

Students' experiences of assessment feedback through analysis of the personal support networks of second year undergraduate student teachers at an English university (0253)

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This paper explores students' experiences of assessment feedback through analysis of the personal support networks of second year undergraduate student teachers at an English university.

Large-scale surveys in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (e.g. DBIS, 2014; HEFCE, 2014) have been uniform in identifying assessment and feedback as the higher education sector's weakest area, confirming Knight's (2002: 107) earlier view of assessment as its 'Achilles' Heel'. This has been particularly apparent in the National Student Survey (NSS) which, since its launch in 2005, demonstrated lower scores in the five assessment (S5, 6, 8) and feedback (S7, 9) statements than any other areas of student experience identified. With NSS outcomes forming part of the Key Information Set (KIS) (UNISTATS, 2015) that potential students are encouraged to examine to select a university, improvements to assessment and feedback dominated discourse across the sector (e.g. Sadler, 2010; Merry *et al.*, 2013). This also raised concerns that quick fix, instrumental solutions may be sought over more principled, longitudinal approaches (e.g. Price *et al.*, 2008; Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009).

'Feedback' has been recognised as a 'contentious and confusing issue' (Boud and Molloy, 2013: 698), with reviews of the literature noting that the term lacked clarity of definition (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008; Evans, 2013). Where Hattie and Timperley (2007:81) conceptualized feedback 'as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding', Price *et al.* (2010: 278) cited its 'multiple purposes' and questioned attempts to measure its effectiveness. Boud and Molloy (2013: 703) noted that feedback practice had shifted from 'engineering models' to 'sustainable models' of practice. Where the former (Feedback Mark 1) was based on information being given to learners, with the onus on the giver, the latter (Feedback Mark 2) was based on learners' engagement as 'constructors of their understanding'.

The challenge for higher education appeared to be the achievement of principled, sustainable feedback within a context of increased public accountability (HEFCE, 2014). Where increased student numbers added a further dimension, peer review appeared to offer pedagogical and practical solutions (e.g. Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000; Van Zundert *et al.*, 2010; Carless, 2015). Nicol

et al. (2014: 102) advocated greater student engagement with the feedback process, arguing that 'the capacity to produce quality feedback is a fundamental graduate skill and should receive much greater attention in higher education curricula'. However, this still placed the onus on tutors to model effective feedback, despite their limited skills in its provision (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008; Nicol, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Carless *et al.*, 2011). Evans (2013) acknowledged the central roles of tutors and peers but also recognised that, to enable interactive, timely and integrated feedback, students went *beyond* structured academic support communities to use personal networks. This paper builds upon earlier investigations of students' informal peer feedback networks within cohort boundaries (Headington, 2014) to consider how and why students use personal (or ego-) networks for feedback.

Using PAJEK software (de Nooy *et al.*, 2005), Social Network Analysis (SNA) techniques (Scott, 2000; Carolan, 2014) were used to elicit and map peer 'feedback networks' within a cohort of student teachers [n=105] at the end of their first year of undergraduate study. It used a constrained number of choices [c=3] and directed, binary data. The cohort formed a defined boundary to enable the exploration of interactions between individuals in the network, information flow and social influence within the complete network (UKSNA, 2015). Additional data, derived from questionnaire, diary and interview methods during the second year of study, facilitated the development of eight students' ego-networks (de Nooy *et al.*, 2005; Prell, 2012). These networks were based on undefined boundaries and unconstrained choices. Nvivo was then used for the thematic analysis of diary and interview data to investigate students' understanding of the term 'feedback' and explore uses of ego-networks for feedback purposes.

In common with others (e.g. Carless, 2015; Pitt, 2015, Price *et al.*, 2015), preliminary findings have emphasised students' need for emotional feedback and support throughout the assessment process. However, it has been evident that students did not rely simply on tutors and peers. The ego-networks identified that emotional feedback and support was sought frequently through trusting relationships with family members. Financial issues that resulted in students maintaining continuity and proximity with family members through living arrangements and regular electronic communication (HEFCE, 2009) may have inadvertently provided some students with an additional level of feedback.

On the other hand, dyadic and triadic interactions with peers, within and beyond the defined boundary of the cohort, face-to-face and through Web 2.0 technology, seemed to facilitate feedback that fostered motivation and resilience based on common goals. These interactions often confirmed or extended student epistemology through dialogue and debate around ongoing assignments or in relation to tutor feedback on completed work. However, the security of triadic 'cliques' based on

trusting relationships and shared language also demonstrated the potential to stultify growth through information stagnation or unchallenged viewpoints. Where some students felt comfortable operating within these constraints, others actively cultivated weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) as specific sources of feedback.

Students appeared to value informal feedback through ego-networks as timely and personal. Supplementing formalised feedback mechanisms, informal feedback offered opportunities for greater levels of engagement and promoted the construction of understanding (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Further analysis will seek to determine the extent to which students discriminated between or combined feedback from different sources.

898 words

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