What Makes for Constructive Feedback to Students?

In recent years, across and beyond the UK, the provision of feedback to university students on their progress and performance has emerged as a key focus of student discontent. Although widely attributed to the advent of the National Student Survey (within which questions on feedback have consistently been scored by students lowest of all the aspects of students' experiences surveyed), evidence of significant student discontent with feedback had in fact already surfaced in other surveys and analyses (see for example Hounsell 2003; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2007; and Hounsell, 2007), Hounsell, and was not confined to the UK but was apparent in Australia and Hong Kong (see for example Carless, 2006; Krause et al. 2005).

The combined effect of these troublesome signs has been two-fold. On the one hand, there has come a flurry of empirical studies across the subject range as well as a multitude of debates and commentary; and on the other, the inception of a range of guidance materials (see for instance Neville, 2008; Burke and Pieterick, 2010) and web-based resources [footnote 1] to assist university teachers to review and enhance the provision of feedback practices. While this surge in engagement with the challenges of giving effective feedback has undoubtedly begun to yield new insights and perspectives, some potentially crucial facets of feedback have yet to be reviewed and distilled. This seminar is concerned with one such facet, the nature of the comments that are made (usually but not always by lecturers and tutors) on university students' essays, reports and other assigned coursework.

Over the last three months, I have identified over fifty non-trivial studies of feedback comments in (or salient to) higher education, and in the paper presentation I shall explore what can be learned from an analytical review that I have embarked upon of this scholarly corpus. There is a range of dimensions which are likely to feature to lesser or greater degrees in the outcomes of the analysis. One such issue is the extent to which comments are predominantly summative and judgmental (focusing on for examples correction of errors or justification of the grade awarded), and conceiving of feedback as essentially after-the-fact and retrospectively oriented; or how far they are forward-looking and ameliorative, providing praise and encouragement or raising questions. A second pivots around a distinction which is made in language learning (see for example Ferris and Bitchener, 2012) between direct and indirect feedback (where the latter suggests where revision may be needed while the former explicitly identifies an error or infelicity). A third has to do with the tenor and directionality of the comments made, as in for instance Boud's discussion (following Rorty) of 'final vocabulary', or the distinction espoused [if not originated] by Black and Wiliam (1998) between task-involvement and ego-involvement – i.e. between comments which are directed at the learner as a person, and those which are directed at the work the learner has produced.

What emerges from these analyses also has to be considered in relation to a recent shift in focus away from what Sommers pungently called 'disembodied remarks' and towards more interactive

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1 See for example the *Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe)* website at Oxford Brookes University [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/index.html]; the resources produced by the *Re-Engineering Assessment Project* at Strathclyde University (reap.ac.uk) ; and my own *Enhancing Feedback* website at the University of Edinburgh (www.enhancingfeedback.ed.ac.uk).

and dialogical perspectives on feedback (Hounsell, 2007) — perspectives that explore not only what comments are provided to students but how they engage with and make use of these in their learning.

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