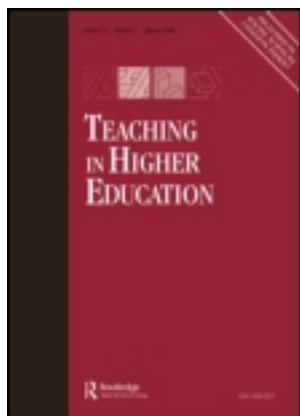


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Practising what we preach: towards a student-centred definition of feedback

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Students appear to have an almost insatiable appetite for receiving feedback and the scholarly literature has acknowledged its central importance for learning. And yet there is no widely accepted definition of feedback, most definitions reflecting the perspective of the teacher rather than student. When staff at the University of New South Wales who had put a lot of time into providing feedback nevertheless failed to score highly on the course satisfaction survey question on feedback, staff conjectured that their students might not recognize what they are providing as constituting feedback. A study was undertaken to find out just how students would define feedback. This article provides the background to the study, describes its design and presents the definition of feedback as conceptualised by the students, and then considers its significance.

Keywords: feedback; definition; students; student-centred learning

There is no widely agreed scholarly definition of ‘feedback’. Indeed, in much of the literature, the definition of the term is left implicit. Interestingly, however, at a time when we have been immersed in the rhetoric of student-centred learning, most scholarly meanings of the term ‘feedback’, whether implicit or explicit, remain teacher-centred. Feedback is generally assumed to be something that teachers give to students in order to help them understand the result they have received and to improve their future work. There has in recent years been acknowledgement of the need for the communication to be two-way but we need to do more than bring student agency into the teacher’s definition. We need to take as our starting point the meaning of feedback as conceptualised by students. This article reports a study to define feedback from a student perspective. This would seem to be a logical first step towards universities doing better in terms of addressing general student dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive.

The feedback dilemma

Assessment has an ‘overwhelming influence on what, how and how much, students study’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004–2005, 3). Of the various things that teachers ‘do’ it would seem to be the provision of feedback that has most influence on student achievement (Gibbs and Simpson 2004–2005, 3). Feedback is central to the learning process (Black and William 1998). Not surprisingly, therefore, appropriate feedback

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is a particularly important component of overall student satisfaction with teaching (Ramsden 2003, 96). We know a good deal about the qualities needed in order for feedback to be effective. To be useful, feedback must be timely, regular, sufficiently detailed, legible (if hand-written), comprehensible, consistent, and pitched at an appropriate level (Carless 2006; Nicol 2010; Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2005). In addition, there has in recent years been emphasis in the literature on the need for students to be active participants in the feedback process if it is to be effective (Boud 2007; Nicol 2010; Sadler 2010; Vardi 2012). ‘While the quality of the comments is important, the quality of the students’ interaction with those comments is equally, and perhaps more, important’ (Nicol 2010, 503).

Despite all we know about what characterises useful feedback and its importance to student learning, ensuring adequate feedback with which students are satisfied has proved problematic in the context of mass higher education (Ferguson 2011; Hounsell et al. 2008; Nicol 2010). Although great numbers of staff spend great numbers of hours providing feedback for students, students tend not to find the feedback as useful as the staff assume it is going to be (Carless 2006, 230). Staff are discouraged by the fact that students do not always seem to take much notice of the feedback that is given. Most academics can relate stories of stacks of assignments never collected. Feedback is often not read, not understood, and not acted upon (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004–2005). Those students who do read it often do not know how to interpret it or to put it to good use. Students believe that the feedback on one assignment is specific to that assignment and not readily transferrable to other assignments (Carless 2006).

The experience of staff and students in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and of Law at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has been no exception. Both Faculties have excellent records so far as the standard of teaching is concerned and yet experience a blip in their ratings when it comes to feedback. A question on the standard course evaluation form (CATEI) used at UNSW asks students to rate selected aspects of a course. One statement to which students are asked to respond is as follows: ‘I was given helpful feedback on how I was going in the course’. Students tend to rate our courses lower on this than on other aspects of course design and delivery. Anecdotal evidence tells us that many teachers disappointed with how students have rated feedback in their course are particularly conscientious teachers who have put considerable energy into increasing the quantity, and ensuring the quality, of the feedback they provide.

