Students' views on feedback: insights into conceptions of effectiveness, areas of dissatisfaction and emotional consequences

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Abstract

The importance of feedback to academic performance and the role it plays in improving students' knowledge and understanding of their own learning is widely acknowledged. Despite this, there remain many issues surrounding provision and receipt of feedback, some of which are investigated within this study. In depth interviews with a small group of students were held to gain insight into conceptions of *effective* feedback, to explore emotional reactions to receiving feedback and to consider aspects of communication and interactions between staff and students. Narratives revealed potential for raised anxiety levels, particularly in light of generic feedback - an aspect which is often under-represented in the literature.

1.1 Introduction

> *'Providing feedback is one of the most difficult, demanding and complex tasks a teacher has to face.'*
>
> (Brookfield, 1990, cited in Bennett, 1997: 11)

The crucial role of feedback in enhancing the student experience is increasingly recognised. Feedback in an educational context is crucial to improving students' knowledge and understanding of their own learning process (Brown & Knight, 1994; Black & William, 1998; Carless, 2006; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). Hattie and Timperley (2007) strongly suggest that feedback is one of the most powerful influences, both positively and/or negatively on learning and achievement, and as Laurillard (1993: 61) states: '…action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner'.

A lack of attention to feedback in the higher educational literature has been recognised, that might otherwise inform design of more effective feedback strategies (Yorke, 2003; Sadler, 1998).

Student dissatisfaction with feedback has long been recognised from research in the UK and further afield (Nicol, 2010; Rowe & Wood, 2008; Williams & Kane, 2008). In the past decade the number of studies into feedback as part of the learning process has increased significantly.

Attention to feedback has also been drawn recently from findings of the UK National Student Survey (NSS). In the survey, students rate their satisfaction with courses which, when published, can then allow satisfaction comparisons with courses elsewhere. Out of the twenty-two measures of satisfaction, three statements relate to aspects of feedback. For the past four years these have been the lowest scoring in terms of students' satisfaction across the sector.

The three NSS questions relate to the promptness of feedback, the detail of feedback comments and the usefulness of feedback in clarifying misunderstandings. Until recently, the lowest score in the NSS nationwide was the promptness of feedback and had thus been accepted as a burning

issue for the higher education sector to address. It has been a focus of a feedback campaign by the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) and has prompted many universities to introduce minimum feedback deadline policies. For example, the author's institution, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) introduced a 15 day feedback return deadline in 2010. Since implementation there have been significant improvements in the scores for feedback in the NSS but it still persists as an area of lower satisfaction across the three areas indicated.

Effective feedback serves to benefit students in all areas of educational development (Black & William, 1998). However Taylor and McCormack (2007) note that, unfortunately, feedback is not always provided in appropriate ways for individual students. In some cases feedback can be presented in a way that has a negative impact on students' learning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). A key issue is that it can fail to engage students, which can have serious implications to feeding-forward for on-going development (Jackson & Prior, 2003; Taylor & McCormack, 2007). Jackson and Prior (2003: 1) contest that '…feedback is not always delivered in the most timely or innovative way that engages students and adds value in terms of their development'. Providing feedback is increasingly recognised as complex, and this study aims to cast light on these complexities.

1.2 Understanding feedback from the student perspective

MacLellan (2001) had identified significant discord between the conceptions of students and lecturers in the purpose of assessment and feedback. Numerous researchers have since highlighted the need to shift towards a more dialogic approach that engages students more meaningfully in the assessment and feedback process (Nicol, 2010, Price et al., 2011).

It is important for students to have an input into the feedback process (Yorke, 2003) to avoid becoming passive 'recipients'. Yorke (2003) suggests that universities should be pro-active in involving students in qualitative enquiries that encourage tutors to reflect on their delivery of feedback. This should include asking students what they consider to be effective feedback and how the feedback process could be improved.

A few studies have focused on student views and understandings of feedback (e.g. Duncan 2007; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Walker, 2009; Mutch, 2003). In the majority, studies involve either both tutors and students or solely tutors (e.g. Carless, 2006) and therefore the student voice in relation to feedback remains relatively quiet in the literature.

