

## Exploring feedback with students: A telling account?

Sector changes, e.g. increasing participation rates and widening access have created a competitive market in higher education (HE), positioning students as consumers of a HE product (Higgins *et al*, 2002; Singh, 2002; Gracia 2009). As part of this 'consumerist' positioning, students are encouraged to formally rate (e.g. through the National Student Survey) the quality of the education service they receive across a number of core areas, including 'Assessment and Feedback'.

This study considers undergraduate students' experiences of the learning feedback they receive within a UK Business School. We perform a detailed content analysis of these accounts and draw on strands of the performance management and wider accountability literatures (Modell, 2005) to unravel students' conceptions of feedback and underlying learning. We subsequently discuss the implications for pedagogic practice, reflecting on the legitimacy of aspects of the HE league tables.

In recent times there has been focus on 'feedback' within the HE literature, (e.g., Hounsell, 2003; HEA, 2004; Nicol *et al*, 2006; Riordan & Loacker, 2009, Carless *et al*, 2011). The value of generating and providing learning feedback to students is established within the literature (Hattie and Jaeger 1998: Hounsell 2003). In addition there is an abundance of 'best-practice guidance' for academic tutors describing the desirable components of feedback (QAA and HEA 2004). These dominant strands create the common 'transmission model' of feedback practice as a transfer of information from tutors to students.

Perhaps as a consequence of this, what remain comparatively under-researched are student perspectives of the feedback discourse (Higgins *et al* 2002; Nicol and Macfarlane 2006). This is significant since studies highlight a number of different perceptions between students and tutors in relation to the nature, scope and usefulness of tutor feedback (Carless, 2006) and NSS results indicate students' frequent evaluation of feedback quality as an area of dissatisfaction. Our study considers feedback from this under-researched student perspective and seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of feedback practice that strengthens its connection and utility to students' learning development.

Twenty students, drawn from across each undergraduate course and year of study, volunteered to take part in the research. An in-depth, unstructured group discussion was subsequently arranged and undertaken with these student participants. This group discussion enabled us to explore the students' shared understandings of feedback. This discussion encounter sought to engage students in a meaningful and undirected dialogue about feedback, rather than extract responses to a series of already developed interview questions.

The selection of an unstructured group discussion approach was also driven by our understanding that feedback practice does not take place within an educational vacuum, but is an integral part of students' broader learning experience. The meaning that students assign to feedback is created through their interactions with each other, their tutors and the learning environments in which they engage, i.e. it is socially constructed. The discussion session lasted for four hours and was split into two halves with a short rest break in the middle. The session was also video-recorded (by the researchers) in its entirety and generated an abundance of rich or 'thick' experiential data. Subsequent exploration of this meaning was undertaken using an interpretive approach, which also remains sensitive to the social construction of feedback meaning.

During the first stage of data analysis we immersed ourselves in the data through the repeated viewing of the recordings. A detailed transcription of the entire dataset was subsequently completed. We analysed these transcripts firstly by performing a manual, double-blind coding. Following this, we employed data analysis software (Leximancer) to perform a detailed content analysis of the text, identifying key concepts and the textual relationship between these to expose the emergent themes within the data. In this way we constructed a detailed, relational picture (Concept Map) of students' feedback discussions. The use of Leximancer to perform detailed, qualitative data analysis is well supported within the literature (e.g., Cretchley et al., 2010; Hewett et al., 2009; Rooney, 2005).

We progressed by undertaking an interpretive analysis of these thematic patterns structured around the three overarching and emergent feedback themes: 'Conceptions', 'Service' and 'Relationships'. Initial analysis suggests that students frame feedback as an issue of assessment, a form of performance management, that uses tutors' learning direction or 'telling' as a means of improving grades, rather than as a tool of broader learning and personal development. The 'grade' emerges as a powerful and consuming performance measure. 'Learning' effort is concentrated almost exclusively on this grade – assessed and awarded by tutors. Hence, students perceive feedback largely as the practice and responsibility of tutors, typically restricted to written comments on assignment cover sheets. Students position themselves as the passive recipients of feedback, rather than as active participants or even producers of feedback which suggests a narrow and instrumental view of feedback, as a phenomenon that is extrinsic to them.

We found little evidence of more pluralistic understandings of feedback practice beyond assessment, arising from alternative learning exchanges, forms or voices such as informal discussions with tutors and peers or other commentary, guidance, descriptions or explanations. There was also little evidence of value being ascribed to self-generated feedback in terms of descriptions of active or reflective learning development practices which might include consulting learning development and study skills texts, reflecting on learning performance or engaging with available learning support opportunities e.g. academic writing drop-in sessions. Students also quickly disqualified themselves from direct involvement with practices of peer and self-feedback, both dismissed as invalid sources of expert feedback, regarding both as having little value. There is also evidence of students using feedback as a grade justification device, beginning to hold tutors to account for the processes of marking and grading.

Faced with increasing pressure from student 'consumers' (e.g., via NSS) for more explicit and detailed feedback, practice development risks emerging from the short-term management of the 'problems' identified by students (consumerist response) rather than a more careful and thorough consideration (pedagogic response) that facilitates desirable forms of student learning and development.

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