Members of staff whose courses have been rated lower on feedback than on other factors have been puzzled as to just what it is that they would have to do in order to score really well on the feedback question. Perhaps the extra feedback that teachers have sought to provide has not been what students wanted and/or was not recognized as feedback by the students? Finding out what students understand by ‘feedback’ could therefore be an important step towards increasing student satisfaction with the feedback we provide.

Method

I ran four focus groups involving 33 undergraduate students in their third or subsequent year of a degree program offered by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences or the Faculty of Law at UNSW. During the first forty minutes of the focus

group session discussion of specific questions was interspersed with written responses to prepared questions. This meant that all students had the opportunity to contribute orally if they wanted to but then to voice their opinions on key questions in writing. While in effect the methodology could be said to be part focus group, part survey, it did mean that the opinions of those most vocal did not dominate our findings. The remaining 20 minutes of discussion was more free flowing around the changes that could be made at the policy level to improve the student feedback experience and it was accompanied by pizza. Students were given twenty dollars cash at the end of the session. Students had been advised in the initial email and flyer that the proceedings would be recorded and their formal permission was gained for this at the beginning of the session. The discussion was later transcribed and used to supplement the analysis of the written responses provided by students during the focus group sessions. Ethics approval for the project and the conduct of the research had been obtained from the Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel at UNSW.

One of the primary goals of the focus group sessions was to clarify just what it is that students are thinking of when they respond to the course satisfaction survey question on feedback. At least one other recent study has asked students in focus groups what they understand by feedback (Bevan et al. 2008). In that instance, students gradually identified more forms of feedback in response to prompts from the facilitator. If, however, we were to find out what each student has in mind when they respond to a course evaluation question on feedback without being prompted by the facilitator or their peers, it seemed advisable to devise questions to which they would respond in writing, without my offering prompts that might influence their responses.

I therefore approached the task of finding out just what students had in mind when they answered the course evaluation questionnaire question pertaining to feedback as follows:

- (1) I gave everyone two copies of the UNSW course evaluation (CATEI) Form A.
- (2) I then asked them to think of a course in which they were currently enrolled and to answer question 2 on one copy, emphasising that I was not interested in their answers per se. Question 2 asks students to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement 'I was given helpful feedback on how I was going in the course.'
- (3) I asked students to think of a course they had already completed and answer question 2 in relation to that course on the other copy.
- (4) I asked the students to reflect on what they had just done and to respond in writing to the question: 'What aspects of the course/s or of your experience in the courses shaped your answer to the question on feedback? In other words, what were you thinking of when you decided how to rate that course?'
- (5) Most individuals shared one of their points and we had a general discussion.
- (6) Everyone was then asked to answer, in writing, 'Is feedback the comments received on assignments or is it much broader?'

The written responses of the 33 students, combined with what was said during the less-structured questioning, were then analysed so as to formulate a definition of feedback as conceptualised by the students.

Findings

A long and diverse list of factors was mentioned by students when they responded to the question as to what aspects of the course or of their experience in the course shaped their answer to the question on feedback (step 4 above). Six out of 33 students, or 18%, stated that 'feedback' as they understood it when completing CATEI question 2 is only comments on assignments; the rest believed that there was much more to it (step 6 above). This would seem to correlate with their written responses at step four, although if we take the question to include other aspects of assignment return, such as the time taken to receive marked work, it would appear that something like 30% are thinking exclusively or virtually exclusively in terms of their experience with the return of assignments and the rest are thinking of their experience in the course more broadly. One student even mentioned the body language of the tutor when giving back the assignment as constituting a form of feedback!

When the responses were read as a whole and combined with what students contributed orally, what emerged very clearly was that students want to be able to gauge at each stage of the course how they are going in terms of the knowledge, understanding, and skills that will determine their result in the course and that if they are able to do so they believe they have received appropriate and adequate feedback. As understood by students at UNSW, feedback can therefore be defined as 'the means by which a student is able to gauge at each stage of the course how he or she is going in terms of the knowledge, understanding, and skills that will determine his or her result in the course.'