1.2.1. 'Emotional Roller-coaster'
The impact that feedback has on students' emotions has been highlighted. Various studies have recommended that greater recognition needs to be paid to the role of feedback in influencing students' self-esteem and motivation (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Juwah et al., 2004). Juwah et al., (2004) suggest that students should be given the opportunity to provide 'feedback on the feedback' to aid tutors in reflecting on its delivery. Additionally this can aid tutors' understanding, of any emotional effect arising from the feedback process.

Poulos and Mahony (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of feedback for university students through focus group interviews across a range of levels and degree courses. It emerged that, for first year students, feedback was a particularly emotive experience. This was due to a number of factors: feedback being a method of adjustment; understanding expectations; difficulties approaching lecturers; and the general emotional reactions to receiving negative feedback.

1.2.2. 'What's your name again?'
Nicol (2010) argues that feedback can often become problematic when the emphasis is placed on feedback as a 'product' framed as monologue, rather than as an interactive process between tutor and student. In such cases, feedback can be perceived by students as impersonal and this is reflected in other studies (e.g. Ecclestone & Swann, 1999). This may be particularly prevalent in light of the move away from paper submission and personal feedback, towards electronic submission, online marking and electronic modes of delivering feedback (i.e. the Virtual Learning Environment BlackBoard, communication tools such as Wimba Voice, email).

In addition to the latter, research suggests that some students are concerned that tutors act in a biased manner when marking work and providing

feedback (Carless, 2006). One strategy that has been adopted to prevent this is anonymous marking (Brown & Knight, 2004); but this form of marking is subject to limitations (Berry & Adamson, 2011). One such limitation is that it may impact on the relationship between tutors and students (ibid) due to its impersonal nature. Moreover, due to recent impetus of feedback deadline policies across the sector, many lecturers provide generic feedback (summary themes arising from a view of the work as a collective) as a way of ensuring that feedback is provided within a set deadline. Although it is not widely reported within the literature, this form of feedback can be problematic. Bray (2006) reports that although generic feedback can be helpful when teaching large cohorts it is often viewed by students as impersonal.

1.2.3   Relationship between tutors and students
Taylor and McCormack (2007) contend that tutors and students undertake different roles when feedback is provided - the tutor takes on the role of 'giver' and the student 'receiver'. These titles imply that the tutor has a powerful role and the student adopts a submissive role - this can be an uncomfortable experience, particularly for low achievers. Taylor and McCormack (2007: 59) argue that more attention should be given to the student as 'receiver' because '*...feedback is a two-way process. Attention to date has focused on the giver of the feedback...how comfortable do students feel in the role of the 'receiver'?*'.

Furthermore, research conducted by Poulos and Mahoney (2008) and Bloxham and Campbell (2010) identifies that first year university students face difficulties in approaching tutors. The research suggests that this is due to students struggling to communicate with lecturers whilst transitioning from school to university. The participants in the former study indicated that communication with teachers during their A Level study is excellent, due to closer familiarity. Therefore it becomes difficult for them to adapt to the relationship between tutor and student at university. Due to this, students can often feel embarrassed or intimidated in asking for help or advice from a tutor at university (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010).

2. This study

The aim of this study was to improve understanding of the nature of interactions between tutors and students in relation to the feedback process. This study was conducted within the department of Education Studies and Early Childhood Studies in the Faculty of Education, Health & Community at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in northwest England.

Most of our understanding of students' satisfaction and responses to receiving feedback stems from large scale surveys such as the National Student Survey which uses simplified quantitative measures. However, recent studies highlight how feedback is often viewed as highly personal for many students, and recommendations are for greater emphasis on understanding the interactional dimension of feedback provision (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol, 2010; Price et al., 2011). This study therefore attempts to gain deep and rich insight into students' thoughts, sense-making and personal reactions to receiving feedback, to identify implications for improving communication.

