

When feedback becomes “fundamental to learning”: some implications for the construction of staff - student relationships and student identities. (0154)

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An understanding of the importance of assessment feedback underpinned a recent research study which explored ways of promoting student engagement with feedback. Our findings indicated that while other factors were important, staff- student relationships had a considerable impact on how students engaged with and experienced the feedback received.

A current campaign by the British National Union of Students focuses on the need to improve assessment feedback on the basis that such feedback is “fundamental to learning” (2010 p. 22). This statement, and the overall campaign, replicate a growing consensus in the pedagogic literature, that good quality assessment and feedback drive learning (see especially the work of Sadler (1989, 1998,) Black and Wiliam (1998), James et al (2006) and Price et al (2007)). Equally, a preoccupation with the quality of assessment and feedback is reflected in policy documents circulating in the Higher Education sector (see for instance Williams and Kane (2008), and NUS (2008)), suggesting that satisfactory assessment and feedback are integral to a positive student experience. Nonetheless, despite the interest in feedback itself, the implications of staff- student relationships in the delivery of feedback and learning tends to be implicit and unexplored within the literature.

In pedagogic analyses the implicit recognition of the significance of social relationships is exemplified by the work of Wenger (1998). In his influential studies he stresses the importance of belonging to communities of practice as crucial to learning, however the substance of the social relationships which operate within these communities is relatively unexplored. As Contu and Wilmott (2003) argue, notions of power relations are underdeveloped, while Mayes and Crossan (2007) make a similar point in relation to Wenger’s treatment of the individual in learning communities.

There is now an emergent interest in staff -student relationships within learning communities. For instance, Crossman highlights the importance of staff -student relationships in influencing student perceptions of assessment, and argues that feedback provides a much valued opportunity for staff to personalise the relationship (2004, 2007). Additionally studies such as those of Higgins et al (2001, 2002) and Steinberg (2008) stress the emotional dimension of feedback relationships for both students and staff. However, whilst demonstrating the significance of relationships and emotions to participants, and providing feedback as a focus for exploring staff- student relationships, the previous studies do not take the analysis much further. The work of Mayes and Crossan, though, provides an approach more relevant to our analysis.

Drawing on the work of Wenger, Mayes and Crossan suggest the need to consider the link between social relationships and learning identities. In a study of learning relationships in the FE sector they argued that an individual's learning identity (one of Wenger's components of learning) is constructed through the personal one to one relationships which operate within a learning community. Student tutor relationships are crucial to the construction of this identity, they suggest.

We took this understanding of the connection between relationships and identity as a basis for the further investigation of our findings. Specifically, we asked what learning identities are constructed by students through the staff-student relationships operating within feedback? Using discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) to consider this question, we explored the interpretative repertoires deployed by students when talking about their experiences with staff and feedback. Focussing on a series of semi structured interviews conducted as part of our feedback study, the "discursive formations" used by students were identified. We found that these formations coalesced around notions of positive feedback value, reflecting the broader pedagogic and policy discourse, juxtaposed with a discourse of failure: failed institutional practices, failed staff- student relationships, and failings in independent learning that produced negative learner identities.

The presentation of this paper will provide an opportunity to report on these findings, and to debate the substance and implications of staff- student relations at a theoretical and practical level. We explore the paradox that while relationships are seen as important to feedback engagement, learner identities constructed through staff –student feedback relationships appear to have the tendency to be negative. Further, we suggest that the current discourse of positive feedback value has the potential to accentuate negative constructions of the student experience of higher education and of the evolving identities of students.

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