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Title Whatever happened to assessment-for-learning?: students' perceptions of feedback in UK business education

Submitter Dr. Kate Black, Dr. Russell Warhurst

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Introduction and rationale

Perceptions of assessment feedback, and its value in students' learning, is a matter of concern across higher education globally (e.g. Forsythe and Johnson, 2016). Academics reportedly expend countless hours providing detailed, personalised feedback on students' work believing that this aids learning and much technological innovation has occurred to enhance the provision of feedback. However, evaluations such as the UK's National Student Survey and other such inter/national reviews (e.g. NOKUT, 2016; ACER, 2009) consistently reveal students' dissatisfaction with feedback.

In the UK, assessment results are a key metric of 'learning gain' and teaching 'excellence' (e.g. QAA, 2017, 2012; HEFCE, 2017). As students' satisfaction with their learning experiences gains greater prominence in global rankings, so a key challenge lies in identifying how to enhance both the perceived and actual usefulness of assessment with feedback being a key facet of assessment. Most research in this field has, to date, focused upon "the input side of the equation" (Poulous and Mahoney, 2008, p.144), that is, the perspectives of academics providing the feedback whereas the field now requires understanding from students' perspectives (Flores et al., 2015).

Given this clear research problem, the aim of this paper is to deepen knowledge of students' perceptions of assessment feedback by critically examining evidence of reactions to feedback to thereby, enhance both understanding and practice

Existing research

The paper critically examines the typically unquestioned assumption of educationalists, in existing research, that assessment and feedback are integral to student learning, being tools to develop higher-order cognitive capabilities (e.g. Beaumont et al., 2011). Reports that in reality students more typically take a surface, or, at best, strategic approach to learning (Entwistle, 1987) and thereby understand assessment and feedback merely as a means to achieve a satisfactory grade (Rowe, 2011), will be scrutinised.

We analyse feedback in terms of either being a *product*, an end point, a summative statement of achievement, or being a *process*, a component of the broader process of learning. With the marketisation of higher education, assessment is increasingly understood, by policy-makers and students alike, as a product. This perspective positions tutors as providers of feedback and students as individualised, passive consumers who react to, rather than engage with, feedback. Reflecting this perspective, three key themes dominate, namely, students' perceptions of the quality of feedback, receptivity to feedback, and perceptions of its credibility. These themes will be critically examined and a key contribution lies in our analysis of emotion in explaining such reactions to feedback in a context of passivity and disempowerment. Within the process, perspective favoured by educationalists, an emerging dialogical view "re-casts" students as "active agents" working in collaboration with their peers and tutors in feedback (Nichol, 2010, p.502). This process-perspective is evaluated and developed as a basis for considering how feedback can be purposed, once again, as a vehicle for learning.

Methodology

This research adopts a case-study strategy within the Business School of an English teaching-led university in 2017. Despite comprising c.20% of all UK undergraduates, this discipline tends to be under-represented in empirical studies within the field of assessment and feedback (Agius and Wilkinson, 2015).

Following ethical approval, a population census was employed. All undergraduates registered to programmes within the academic year 2016-2017 at the case-study Business School were invited to participate. Data was generated using a 30-question online questionnaire administered via email. Likert scales (values 1-7) ascertained respondents' views across three key areas namely their attitudes towards, and understanding of, feedback and their goal-orientations using the validated 'Attitude-toward-learning' scale (Pieper, 2003). Open-format questions were also incorporated to elicit respondents' wider views.

Statistical analysis is examining relationships between the variables using the independent variables of study year and goal-orientations.

Key findings to date

Statistical analyses will be supported with qualitative evidence.

Initial statistical indications are that year of study has little influence upon respondents' perceptions with, for example, most respondents feeling confident that they understood their feedback, and that it enabled them to improve future work. However, such claims were often negated as respondents emphasised the value of their grade over narrative comments. Aligning with this finding, the 'goal-orientation' of the majority of respondents was to avoid seeming incompetent rather than to develop mastery of their subjects. Moreover, respondents reported how the language of feedback and rubrics presented challenges. Whereas criticality is typically a key final year capability, one quarter of final-year respondents reported not understanding commonly occurring feedback on this capability such as '*lacks evaluation and criticality*'.

While most respondents reported that feedback helped them understand their grades, over seventy percent also reported that feedback '*was too brief to be helpful*' and over sixty percent reported receiving no suggestions for improvement. Significantly, the findings reveal the emotions associated with feedback. Anxiety was widely reported with anger and demoralisation a typical reactions to feedback. An initial analysis of emotional responses appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors seemingly contributing to students' emotional response to receiving feedback

Contributing Perceptions	Significance	Exemplar supporting evidence
Perceived delay in feedback	58.1%: feedback should be within 2 weeks max.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "<i>Most [feedback] is received at the end of a semester so it's meaningless while we just worry about it waiting for ages</i>"
Perceived unfairness in grade and feedback	29.6%: grading is unfair <i>within</i> modules 34.6%: grading is unfair <i>between</i> modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "<i>Most of the grading is unfair</i>"• "<i>I was given exactly the same feedback for XX as another student in my group who got 70% (I got 48%). It's totally unfair</i>"• "<i>There should be two independent graders on every piece of work to ensure its fairer</i>"
Credibility of the feedback: perceptions of the module	57.4%: view of feedback is influenced by view of the module	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "<i>There are inconsistencies between modules ... some have nothing to do with lecture materials. It was just all confusing.</i>"

Credibility of the feedback perceptions of the grading tutor	60.1%: view of feedback is influenced by view of the grading tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Time and time again I asked for help on assessments from XX and they respond with questions such as “What do you think you have to do?” He’s useless and then tells me I’ve done my assignment wrong”
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Implications

While aggregate data, such as that typically reported, reveals students’ broadly negative perceptions of feedback, finer grained analysis reveals substantial variance in perceptions. If higher education is to rise successfully to the challenge of realising the expectations of its students, academics need to appreciate the emotion invested by many students in their assessments, providing feedback that acknowledges but ameliorates the inevitable negative emotions and re-establishes assessment as a vehicle for learning.

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