

Exploring student and tutor perceptions of feedback in Post Graduate study (0030)

Outline

Background

While much research has been conducted over the years on the uses of and perceptions of feedback with undergraduate students, little if any of this has been done with post graduate students. This may be because there is an assumption that students who reach this stage of study, do not need any further help in this area. There has been some research, however, which shows that both the transition to post graduate study is not an easy one, (Tobbell, 2010) and also that their profile is not a homogenous one (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthorn, & Zammit, 2009).

Research has been conducted by Nottingham Trent University and Sheffield Hallam University to research into the perceptions of, and uses of, feedback by post graduate students. The research has also examined the perceptions of feedback from post-graduate tutors' point of view. The purpose of the research was to identify how to enhance the student learning experience in this area to ensure students are getting the most from their feedback. The research itself was theoretically underpinned by theories linked to Assessment for Learning (AfL) (Gardner, 2006) through the use of targeted feedback that would enable students to improve their work at postgraduate level by fostering a more independent and autonomous approach to their learning. This research builds on the work done by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) connecting to their work on self regulation through feedback to enhance academic performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Methods

A mixed methods approach was taken for this work, (Gorard, 2004) collecting and collating both quantitative data and qualitative data. The research followed the pattern of a small-scale evaluative case study (Bassegy, 1999) focussing on a narrow field of enquiry with comparable participants in two separate institutions, and with a view to improving practice therein. The approach was both interpretivist and evaluative, involving a collaboration between two separate institutions.

Having taken this approach, the research included data derived from a number of sources to add rigour to the work through methodological triangulation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). This range of data collection methods included:

- Questionnaires for postgraduate students across a range of PGCE subjects to ascertain their views on the assessment and feedback they had experienced during their course.

- Questionnaires for the tutors of postgraduate students across a range of courses, to ascertain their views on if and how their postgraduate students use the feedback they are given by them.

Findings

Student Perceptions - From the findings, 81% of the students who participated said that they had found their feedback useful and had used it to inform their next piece of work. A total of 66% of the participants said that it had improved their work, with 10% saying it had not, and 10% not using it to do so.

In terms of the type of feedback that was most useful, the results were interesting identifying challenges for Higher Education Institutions. Written feedback was deemed to be the most common type of feedback received, by 50% of students. It was also the most common type to be ignored by students when it came to using it to inform their next piece of work. At both institutions written feedback was deemed, therefore, to be the least useful, yet most common form of feedback received, with verbal feedback being the much less so.

When asked if feedback had improved their marks, most students responded that it had not, and the main type of feedback cited here was again, written feedback. Thus, although written feedback seems to be the most common form of feedback across the two HEIs, it is also the least well used, and the most ignored.

Tutors Perceptions - Approximately one third of the tutors questioned commented on the requirement of students for verbal or face to face feedback from their tutors, in preference to written feedback. These tutors felt that their students responded much more to this kind of feedback than any other. The type of feedback described by the tutors in their responses included short face to face meetings, verbal feedback in class with students, and one to one discussions, during which students were given feedback (which in some cases was a mere reiteration of their written feedback) which they responded well to by improving their next piece of work.

Well over 50% of the tutors gave practical details of what their students had done with the feedback to improve their work, this included students responding to specific targets set, improving their academic writing and referencing, changing their ideas for future work, improving the coherence and structure of their work, and using feedback to ensure they met assessment criteria.

In terms of negative responses, that is, where tutors remarked both on why and why not students used feedback, a variety of comments were given from approximately 40% of the tutors. Some said that students did not always listen or understand the feedback they were given, and that it might be that students needed help to understand how useful feedback was to them. One tutor commented that the some students consistently ignored feedback on referencing and writing until they were referred in an assignment.

Conclusions

The research has shown that it is possible to interpret the data through a lens of seven principles for good feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) in order to determine how each one connects to the way post graduates perceive and subsequently use feedback in their academic work. In doing so, we have exposed a number of issues which need further

investigation, and have also highlighted ways in which we might move forward in this (as yet) poorly researched area to improve how and why we use feedback at this level of study.

Sample size was limited to postgraduates on PGCE courses at both institutions and it would be useful to go beyond this type of student with further research of this nature to ascertain whether or not the findings of this study can be found across other types of post graduate study/courses. Using PGCEs did, however, enable us to make a very useful comparison between the two universities as the postgraduates were on similar courses at both institutions.

References

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