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Feedback: A thematic analysis of focus group discussion of what students get and what students want. (0204)

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Introduction

This paper presents the qualitative phase of a larger research project exploring students' experience of receiving formative and summative feedback. Feedback is one of the most critical, and most controversial, components of student learning. National Student Survey results show persistent dissatisfaction with feedback relative to other aspects of university experience, and institutional and pedagogical attention is focused on how feedback may be managed to enable learning within the context of financial pressures and the rise of consumerist attitudes in students. Feedback has multiple aspects which may be analysed from various levels of abstraction. As social psychologists we approached the issue through a framework suggested by Doise (1986), (see table 1.). From this approach research strategies may be anchored at a specific level of analysis but the findings are contextualised in relation to the other levels of analysis.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
IDEOLOGICAL	Shared beliefs, social representations, social norms
POSITIONAL	Relative social positions (student, lecturer, customer, gender, class)
SITUATIONAL	Interactional context
INTRAPERSONAL	Basic individual cognitive processes

TABLE 1 The levels of analysis in social psychological theory and research from Doise (1986).

Research at a particular level, will lead to the adoption of particular methods, which relate to the understanding of feedback in particular ways. The ideological level for example, could involve the analysis of the social practices which maintain systems of monitoring and regulation in institutions. The positional level may develop analysis related to the investigation of gender, class or another social factor. The situational level is focused upon interactions. This interactional sphere is particularly useful for anchoring an analysis of feedback as it is at this level that the influences of the other levels may be expressed, and therefore observed. The aim of this phase of research is to both highlight and understand the processes and perceptions of students making sense of and acting upon feedback as expressed through focus group conversations.

Method

The research was undertaken following institutional ethical clearance and data was generated from a series of 6 focus groups, held in a small comfortable room on campus. The groups ranged in size from 3, to 5 participants, with a total of 28 students, including mature students, master's students, and students from courses across all faculties at the University (Humanities, Social Sciences, Science, professionally oriented and academic courses), international, exchange, European and home students. Participants were recognised as motivated, vocal and engaged students, underperforming students and those who experiencing difficulties did not seem to volunteer. To counter this, a further series of interviews were arranged with specifically targeted individuals but only 3 were undertaken, with several students who could have contributed material to this issue declining the invitation to participate.

Focus group material was transcribed and thematic analysis was employed following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008). Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data and initial ideas were bullet pointed and noted. At this stage the researchers have devised initial codes, with themes identifying areas within the data that seemed important to feedback and learning. The data will be further reviewed for additional themes and for the development of the relationships between themes in order to establish how they can group into overarching notions to describe the multiple and complex ideas concerning feedback.

Initial Analysis

Recognition of diversity

It is important to indicate that it was evident that the students in all groups acknowledged the wide ranging concerns and issues about feedback and they were appreciative of the constraints on markers in terms of time, and logistics. Comments concerning this area was not given detailed analysis, but demonstrated that the students were sophisticated in their understanding of the individual and institutional context of assessment and feedback. The thematic analysis is at an early stage, but there are three emergent themes derived from initial analysis. Students want:

- ◆ To be 'known' (although knowing them doesn't mean we have to know them personally)
- ◆ To be part of a learning community (but personal' feedback doesn't have to be individual)
- ◆ To relate feedback to teaching (if feedback is part of learning it is also part of teaching)
- ◆ To make their 'good' better (knowing what they can build on)

The conference paper will outline and build on these themes, developing interconnections and refinements. The following illustrates the type of issue brought into focus by the analysis.

Being Known

'Being Known', implies individualised feedback, but relates to a wider issues of how students feel about how markers acknowledge and understand the context in which they are studying and the pressures and experiences they are going through. This is not necessarily an individualised orientation but one in which the markers are challenged to pitch feedback which fits into the overall student experience. For example, in one focus group students talked of 'response' rather than feedback, and the desire to be recognised for taking a particular approach which the marker can highlight. Students also differentiated between the feedback of individual coursework markers and support to facilitate longer term development. A further element of 'being known' relates to 'Knowing their experiences'. This partly relates to preparing students to understand feedback, but also recognising how some groups of students have different assessment loads or weightings and that broad institutional policies (such as the format of feedback on exams) may impact on some student groups much more than others.

The thematic analysis will build an understanding of how students talk about their feedback experiences, linking this interactional talk to pedagogical approaches and institutional strategies about assessment and feedback.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Doise, W. (1986). *Levels of Explanation in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.