The objectives of the study were to:

- explore what students perceive as *effective* feedback
- identify emotional dimensions to the receipt of feedback or engagement with the feedback process
- identify issues relating to communication of feedback and relationships with tutors.

2.1   Methodology

The methodological tradition the research will be bound within is anti-positivism to derive understanding through examination of individual experiences, thoughts and sociological situations rather than using scientific description to explain phenomena (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). The intention is exploratory, to unearth the subjective experiences of individual learners, to understand their thoughts and how they make sense of the feedback process. The study is based around detailed interviews with three students, hereby identified by the pseudonyms Samantha, Amy & Ross. The students were studying in their first year, and enrolled on the Education Studies BA (Hons) degree. The students were recruited from

volunteers who responded to a request to participate in the research. Each had achieved high marks in their first year, 2.1 or higher, so it is acknowledged they would not be representative of the whole cohort. However, the purpose of the research was not to identify generalizable themes but simply to cast light on the nature of deeper-level perceptions, thinking, and emotional reactions. This is an area of the literature that is under-researched and the purpose here is to deepen understanding of students' experiences and reactions to inform future research in this direction.

Semi-structured interviews were selected for the research project as a means of investigating the issues surrounding the giving and receiving of feedback. As O'Leary (2004) and Flick (2002) argue, this method of enquiry lends itself to greater flexibility than more formal, structured interviews. The participant can vary the flow of discussion if desired, and the more natural conversation helps the student to be more open. For the researcher, maintaining some structure enables pre-determined issues and questions to be covered which unstructured interviews do not.

2.2 Dilemmas and considerations of validity

When utilising any approach for research purposes it is important for one to engage with the dilemmas which the method may subsequently raise. There are many who argue that the interview method is one which can be questioned in relation to validity and bias (Cannell & Kahn, 1968; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989; Cohen et al., 2003). Cohen et al., (2003) argue that, '…no matter how hard an interviewer may try to be systematic and objective, the constraints of everyday life will be a part of whatever interpersonal transactions she initiates' (2003: 268). This suggests that interviews can be characterised by bias through gathering data which corresponds to the researchers' objectives and preconceived ideology in relation to the phenomenon. However Cohen et al., (2003) argue that there are practical ways of minimising bias. They contend that this can be achieved through the researcher familiarising themselves with the ways in which bias can be introduced. This awareness will assist the researcher in avoiding bias during the interview. Furthermore, Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) argue that the interaction between a researcher and

participant can have a profound effect on how the data is constructed. The interviewee may be influenced by the researcher which could have an impact on their response (ibid). Due to this suggestion the researcher can overcome this problem by not overtly indicating their opinions to the participants (Cohen et al., 2003).

The researcher was aware of the potential risks from the outset, therefore a number of set questions were asked consistently within the broader open interview framework. Otherwise, limited interjection took place in order to enable the students to represent their thoughts in their own voice.

Full ethical consideration was undertaken and students gave full consent to participate in the study.

2.3. Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, themes identified by manual highlighting. Larger themes were identified first and subsequently refined. The following section will discuss some of the themes and findings taken from these results.

3. Results

3.1 What is *effective* feedback?

The first objective of the study was to investigate what students perceive as *effective* feedback. Each student was asked what they considered effective feedback to be and they answered with similar responses. Effective feedback should be personal, constructive and indicate areas for improvement in a clear and coherent way:

> *'…constructive, where it points on places where you are perhaps weaker than others but also shows you how to improve.'* (Amy).

> *'Personal, directed at my work. I don't care if it's like nasty basically or saying it's completely wrong but just to be to the point.'* (Ross)

Samantha commented that often when given a low mark for a piece of work, the feedback did not always give a comprehensive explanation of why the mark was so low:

'…if you've got a low mark and there are only a few points [of feedback] then maybe the feedback points don't equate to why my mark is so low. So if you had more information on what you did wrong or obviously what you did right then that would be more effective…I know some people who have had lower marks and they don't know why they got the marks quite so low.' (Samantha)

MacLellan (2001) argues that feedback should not be written with the intention of providing justification for the mark awarded for the work. However, Samantha indicated that a justification for the mark awarded would be helpful. In addition to justification, the students indicated that for feedback to be effective it should clearly indicate how they can improve for forthcoming assignments, as highlighted in the literature (Laurillard, 1993). Each student emphasized that effective feedback should be constructive – aligning to the principles of good feedback recognized by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2010).

