

## **'Wishy-washy feedback doesn't help anyone': non-traditional students' conceptualisation and understanding of feedback**

The use of feedback to support higher education (HE) students' academic progression has received much attention due to consistently low National Student Survey (NSS) scores across the sector in the area of Assessment and Feedback. Whilst the timeliness of feedback has been addressed within many institutions, the consistent low NSS scores would suggest that feedback remains an on-going concern (Burke, 2011; Cramp, 2011). This qualitative based study explored the ways in which non-traditional students interpreted their feedback, their conceptualisations of feedback and the forms of feedback they found useful and not as useful. Through an exploration of students' conceptualisation and interpretation of feedback and utilising a Bourdieuan perspective, this paper argues that feedback serves as an 'elimination' tool through which students can either establish a sense of belonging and close alignment with or alienation from their HE institution.

### **Introduction**

The participation of non-traditional students in HE and particularly their sense of feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010: 126) has received much attention in academic literature. Non-traditional students' experiences of HE have frequently been framed through their construction as 'other', as they do not appear to possess the forms of capital that secure their close alignment to HE processes and practices (see for example Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Whilst much has been achieved in the sense of widening participation, little has been done to explore the implicit and yet unchallenged practices through which HE re-enforces constructions of 'other' and thereby continues to replicate social inequities. As an '...interface between teachers, pedagogical goals; student learning needs and institutional/governmental policies' (Bailey and Garner, 2010: 188), feedback is a powerful mechanism through which students can understand their sense of fit to their HE institution. By the time students receive their feedback, which is frequently on completion of modules studied, the grade provided becomes an implicit judgement on their alignment to their university rather than being viewed as a formative component that contributes to their academic development. For students without a family history of HE, the final judgement on a piece of work and particularly when the work has been judged to fail, therefore contributes to students' sense of otherness (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2011). Given the emotional work that is connected with non-traditional students' experiences of higher education and the trajectory interruptions (Byrom, 2009) that contribute to their sense of fit, feedback, in all its forms has a critical role to play in supporting the habitus transformation of such students.

### **Methodology**

This paper, although located within a wide body of research concerning academic and social fit, is also situated within policy discourses around widening participation. Undergraduate students studying education related courses from two post-1992 higher education institutions, who identified themselves as being the first in their family (and therefore established as non-traditional) to go into higher education, were invited to participate in the research. Much research conducted within this field is qualitative in nature and we take this approach up within this study. Creswell (1998) views qualitative research as an 'intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different

textures, and various blends of material' where the fabric 'is not explained easily or simply' (Creswell, 1998:13). Thus the methods used within this research seek to uncover the complexities of issues connected with feedback and the ways in which students constructed their HE identities as a result of feedback received. In total, 10 students participated in the research which comprised focus group interviews and a qualitative questionnaire.

The research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines provided by BERA (2011) and data was analysed thematically.

## **Findings**

The following themes emerged from the data:

- Timing of Feedback
- Useful Feedback
- Feedback as Elimination

### **Timing of Feedback**

Students consistently raised the importance of when they received feedback referring to summative feedback as being too late in helping them consider improvements to a piece of work. A number of students stated that tutorials should be held early in the term rather than towards the end of the module when it was deemed too late. Sam stated:

I think that feedback should occur regularly throughout the course. When an assignment has been set, it is important to seek assistance and feedback on work so that you have ample time to make adjustments before the hand in or exam.

(Sam: Questionnaire)

This was further emphasised by Sally who not only wanted opportunities to discuss assignment work earlier but inferred the contribution of the provision of earlier feedback to her sense of alignment to the institution:

We need tutorials much earlier because then we get to know what's expected of us. It can help you know where you're at with the work...you know...whether you belong here.

(Sally: Focus Group Interview)

Whilst formative feedback such as that desired by students can be viewed as corrective instruction (Brown, 2007), students perceive this as being invaluable in supporting their on-going processes of alignment to the education field.

### **Useful Feedback**

Students had clear ideas about the types of feedback they would find useful. Jade for example stated

I find written feedback the most useful, as I can then refer back to it when necessary. For example, if I come to write an assignment I can look back over the feedback I received previously to assist me in making the relevant changes to improve my grades.

(Jade: Qualitative Questionnaire)

Jade's use of feedback represents an active approach to seeking to learn from what is provided by the lecturer. At the same time however, she is accepting a 'particular hierarchy of success and expertise' (Mann, 2001: 15), in which the feedback provided is 'fixing' whatever problems were identified with her work and thereby 'fixing' her lack of fit.

### **Feedback as Elimination**

Non-traditional students are complicit in the construction of the HE social space and its concomitant logic (Bourdieu, 1990) through their acceptance of feedback and lack of critical dialogue with tutors about their work. Lily explains

I found it embarrassing to go up to tutors and question as I felt that they may be offended by me challenging feedback or that their item was stretched enough without having to provide further support, and this is the reason why I have not asked...

(Lily: Qualitative Questionnaire)

Whilst dialogue connected with feedback is considered to be beneficial (Cramp, 2011), 'written feedback, which is essentially a monologue, is now having to carry much of the burden of teacher-student interaction' (Nicol, 2010: 503). For non-traditional students who lack the confidence to approach tutors for increased clarification on feedback provided, the emphasis placed on feedback serves to remind them of their need to be transformed (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

There is an apparent mismatch between non-traditional students' expectations of feedback and feedback provided by course tutors. Students have clear ideas about the most useful form of feedback and how it should be provided and yet do not feel sufficiently empowered to question or enter into dialogue with tutors about this. Thus feedback can be interpreted as an implicit mechanism through which students are constructed as 'other' and contributes to their sense of belonging or alienation.

### **References**

Bailey, R. and Garner, M. (2010) Is the feedback in higher education worth the paper it is written on?: Teachers' reflections on their practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Vol. 15 (2): 187 - 198

British Educational Research Association (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. London: BERA

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (R. Nice, Trans. Second ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *Practical Reason*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.

Brown, J. (2007) Feedback: the student perspective. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. Vol. 12 (1): 33 – 51.

Byrom, T. (2009) 'I don't want to go to a crummy little university': social class, higher education choice and the paradox of widening participation. *Improving Schools*. Vol. 12 (3): 207 - 224

Byrom, T. and Lightfoot, N. (2012) Transformation or Transgression? Institutional habitus and working class student identity. *Journal of Social Sciences*. 8(2): 126-134

Burke, D. (2011) 'Now I've got the feedback, what do I do with it?': Strategies for students to get more out of tutor feedback. *Practice and Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Vol. 6 (1): 43 – 66

Cramp, A. (2011) Developing first year engagement with written feedback. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. Vol. 12 (2): 113 – 124

Creswell, J. (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc

Mann, S. (2001) Alternative Perspectives on Student Engagement: alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*. Vol. 26 (1): 7 – 19

Nicol, D. (2010) From Monologue to Dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. Vol. 35 (5): 501 - 517

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. (1): 107-124.