

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Providing Effective Feedback on Exams under Structural Constraints: Integrating Self-Directed Reflective Learning among Accounting and Finance Students

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract:

Abstract

The importance of 'assessment feedback' in higher education (HE) is a key priority for policy makers, scholars and educators (Sanchez and Dunworth, 2015; Evans, 2013). It is an integral component of developing students as independent learners who are able to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning not only within the HE setting, but also within their professional practice (Ferguson, 2011). The feedback discourse has predominantly focused on practice relating to students' written assignments (courseworks) with a paucity of discussion relating to examination feedback. This gap in the discussion is particularly pertinent to those subject areas that are heavily dependent on examination based assessment strategies, possibly because of professional body requirements, progressive skill competence (typical of STEM subjects) or a combination of both. This project aimed to creatively respond to enhancing student engagement with examination feedback.

Paper:

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Outline

Context

Lizzio and Wilson (2008) identified feedback as a tool to bridge the gap between a student's actual level of performance and desired learning goal with the potential to improve student learning both within HE and beyond. This, coupled with external drivers such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has led to the emergence of feedback as a research topic with a growing body of literature in the UK and across the globe (Sridharan et al., 2018; Jørgensen,

2019). Initially research focused on academic practice of constructing and delivering quality feedback (Nichol, 2011; Price et al, 2011); more recently the focus has shifted to student engagement with and action on feedback thereby avoiding a state of 'passive recipience' (Winstone et al 2017).

Anecdotally, the challenge of engaging students with examination feedback is potentially the most problematic. Examinations typically occur at the end of a unit and, whilst feedback opportunities may be available, student take-up is often limited for a variety of reasons including timing if students have left for a mid-semester or summer break and lack of appreciation of how the skills and competencies assessed in one examination are built on in future study or professional examinations. (Faulkner et al., 2013).

This was the context facing the accounting team at a Post-1992 university. Student engagement with post examination feedback was low contributing significantly to achievement at higher levels and beyond into the profession. Appealing to the literature on feedback the team identified a gap both in terms of feedback for numeracy-based disciplines and enhancing student engagement with end of unit examination feedback.

Problematisation of Assessment Feedback in Numeracy-based Disciplines

The authors attributed the limited literature on feedback in numeracy-based disciplines to scholars' original conceptualisations of the purpose of these disciplines and the association with the two dominant paradigmatic views of feedback; namely cognitivist and socio-constructivist (Evans, 2013). The former is associated with directive telling where feedback is seen as corrective, with an expert providing information to the passive recipient; whereas the latter is seen as facilitative in that it involves provision of comments and suggestions enabling students to make their own revisions thereby assisting them to gain new understandings without dictating what those understandings should be.

Accounting, whilst considered a social science, is similar to STEM subjects, in part due to its highly quantitative subject content. Hence it is often perceived to be concerned with the application of specific rules and procedures to solve problems (Quattrone, 2015). Consequently, tutors often mark based on appropriateness of method, accuracy of calculations/results and the logic of interpretations and recommendations. As a result, a cognitivist rather than socio-constructivist approach to feedback is widely adopted among accounting tutors with a perceived limitation to the scope for tutors to provide feedback requiring students to reflect, critically evaluate their learning and identify areas for further development. (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984). These challenges are exacerbated by constraints for accounting courses which are often accredited by professional associations such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA). Whilst enhancing the professional credibility of the course, this can also result in an examination based assessment strategy aimed at modelling and preparing students for the professional examinations offered by ACCA.

An Intervention to the Examination Feedback Challenge

To address this feedback gap, the teaching team implemented a 'Feedback Day' initiative utilising ideas in the feedback toolkit suggested by Winstone and Nash (2015). Students were invited to attend an event where all their units were considered and given the opportunity to meet tutors to engage in structured dialogic conversations aimed at providing feedback on their performances,

implications for future assessment and supporting student action planning. The event was positioned as intervention research based on the theory of change to explore how to introduce a co-constructivist perspective to feedback that promotes dynamic learning. Weiss (1972) defined the theory of change as how and why an initiative works. Thus, an interventionist research method focused on a systematic study of purposive change strategies, was deemed to be appropriate in determining the extent to which the intervention was effective in achieving its goals (Fraser and Galinsky, 2010). The study aimed to explore how tutors learn from students through dialogue and participation in shared experiences whilst examining how effective this was in encouraging students to take responsibility for seeking out and acting on feedback. (Carless, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, the research had three main objectives:

- To explore how a co-constructivist perspective to feedback can be implemented through facilitating dialogic conversations between students and tutors.
- To examine how tutors can be enabled to understand students' challenges incorporating feedback in their learning
- To investigate how students can be assisted by tutors to engage in self-directed and reflected learning

The study took place over an eight month period from August 2018 to April 2019 with data collected from staff during the development, delivery and post-delivery of the event and from students in terms of their feedback of the event itself. Initial findings indicate that, whilst tutors recognised the importance of feedback as a tool to facilitate students' learning, there was some resistance to a change in approach. However, during the event both staff and students enjoyed and valued the dialogic aspect of the feedback delivery and sense of community achieved by delivering the initiative as a whole department event. Students who attended were often fixated on discussing those examinations where they had performed less well than they expected, often needing some persuasion to consider other examinations where there were pertinent lessons to be learnt for future study and professional examinations. Attendance monitoring at the event also enabled follow up with those students who did not attend; often these were students deemed to be at most risk of failure. A major findings from the study was the need for tutors to believe in the purpose and effectiveness of co-constructivist approach to feedback, thereby, enabling students to engage in self-directed and reflected learning.

(988 words)

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