

Rethinking Feedback: Convergence of academic practice, student engagement and partnership (0369)

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Outline

Feedback is both a driver to student learning and a point of dissatisfaction, evidenced in the NSS. In his review of recent literature, Jonsson (2012) argues that discourse has focussed on academic practice of giving feedback on assessments and suggests that work in the area of students' using feedback is sparse. Price et al (2011) indicate that, despite the fact that feedback continues to dominate as an area of concern, few students actually constructively use the feedback provided. Furthermore, Nichol (2011) suggests that the effectiveness of feedback in higher education is 'not compelling'.

Barnett (1999) and Kumar (2007) both argue that institutions are preparing students for a complex challenging future. Consequently, we have a 'responsibility to prepare students for a lifetime of uncertainty, change, challenge and emergent or self-created opportunity'. Therefore there is a need to equip students with skills that will have lifelong benefits. Enabling students to both recognise feedback in all its forms and adapt strategies to utilise feedback to make themselves more adaptable in an uncertain, complex and challenging environment is relevant both now and in the future. Arguably, research and workflows in higher education relating to partnership, employability, student retention and success converge in the challenge of energizing students to recognise, value and constructively use feedback, from a variety of sources and in multiple formats, to inform both academic and personal development.

Although much of the work in the sector has concentrated on increasing students' satisfaction with feedback this was not the sole impetus for this work. NSS scores and other measures were undoubtedly a motivating factor, however the primary aim was to explore how to aid students' development of using feedback for learning and improving, thereby equipping them with the skills to prosper in life beyond higher education. The language in the discourse around feedback typically refers to students 'receiving' feedback, driven partly by policies aimed at influencing staff behaviour against an outcome of increased student satisfaction as measured by instruments such as the NSS. Debatably, the questions in the NSS relate to staff practice rather than student engagement with feedback with the associated potential to draw inappropriate conclusions in terms of both the effectiveness and students ability to use feedback to constructively inform academic and personal development. Shifting the lens to focus on students as active agents in the productive use of feedback requires an alternative definition of satisfaction aligned with a notion of partnership in the learning experience and how this contributes to personal development. As a result, this work explored the potential to create a culture shift by putting students at the heart of the feedback discourse, thereby progressing practice and impacting students learning in the academic sphere and beyond. Empowering students to own and use feedback in all its forms is the essential element that will lead to sustained enhancement at an institutional level.

This project focussed on the Business Schools at two post 1992 universities in order to compare and contrast findings with students of similar demographics. Adopting a collaborative action research approach, the project aimed to unpack students understanding of feedback, where they recognised it occurring, and their perceptions of credible feedback. This framed the context within which to

identify effective strategies for supporting students to act on feedback. As considerable time, knowledge and effort are put into providing feedback, resources can appear wasted if efforts are not concentrated on equipping students with ways in which to utilise feedback for their personal and academic development. Consequently, empowering students to effectively use feedback should result in enhanced staff as well as student satisfaction.

Several cycles were completed over a four year period to both explore feedback practice through a student experience lens and evaluate the impact of innovations. Data was collected from both staff and students via focus groups to enable participants to exchange and develop their views. An action research approach was purposefully selected in order for the practitioners to focus on enhancement and improvements within their practice, as Meyer (2000) describes 'action research as a process that involves people and social situations that have the ultimate aim of changing an existing situation for the better.' Several cycles were implemented over a four year period (2010-2014) and at two separate institutions. Through a collaborative approach this work aimed to empower students to recognise, own and use feedback by:

- Recognizing feedback in its variety of forms (verbal, written, formative, summative, ad hoc)
- Recognizing where feedback may come from (tutors, colleagues, peers, self)
- Employing strategies identified through this project to improve both student learning and self-development.

The findings support the discourse in the literature relating to students lack of active engagement with feedback. The reasons for this are complex; typically students did not recognise different forms of feedback within the learning experience and located it within a specific task, ordinarily assessment. Somewhat paradoxically, they felt feedback was most useful when connected to their future self. Furthermore, students struggled to identify credible voices in feedback and lacked conscious strategies for acting upon feedback. This suggests that greater effort should be placed in helping students to recognise, value, understand and act on feedback, whether coupled with assessment or not. The project is currently being extended to include students from different subject areas and a wider selection of institutions.

Focussing the feedback discourse on influencing the actions and behaviours of students is necessary to create the step change impact needed in the feedback debate, as identified by Jonsson (2012) as a missing piece of the feedback puzzle. Pedagogic and academic practices need to develop to empower students to personalise the feedback agenda and hence realise the full potential of the transformative learning experience to equip them to be adaptable in an uncertain, complex and challenging environment within the academic sphere and beyond.

958 words

References

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