3.2 'Feedback on feedback'

Yorke (2003) highlights the importance of gaining 'feedback on feedback'. The students indicated that the feedback they have received whilst studying has been of a good standard. They explained that they have enjoyed receiving feedback as it indicates aspects of their work in which they have excelled and equally aspects for improvement. The student participants did however raise some issues and points to consider for the forthcoming academic year. The following section discusses some of these issues in reference to the literature.

3.2.1 Generic Feedback: "Sorry are you talking to me?"
A main concern identified here, not significantly highlighted within the literature, relates to the use of generic feedback – where the tutor provides general commentary on the collective body of work. Each student, without being prompted by the researcher, discussed issues surrounding this form of feedback. They indicated that generic feedback was not particularly helpful as it made it difficult to understand which aspects of the feedback related to their work. This concurs with the work of Bray (2006) who illustrates that

students view this form of feedback as highly impersonal.

'I don't think the generic feedback is perhaps a particularly good one, because you are trying to guess where you come in the general discussion. You just want to know how you have done.' (Amy)

'You don't know who they are talking about… you just don't know who it is directed to. So I don't find generic feedback very helpful.' (Samantha)

'I don't look at it when I get it because there is no point, because I don't have a clue what it is because I can't relate it.' (Ross)

Although generic feedback is often recommended as a strategy for returning some prompt feedback, students indicated that they would prefer to wait for their individual feedback and marks. One of the students recognised generic feedback as part of the three week feedback return policy that the study university operates, as she stated that:

'…after the three weeks they give you the generic feedback…I know it is part of the procedure but I don't really think too much of the generic.' (Samantha)

Interestingly, what emerged from the data was just how many emotional tensions are attached to this form of feedback. All participants indicated that generic feedback can often cause them to become very anxious. Amy particularly discussed in detail how she becomes increasingly anxious when receiving generic feedback:

'There are times when we've received generic feedback and we didn't get the mark and it has been a good few weeks before we got the marks and it has made me more anxious. I worry thinking "Oh I didn't do that" …I have been left for weeks thinking "Oh no I didn't do that, oh no, oh no, oh no!" So I don't think that is particularly helpful.'

Amy was not alone in feeling this anxiety, as both Samantha and Ross expressed similar feelings. The researcher was particularly interested to discover if Ross would comment on generic feedback in a similar manner to the other two participants - as

he was the only male to be interviewed. This proved to be the case as he commented that:

> *'I will try and think what I have wrote in my essay and I will just panic myself basically…it could be demoralizing, you know, and then you think "I am doing rubbish really".'*

The term 'demoralising' as used by Ross in this response indicates how some students may feel after receiving generic feedback. This is a worrying factor as it is documented in the literature (e.g. Yorke, 2001) that there is a connection between student feedback, experience and retention at HE. These factors intertwined with the emotional aspects of generic feedback could act as an indicator of how such feedback might unsettle students' confidence at vulnerable early stages in their course, possibly contributing to withdrawals.

In recognition that three participants cannot represent the whole cohort, the students were asked to comment on any reactions they had encountered from their peers. Samantha suggested that other students also do not hold generic feedback in high regard as, *'…obviously everyone prefers getting your own feedback'*. Amy suggested that other students presume they have failed a piece of work when they receive generic feedback which in turn raises anxiety. She commented that:

> *'…when the generic feedback has gone out they have said "Oh well, I've failed that then". So I'm presuming they have the same jitters as me.'*

Ross at this point highlighted possible gender differences by commenting that,

> *'…it's always the lads that I speak to but lads have a different attitude towards things than girls. You know lads tend to say "I don't bother with it me. I will wait for my personal mark". It just seems quite pointless to me, I just don't see the point in it.'*

The participants have highlighted clearly that students do not consider generic feedback to be useful. They suggested that generic feedback would be more appropriately delivered after students had received their individual marks. Doing so may minimise anxiety that arises from this form of feedback.

