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Student engagement and the role of feedback in learning

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Abstract

Using an historical approach the intention of this paper is to identify from the literature better practice in feedback. Assessment is an essential element in the learning cycle, and is central to an understanding of how learning outcomes are achieved. It is through their assessments that we come to know our students, if our teaching has been successful and plays a significant role in determining the students' success. However, unlike the teaching process, assessment does not have the same dialogic element that learning and teaching now has. While feedback is a key element in formative assessment, we do not know how our feedback is understood by the learner, or what meaning they make of it. What makes good

feedback, and how do we ensure that learners can understand and act upon it? The current language of learning and teaching is underscored with the concept of student engagement with the curriculum. However, the language of assessment often remains in the realm of judgement and the way it is conveyed is clearly in the transmission model of teaching where rigidity, standards and rules stand in place of dialogue, flexibility and learner centeredness.

Introduction

A seminal paper on feedback was published by Black & Wiliam (1998) in a special issue of *Assessment in Education*. Their research focused on formative assessment, and citing the work of

Crooks (1988) indicated that the focus on the summative features of assessment has diluted the impact that assessment has on learning. A key element to formative assessment is feedback, and Black & Wiliam identify four elements that make up a feedback system:

- Data on the actual level of some measurable attribute
- Data on the reference level of that attribute
- A mechanism for comparing the two levels, and generating information about the gap between the two levels
- A mechanism by which the information can be used to alter the gap
(Black & Wiliam, 1998:48)

We need a clearly defined task, criteria that establish what good performance is for that task, and the ability to convey that understanding of the criteria to the learner. This definition feels overly mechanistic, using the language of electrical circuitry, a metaphor that recurs throughout the literature and highlights an important factor in feedback often ignored: the meaning and impact of feedback on the student.

Undoubtedly the skill of the teacher in crafting useful feedback is an important element in the process. Sadler (1998) notes that the quality of the interactions between teacher and student are at the heart of teaching and learning and identifies six resources that teachers have in making judgements about assessment:

- superior knowledge of content
- attitudes towards teaching and learning
- skills in constructing assessment tasks
- deep knowledge of standards and criteria
- evaluative skill in making judgements
- expertise in framing feedback statements.

That teachers can deliver high quality, expertly framed feedback statements, needs to be further substantiated to enable us to establish what high quality feedback is. Nicol (2006) suggests the following definition of quality:

...good quality external feedback is information that helps students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct; that is, it helps students take action to reduce the discrepancy between their intentions and the resulting effects' (Nicol *et al.*, 2006:208).

Nicol makes four suggestions:

- Make feedback relative to the criteria;

- Teachers are master practitioners in the discipline - their knowledge is deep, not only of the task set, but also of the language of the discipline. The feedback needs to be phrased in such a way that it bridges the gap between the language of the master and novice.
- Provide it so students can act on it;
 - For the feedback to be useful there needs to be an opportunity to use it. Not only does the feedback need to be understood by learners, but they also need an opportunity to try again. This requires that they understand what is intended by the feedback, and recognise the opportunity to put this new understanding into practice.
- Provide corrective advice, not just strengths and weaknesses;
 - Corrective advice would include how a learner might do the work better. For the better piece of assessment this might be easy to identify, however for work that is of a lesser standard this could represent a sizeable piece of work for the teacher.
- Limit feedback to what can be used and prioritize areas for improvement;
 - Feedback is a time consuming and effortful task and it is important for the teacher to recognise the utilitarian nature of feedback. However, given that the student understands what needs to be done, and has an opportunity, there also needs to be a willingness on the part of the student to try again.

How do we ensure learners can make sense, and use, of our feedback?

Feedback is not only concerned with a prediction by the teacher of what the learner might learn and be able to do; it is also the interaction of the learner with this prediction. How do we ensure that the learner can make meaning of feedback? The learner needs not only to understand the feedback and the gap it is describing, but also needs to feel empowered and willing to address it.

