions of feedback are mediated by pre-assessment orientations, performance outcome processing and behavioural response. The results can be aligned to those of Ingleton (1999) who argued that an individual's pre-disposition and decision making processes in-situ temper the emotional reaction. The effect of emotional engagement is of particular significance to university lecturers, considering that potentially emotions could

last for a sustained period of time. If a student receives what they perceive as negative feedback the consequence could be that the learner is unreceptive to learning for a long time (Tennant 1997). The majority of lecturers attempt to "control, manage, limit or redirect outward expressions of emotions" (Dirkx 2001, p67). However, findings within the present research suggest that academic staff need to consider more than just emotional responses. The behavioural dimensions apparent within the results suggest that constructs such as attribution, motivation and future effort deployment are important considerations for academic staff. Suggestions are made that the feedback lecturers give to specific students may be able to control subsequent behavioural responses by tailoring it to address the student's conceptions of feedback and pre-assessment orientations.