This is worth considering a little more closely. Perhaps the first point to mention is that this definition does not refer to teachers telling the students anything, although it certainly does not preclude the teacher providing information. Most definitions of feedback assume as a starting point that feedback involves teachers giving students information about their performance in a piece of work (Bevan et al. 2008). Feedback is usually defined in terms of 'information presented' (e.g. Poulos and Mahony 2008), provoking the response from some scholars that being told is not enough. 'Few physical, intellectual or social skills can be acquired satisfactorily simply through being told about them' (Sadler 1989, 120). Recent definitions of what feedback does or at least *should* involve, have sought to emphasise the importance of student agency in relation to what they have been told. Even better is to start from the perspective of the student and to work from that basis to see how teachers can best assist with that process, just as we start from an understanding of how students learn in order to see how best we should teach (Ramsden 2003).

Implications of a student-centred definition of feedback

The student definition of feedback is in no way 'shocking' but is rather aligned with much of what we have been learning from studies of feedback in recent years. It provides a context within which to make more sense of some of what we already know about student behaviour in relation to feedback.

Resolving the feedback dilemma

Most basically, it explains the dilemma as to why, when staff believe they are giving plenty of useful feedback, students never seem to believe that they have enough

(Carless 2006). The staff may well be providing plenty of feedback as per the teacher-centred definition of feedback, while the students still do not feel able to adequately gauge their progress throughout the course as per the student-centred definition of feedback. Once we see the disjuncture between the definitions this discrepancy in perceptions is no longer surprising.

Interest in numerical result

Staff commonly complain that students' sole or primary interest is in the numerical result obtained, rather than the comments provided (Carless 2006). In this study the students complained that they believe most staff are primarily interested in providing a numerical mark! Viewing this situation from the perspective of our student definition the importance of the numerical mark is not surprising, because this is probably the single most efficient way by which the student can gauge how they are tracking in the course. It is also likely to be the most valid measure; comments may sound positive or negative depending on their tone, even for two assignments receiving the same score. Tertiary students do not usually receive qualitative descriptors as the outcome of their completion of a course. Their transcript does not say 'works well in tutorials', or 'a pleasure to have in class' as they might at school, or even 'tends towards over-generalization in essay-writing' but simply conveys a numerical score. Not surprisingly, then, it is the mark given on the student's work that will be the most effective indicator of how the student is tracking in relation to the final result. This does not mean that most students are not also interested in comments.

Feedback through the return of assignments is the single most important determinant of students' satisfaction with feedback but is only one of several factors

From the students' perspective, reliance on feedback at the point of assignment return could not by definition be all that is encompassed by a satisfactory system of feedback because it does not happen sufficiently often, a situation exacerbated in courses with few, heavily-weighted assessment items. This aligns with the findings of a recent study by Pokorny and Pickford (2010), in which students told the researcher that feedback should happen every week if it is to assist them with their learning. Removing reference to telling in our starting definition opens up scope for a range of approaches to ensuring feedback in which the student assumes responsibility for their learning and benchmarks their performance on the basis of a number of sources of information, only one of which is the information given to students on their assignment performance. Something as seemingly simple and traditional as marking and discussing exemplars in class offers students valuable guidance as part of a broad feedback system for students (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2011) and ties in well with the notion of feeding forward – students having a better understanding of what they are aiming to achieve while they are doing it rather than finding out after the event. Other valuable practices can include self-review test questions, model answers and worked examples, as well as commentaries on past exam questions and opportunities for students to learn from and with one another as well as from the lecturer (Hounsell et al. 2008).

Most students want to use feedback as a basis for improving their work and to do that they need to hear both what they did well and what they did not do well

Given the conceptualisation of feedback held by our students, it is not surprising that students tell us that they want feedback both on what they did well (what was it that made it good) and on what needs improvement (Ferguson 2011, 57). Both will contribute to receiving an accurate picture of where the student is currently at in relation to what it is that will determine their final result in the course. Students are certainly interested in the mark but also want the feedback from which they can learn for next time. When asked 'Would you have received higher results with more feedback?', 79% of students in the focus groups said that they would have done, and the remaining students answered 'maybe'. If students are to reap the benefit of a broad-based approach to feedback they need also to learn the skills of judgment, of how to clarify what good performance is and be provided with opportunities to learn how to close the gap between current and desired performance (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). It is also worth bearing in mind, however, that some students may want to know how they are tracking simply so as to ensure they pass the course, not necessarily in order to rank at the top of the class. Although it may sound anathema to many teachers, students – like staff – are constantly juggling a range of commitments and it is just possible that our own course may not be top of that list. From the perspective of a student aiming for something less than a high distinction, it may be all the more important to have an accurate sense of how they are tracking in relation to a final result on the course.