3.2.2 Relationship between tutor and student

An apparent tension which emerged in the data was how it can often be difficult to understand and interpret feedback. This is an issue which is highly documented and echoed within the literature (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Higgins, 2000; Chanock, 2000). Two of the participants discussed how they have previously approached tutors to discuss their feedback in order to make sense of their comments. Higgins et al., (2001) argue that students require the opportunity to discuss feedback with tutors to ensure comprehensive understanding, before they can utilise the feedback to improve performance. However, one particular student highlighted how a one-to-one discussion with her tutor was unhelpful as the tutor pinpointed the 'wrong' aspects of her work. She commented that:

> *'I didn't think that was particularly helpful at all as I came out thinking that was a waste of time and I really shouldn't have bothered…in that particular case I felt very much as though they are up there and I am way down here.'*

This comment also echoes themes identified in the literature (e.g. Taylor & McCormack, 2007) of power relationships between tutors and students where students adopt a submissive role. This can inhibit attempts to foster a dialogic approach to feedback as recent researchers encourage (Nicol, 2010)

The participants discussed how it can be difficult to make the transition from school to university as highlighted by Poulos and Mahoney (2008). Ross highlighted this whilst discussing the differences between feedback at school and university:

> *'It's spoon fed at A Level. It's given to you, do this, do that. But you go round it in a different way at Uni. I think it's more one-to-one at A Level, your teacher will sit down with you and say "Do this, do that".'*

Ross also discussed how the relationships with tutors at university are different to sixth form. This particular student indicated that he felt as though he could question his A Level teachers regarding feedback but not his university tutors. When discussing this issue further he commented that:

> *'…if I had a problem enough then I would be cheeky enough to go up to them and say*

"listen what's that all about?", but I haven't this far.'

The expression 'cheeky enough' suggests that the student would regard himself as behaving in an inappropriate manner, highlighting the possible tension between tutor and student. It is important to note that as first year students, the participants may not yet have established a good relationship with their tutors - this resonates with Poulos and Mahoney's (2008) research. Therefore it would be interesting to seek the same participant views during their third year of study to distinguish if their views change alongside the progress of their course. The comments highlighted thus far, confirm the importance of tutors establishing a good rapport with students, as it enables students to feel more comfortable approaching them regarding feedback.

4.   Discussion and Implications for Practice

The study indicated that students have a clear understanding of what they consider as effective feedback: personal; constructive and indicates areas for improvement in a clear and coherent way. The study reaffirmed that for feedback to be effective it requires personal and constructive advice.   It also highlights the importance of successful transition to university and how the feedback experience is also heavily influenced by the relationship between the tutor and student.

Although the research is limited to three participants, it serves to reinforce themes in the wider literature. It provides an insight into the emotional dimensions of receiving feedback which is under-represented in the literature.   The increased level of anxiety that is evoked through receiving feedback is particularly striking. The study also serves to deepen our understanding of student thinking and reminds us of the complexity, not just of the feedback process, but individual interpretations particularly in the context where the student experience is averaged and judged by simplistic quantitative measures such as the NSS.

Whilst the prompt return (15-day) policy has led to improvements in NSS scores they are, however, still persistently low within LJMU as they remain cross the sector. The lowest score on the NSS is currently, 'feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand'. Studies, such as this, that seek the viewpoint of the student, are crucial to gain an insight into one of the main areas of student dissatisfaction.

Ensuring that feedback is harmonious with student expectations is important, but as recent research highlights, effective communication, and by extension, good student-staff interactions are crucial to enable shared understanding and promote dialogue.

Additionally, it is crucial that tutors provide feedback that students can clearly act upon, but this is not always the case. It is like a doctor informing a patient of their medical needs but not providing a prescription. Unfortunately, this was represented by one of the participants:

> *'…it just says "This is wrong" but doesn't give the solution.'*

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