Sadler (1989) points out that the action is the learners to take; to close the gap between the 'state revealed by the feedback and the desired state' (Black & Wiliam, 1998:54). Thus the learner must understand the feedback to be able to action it, and they need to perceive that this is a possible task, and the gap between current performance and good performance is not impossibly wide. Self-assessment, and self-knowledge, what Nicol *et al.* (2006) calls self regulation by learners, are essential elements of the process.

The work of Nicol *et al.* (2006) provides a useful framework - cognition, motivation and belief. He suggests that self-regulation is the degree to which students can regulate aspects of their thinking, motivation and behaviour during learning. Nicol *et al.*'s work is predicated on the work of Biggs (2003) and his concept of constructive alignment- the idea that learning occurs when students construct their own understanding of what is to be learnt, and are activity engaged in learning. Nicol (2006) indicates that the transmission model of feedback has only recently been challenged. If feedback is the teachers' domain, as part of the transmission model of learning, then it would disempower the learner. Further, if the feedback is written by the teacher the assumption is that the student can understand it, that the teacher is highly skilled in framing feedback. As Nicol *et al.* point out 'viewing feedback as a cognitive process involving only transfer of information ignores the way feedback interacts with motivation and beliefs' (2006:201).

Gibbs & Simpson (2004) examine what they term conditions in which assessment can support learning, and of the ten conditions, seven are concerned with feedback being that it:

- Is provided both often and in detail;
- focuses on actions under the students control;
- is timely and students have opportunity to act on it;
- is appropriate to the assignment;
- is understood by the student;
- is attended to by the student;
- is acted on.

The last three echo the work of Nicol *et al.* (2006) - that the student can understand the feedback (cognition), that the student can attend to the feedback (motivation), and that they act on it (belief). Sadler tells us that:

By quality of feedback, we now realise we have to understand not just the technical structure

of the feedback (such as accuracy, comprehensiveness and appropriateness) but also its accessibility to the learner (as a communication), its catalytic and coaching value, and its ability to inspire confidence and hope (Sadler, 1989:84).

The catalytic, coaching and inspirational value of feedback connects with the concept of belief espoused by Carless (2006) provides further evidence of the affective impact of assessment exploring issues of power, emotion and discourse in relation to the written feedback given on students' assignments. He identified a number of differing perceptions between tutors and students in terms of the emphasis on grades, usefulness of feedback and fairness of the judgements and suggests assessment dialogues as a means of clarifying these differences.

Feedback as dialogue

Nicol (2010) examines students' negative reaction to written feedback, which, students claim, is difficult to understand and does not meet their needs. Previous research identified that most feedback was largely negative in nature, focussed on the mechanical aspects of the task and provided little that offered a clear direction on how to improve. This research indicated that there is a need for students' to engage with the feedback to make sense of it. Nicol (2010) proposes that feedback should be conceptualised as a dialogue between teacher-student and/or peer-to-peer where meaning is constructed, as dialogue is fundamental to successful learning and teaching. This view is explored by Burke (2011) in work that builds on the ASK approach (Burke & Pieterick, 2010). Burke proposes feedback tutorials where students engage with the feedback they have been given, providing a site for the feedback dialogue.

Students can only achieve goals if they understand them, which is difficult as feedback is often written in a coded and tacit format. Students need to be able to understand on what basis the judgements of their work are being made. As Sadler points out 'the teacher...accepts a considerable responsibility in trying to turn an assessment episode into a significant learning event' (2010: 540) and that students face a number of challenges in being able to interpret this feedback; the students' potential blindness created by their belief in what they intended to write, the students understanding of the communication from the teacher and their understanding of what the teacher intended by

the feedback, and if they understand all this, their ability to action the feedback. Work by Beaumont *et al.* propose a dialogic feedback cycle that focuses more on preparatory and in-task guidance – what the task requires and formative drafts, in their words 'reconceptualising feedback as a guidance process' (2010:14).

