

It's more than what you write on the page: The three domains of influence on student perceptions of feedback (0288)

Margaret Price, Birgit den Outer
Oxford Brookes University, UK

Introduction

Higher education is trying to find ways to improve student engagement and satisfaction with assessment feedback. Feedback, according to students, needs to be understandable and useful (Price et al., 2010) and there have been many studies that have examined the feedback itself - its format, style, structure, method of delivery, timing, links to assessment criteria and so on - to try to find a formula for success. They have shown that several aspects of feedback militate against its utility, for example poor legibility, use of jargon, inappropriate timing and vagueness. However, improving the feedback product is not necessarily the key to ensuring that feedback is seen as good; many initiatives in this area have not led to a marked improvement in student satisfaction. The study reported here has taken a different stance. Recognising that feedback is integral to - but only part of - the larger learning process, we have asked students to identify where feedback works for them and explored the factors well beyond its content and delivery that influence their perceptions of it.

Pilot study

The project grew out of a small pilot study about feedback that business students selected as 'good' or 'bad'. This revealed that there seems to be little difference between the content of the feedback deemed 'good' or 'bad' and suggested that there are more veiled, yet possibly significant factors at play that determined student perceptions of the quality and utility of feedback, for instance engagement with the assessment task, prior interventions within modules designed to improve student 'assessment literacy', students' ability to gauge the quality of their work through their understanding of standards, and marking criteria. This accords with other broader discussions in the literature around dialogue, trust and the relational nature of feedback (e.g. Carless 2009, Nicol 2010, Orsmond et al. 2011, Price et al., 2011). Therefore, this study asks whether foundations of satisfaction with feedback lie not only in the quality of the feedback provided, but also in student experiences prior to receipt of feedback that enable them to engage with assessment and to self-evaluate their work.

Main project

The study reported here built on the pilot study. Student researchers asked students (n=32) to select from feedback they had received at university one example of 'good' and one example of 'bad' feedback. The student researchers interviewed them about their selections and related experiences. To compare different learning milieus, we collected data from disciplines with different feedback practices (Biosciences and Business) at two institutions with contrasting institutional cultures and missions (research-led and research-informed). SRAs thematically analysed the interview transcripts using NVivo in order to obtain a more nuanced picture of how students categorised and interpreted the pieces of feedback, and their experiences related to their engagement with, preparation for and undertaking of the assessment task. In addition, the SRAs analysed the good and bad feedback pairs using a discourse analysis framework, drawing on the work of Brown, Gibbs and Glover (2003), which classified feedback comments into five types: content, developing skills, further learning, motivational and demotivational comments on student work. The SRAs then analysed the transcripts and coded feedback pairs together and wrote up individual reports. One SRA then analysed the coded feedback scripts collectively, looking for patterns across the entire data set. Initial findings informed the development and trialling of initiatives in modules about both institutions.

In Phase 2, selected module leaders trialled interventions designed to improve feedback in various modules. The SRAs ran focus groups with students to evaluate the impact of the intervention. Staff researchers later interviewed module leaders and project subject coordinators about their perspectives on the interventions. Staff researchers reviewed all the data and SRA analyses in order to draw conclusions about what makes 'good' feedback good.

Findings

Our analysis determined that whether students perceive feedback to be 'good' or 'bad' is influenced by a range of factors that fall broadly into three domains: the domain of the feedback itself (which traditionally has been the focus of advice to improve feedback), the domain of the context of the feedback, and the domain of the students, including their development and expectations. After outlining each of the factors, this presentation will discuss how they interact with each other, as well as 'sites of silence' i.e. where, based on the research literature, we expected the project to generate data but no data emerged.

This research confirms that the technical aspect of feedback-- the comments made on students' assignments--is only a small part of the complex phenomenon of 'good' feedback. Therefore, changing these technical aspects alone is unlikely to change whether feedback is effective (in that it leads to more learning) or whether it is seen as 'good' (by students and in NSS scores). Indeed, NSS scores remain low despite years of attention on improving the timing and technical aspects of feedback. Awareness of how the context of feedback and the student beliefs and expectations shape student judgements of feedback as 'good' or 'bad' can help diagnose problems and orient decision-making towards improving feedback in specific contexts.

References

- Brown, E., and C. Glover. 2006. Evaluating Written Feedback. In *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*, edited by C. Bryan and K. Clegg, 81-91. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Carless, D. (2009) 'Trust, distrust and their impact on assessment reform'. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 79-89.
- Nicol, D (2010) 'From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback in mass higher education'. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 35(5), 501 -517.
- Orsmond, P., Merry, S., and Callaghan, A, A. (2011) 'Communities of practice and ways to learning: charting the progress of biology undergraduates'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-17, iFirst Article.
- Price, M., Handley, K. & Millar, J. (2011) 'Feedback - focussing attention on engagement'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(8), 879-896.
- Price, M., Handley, K., Millar, J. & O'Donovan, B. (2010) Feedback all that effort but what is the effect? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 277-289.