Students generally prefer to be assessed by staff, not peers

The fact that providing individualised, actionable feedback is a labour-intensive process ill-suited to a system of resource-constrained mass education, combined with pedagogical arguments (e.g. Sadler 2010), means that there is increased interest in the implementation of peer feedback systems. And yet, it is often found that, although students are happy to engage in peer review and self-assessment, they want it to be the staff themselves who grade their work (Nicol 2010, 514). From the perspective of our student definition of feedback, it is not surprising that feedback by peers who may not know much more than one does oneself is questionable from a student perspective since it will not provide an accurate snapshot of current performance against end goals, as per the students' definition. Scholars are currently suggesting innovative processes by which peer feedback is linked to teacher feedback so that the work of peers is monitored and affords a better measure of student performance (Nicol 2010, 514).

Feedback needs to be relevant to what is going to determine the final result and to be a fair guide of that

If a student is half way through a course and the only remaining assessment task is a two-hour essay exam, then he or she is unlikely to deem voluminous information on their oral presentation skills useful feedback. To be valued, the feedback must relate to the remaining assessment that is going to contribute to their final result. And, if that mark has already been determined, the interest of the average student may well

be minimal. Of course, for those students who may be thinking in terms of their results for the whole program of study, feedback on the summative assessment in one course may well be deemed useful for a subsequent course, but we cannot assume that all students will be able to draw those links. And similarly, if the final exam is to take the form of difficult problems to be solved, the students will not deem useful, glowing feedback on their progress in answering factual recall questions. To be valid, feedback needs to be a fair indication of how the student is going in terms of 'the knowledge, understanding, and skills that will determine his or her result in the course'.

Students seem to want virtually continuous feedback

The expectation on the part of students that they should be able to gauge their progress throughout the course may have been exaggerated by the fact that students are of the 'net generation'; they are what Prensky has famously referred to as 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001a, 2001b). Jason Frand (2000) has set out a useful list of characteristics of the information-age mindset, which includes the need to stay connected, for interactivity and for immediate response. According to one colleague with whom the findings were discussed, the current cohort of students seems to need immediate and ongoing confirmation that they are on the right track even before undertaking any tangible work in a course. This makes more sense and appears a more achievable goal when placed in the context of our student definition of feedback rather than when viewed from the perspective of the traditional teacher-centred definition of the term as something that teachers must 'give' to students.

Conclusions

There has over a number of years been a trend towards developing new approaches to understanding what happens in the university lecture hall and tutorial room. The nature and purpose of knowledge, the role of the lecturer, and just what it is that students 'do' as learners, have all been called into question. Integral to this, traditional assumptions regarding what constitutes formative assessment and feedback have been shown to be far too simple (Pryor and Crossouard 2010). The bottom line of this fundamental rethinking of the theoretical basis of what we do in higher education and why is a renewed focus on the student, as evidenced by the very language of 'learning and teaching' policy and practice.

Conceptual thinking regarding feedback tends, however, to have lagged behind developments in other areas of research on higher education. At present there is no widely agreed scholarly definition of 'feedback' either in the pedagogic literature or in practice (Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). The assumption still tends to be that feedback is something staff provide for students, and a key focus is therefore on how to ensure that it is constructive rather than inhibitory towards learning (Yorke 2003). We already know, for example, that feedback needs to be timely, actionable, and as specific as possible. This has all been useful, but finding out just what students themselves understand feedback to be offers a means of exploring the connections amongst what can otherwise appear to be disparate pieces of information on what makes for quality feedback.

In line with broader theoretical trends focusing on the students as active participants in their own learning, this paper has reported a study to find out just what students themselves understand feedback to be. Although working with a small and bounded case, its straightforward findings are of broad relevance for those working in higher education.

The study found that, from the perspective of students, feedback is the means by which they can at each stage of a course gauge how they are going in terms of the knowledge, skills and understanding that will determine their overall result in the course. Students can gauge this information in a variety of ways, only one of which is the receipt of written feedback from staff. Acceptance of a student-centred definition offers a 'meta-explanation' as to why known characteristics of good feedback matter and a context within which to explore new and effective ways of ensuring that students have the feedback we know to be so important to their success in higher education.

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