Bloxham & Campbell (2010) suggest that often the language of the disciplines is arcane and confusing and that students can only become part of the subject community by engaging in an active shared process (observation, imitation, participation and dialogue). Their research focuses on moving the learner from passive recipient of feedback to interaction with the marker. This involved interactive cover sheets where students identified the particular aspects of their work that they wanted feedback on. Bloxham & Campbell assert that the language of assessment and feedback is difficult for students and point out that students, unlike other novices, are expected to write in the language of the discourse whereas a novice is usually allowed to take a passive role. They suggest helping students to enter into dialogue with academic staff, by developing first a facility with the language of the discipline. The work of both Nicol (2010) and Sadler (2010) build the case for the development of students' capacity to make sense of teacher feedback through the student using criteria in the act of appraisal. This can be developed through dialogue with peers and teachers. Talking about assessment provides opportunity for the novice to practice some of the language of the master, and to construct understanding through discussion.

Nicol *et al.* (2006) suggests that students are already engaged in self-assessment when they engage with the assessment task in hand, and to further this, students could reflect on the kind of feedback they would want on the work, and providing assessment of their work. Boud *et al.* (2001) explore the role of peer learning and peer assessment in higher education, how giving students the teachers' experience of marking, the student can become more skilled in making judgements about assessments. Peer and self assessment also offer some useful strategies for dealing with the workload involved in developing good quality feedback, and providing the coaching experience that may prove to be a useful manifestation of the self regulation identified by Nicol *et al.*

Conclusion

There are several elements to the equation of what makes good feedback.

Firstly is the assessment task itself and the assumption is that it is worthwhile and central to the focus of the course? Does it provide opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding and facility with the course content? Is it aligned with the learning focus of the course? Further, for feedback to be really useful it needs to be actioned, so there may be more than one assessment task or opportunity to resubmit assessment for review and regrading.

Secondly, what is the role of the teacher in providing feedback on the assessment task submitted by the student? Understanding the two-way nature of assessment feedback, in that the feedback also impacts on the assessment task itself, needs to be read as an insight into the assessment setting. The teacher needs to be able to explain in a language to be understood by the learner, and to engage in dialogue around both the task and the feedback. Further the teacher needs to be sensitive to the mentoring and coaching opportunity afforded in the feedback and the impact of feedback on self-esteem and motivation.

Thirdly are the two roles of the student:

Firstly, is the student as learner and their understanding of both the task and the feedback, and the development of their skills of self-assessment? Within this are the impact of the feedback on the learner in terms of emotion and ego, and the effect of this on motivation and self efficacy.

The second is the role of the student in the opportunity afforded by assessment by peers and the potential of developing a coaching role. The potential for feedback to come from other sources – peer, self as well as teacher, may provide a necessary adjunct to teacher only feedback, with some benefits in terms of the development of judgement and appraisal skills in learners. For students to be able to be competent at assessment appraisal they need three crucial elements (Sadler, 2009) – understanding of task specifications, then quality, then criteria.

In this paper I have traced the evolution of feedback from the process analogous with sound feedback systems, the transmission model, to the

acknowledgement of the importance of the reception of the feedback by the learner, the dialogic model. While teaching practice has reflected the centrality of the learner in the process, assessment and feedback has been largely informed by the need to make judgements, and until recently has not embraced the learning aspect of assessment.

Ultimately, for better student learning outcomes it is important to establish how we can develop students' facility with self assessment and to identify what we can do to help the learner move from defensive response to feedback to engagement and curiosity.

This leads me to consider why we have made the practice of providing feedback on assessment - assessment as learning - so very different to the practice of teaching? Dialogue and learning conversations are an intrinsic part of teaching, but have been strangely missing from assessment. Dialogue, and the centrality of the learner in the process, carries with it an acknowledgement of the emotional context in which it operates.

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