Too Much Feedback?

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Nightmare Feedback? University Teaching, Funding and How to Cope

It is the age of feedback! We are all constantly being asked to provide it. Kingsley Purdam highlights some of the challenges for lecturers, students and for University funding of the policy focus on feedback.

Feedback has become a key part of reputation building for service providers. On-line businesses such as Amazon, Ebay and Trip Advisor all use customer feedback as an integral part of their business models. On a recent train journey I was offered four different ways to provide feedback on how satisfied I was with the toilets!

University teaching is no exception. Student feedback on the efforts and abilities of their lecturers has become a key part of the performance assessment of individual staff and also of Universities as a whole. The National Student Survey (NSS), the Post Graduate Taught Experience Survey, the Post Graduate Research Experience Survey and the UK Engagement Survey all collect student feedback. In addition individual course units have student feedback surveys and feedback is also usually collected via the course student representatives.

There are even websites which encourage students to make personal comments about their lecturers.

Feedback from students can be very valuable for lecturers to develop their understanding of how their students are engaging with a course and how they are learning. It can help lecturers reflect on their teaching and to innovative in their approach.

Lectures are now recorded which means that there is a record of every word the lecturer says in the classroom. This can be the source of further student feedback. It can also be a way for the lecturer to experience his or her own teaching by listening in.

In our research, which is part of a project looking at the measurement of public attitudes and engagement, we have examined the nature of student feedback and collected examples of where the written comments from students have left the lecturer perplexed.

Firstly, often many students do not respond to requests for feedback. This can lead to unrepresentative feedback. Whilst the NSS has a

reported response rate of 68 per cent this feedback is not specific to individual courses or lecturers[1]. Some of the university course units we have examined have had less than 10 per cent of students complete the feedback surveys.

One lecturer commented how they had received praise from their line manager about the excellent feedback of their teaching even though it was based on a response from only one student!

Often, the scope of the questions the students are asked to respond to can be quite limited. For example, the NSS states that it only takes 5 minutes to complete. It includes questions such as: *"Staff have made the subject interesting?"* which seem a little simplistic and of limited use for informing approaches to teaching.

One lecturer we spoke to explained how in some kind of Kafkaesque nightmare their course unit questionnaire asked students for feedback on the feedback they had received on their work before they had actually be given the feedback.

The meaning and value of some of the written feedback that students do provide can be perplexing. One of the lecturers we consulted received the following feedback: *'Honestly, I can't remember who the teacher was sorry".* Perhaps more worryingly another lecturer received the following feedback: *"I can't remember anything about this module."*
Another student commented: *'Sorry to say I actually can't think of anything to say".*

Among students who could remember the course and the lecturer there was also other somewhat baffling feedback. One lecturer reported how one student had written that they: *"Just found the whole subject quite boring".* Yet this is a degree course, which the student is presumably studying by choice.

Perhaps the lecturer needs to make their teaching more engaging and exciting, of course, but can they transform the whole subject?

Other student feedback can also provide a challenge for lecturers to know how to respond. One lecturer told us how one of their students had commented: *"The lectures were 'rather relaxed".* Perhaps of more direct frustration was the student who commented that: *"The exam practice class was no use as we didn't get to see the actual exam questions just the old ones."*

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[1] See https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/national-student-survey-2017-

Tellingly another student in response to what she valued most about the course was: *"My good grade".*

Student feedback can be much more positive of course. Aside from one lecturer who received the comment from a student that he was: *"Quite cute",* student feedback can be constructive and informative and reassure the lecturer that their teaching is delivering the learning they expected.

One lecturer received the memorable comment that he: *"Should be dipped in gold"* such were their skills in supporting the students in their learning. However the comment one lecturer received from a student which read:*"The teacher is a pedagogue"* is less clear in terms of if being positive or negative.

Using feedback to improve teaching

A great way to reflect on your own teaching is to go along and listen to a colleague's lecture. Look out for voice control, body language, timing, use of practical tasks and the levels of student engagement.

Informal mid-term feedback from students writing anonymously on postcards can be helpful in fine-tuning a course to the needs of the students who are actually studying it at the time. For example on one occasion it led me to spending more time discussing the assignment requirements for a course and reassuring students about a presentation they were required to give.

Approaches to teaching where students are actively involved in practical tasks that aid their learning can also be a way to pick up on how students are engaging and learning. In social research courses this involves students running their own focus groups and conducting their own surveys as a practical hands on way of learning. (Embed link http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13645579.2015.1102453?journalCode=tsrm20)

Feedback from students is a vital part of any education system in terms of improving teaching and assessment, developing the lecturers understanding of how students learn and for quality assurance. I don't think we should hide from the feedback we receive, but we need to collect student feedback in different ways to ensure it is fit for purpose, particularly given its growing (and controversial) importance in higher education funding.

Perhaps also students themselves need more guidance and support in how to provide feedback that is usable by academics. It may be that students are perplexed about what they are being asked about.

This blog is part of ongoing research into the measurement of public attitudes and approaches to learning at the University of Manchester. If you have any feedback from students that you have received on your teaching which you have found perplexing please Tweet to @socialstatsman or email kingsley.purdam@manchester.ac.uk. Make sure it is anonymised. Also if you have any feedback on this blog please share it, as long as you think it will help!