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Feedback on Feedback

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Abstract

Northumbria University hosts a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which specialises in the 'Assessment for Learning' Agenda (AfL). This agenda developed in response to the diverse needs and competencies of Northumbria's learners. But are the issues addressed by AfL solely a concern in Northumbria? What challenges and possible solutions might other Higher Education institutions encounter or offer? This paper addresses such questions, by identifying, analysing, and reflecting upon an issue in student learning and support, relevant to the discipline of English Literature in another Higher Education teaching context: the attitudes of students and staff to feedback in the School of English, Queen's University Belfast (2007). To do so, it references national statistical data, and general and subject-specific educational research and literature. As such, this paper offers 'feedback on feedback', exploring dialogue between teachers and learners.

Introduction

In recent years, Northumbria University has established a reputation for its pedagogic research and expertise, especially in the area of feedback on learners' assessments. Most notably, this has taken the form of the 'Assessment for Learning' Agenda (AfL), focussed on the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), but with off-shoots and impact in all the University's Schools. This agenda has numerous elements, centred around this aim (CETL, 2008): fostering 'student development' by facilitating learners to take responsibility for 'evaluating, judging and improving their own performance by actively using a range of feedback'.

This agenda has developed in response to the diverse needs and competencies of Northumbria's learners. But are the issues addressed by AfL solely a concern in Northumbria? What challenges and possible solutions might other Higher Education institutions encounter or offer? This paper tries to address such questions, by identifying, analysing, and reflecting upon an issue in student learning and support relevant to my discipline and a former teaching context: the attitudes of students and staff to feedback in the School of English, Queen's University Belfast (2007). To do so, it references national statistical data, and general and subject-specific educational research and literature. The paper also employs primary data gathered through structured questionnaires distributed by staff to 74 students. The questionnaires employed the Likert scale, inviting students to respond to a series of 'opinion' statements about the issue; they also gave space for comments. The format of this questionnaire was conditioned by a series of unstructured oral and email focus group discussions with students on the School's Staff-Student Consultative Committee. The data gathered in the questionnaire was processed using the statistical package SPSS. In turn, the findings of the focus groups and questionnaire were correlated with formal and informal staff discussions conducted or observed by the author (at School Boards, for example). By researching attitudes amongst samples of students (in general

and through their representatives), and staff, in a variety of formal, informal, oral, written, confidential and public formats, these multiple sources have been 'triangulated'. This was done in an attempt to generate both qualitative and quantitative data, to compensate for any problems with each mode of data collection, to complement each mode with another, and thereby to develop a comparative, coherent and informed picture of the issue: 'feedback on feedback'.

The Context

Entwistle and Ramsden (1983, pp. 114) ask: '*How does the context of a department relate to learning?*' With this question in mind, it is important to outline the context of provisions for feedback in the School of English at Queen's. All modules employed both formative and summative assessments, with feedback given as a matter of course *solely* on formative work. There were no guidelines or rules dictating how or in what forms such formative feedback should be delivered. There was, however, a standard mark-sheet for written work, which allowed tutors to give written feedback on aspects of content, argument and presentation (including style and punctuation) in student essays. Because there were no explicit guidelines governing forms of feedback, staff used diverse methods to distribute feedback on formative oral and written work, at their own discretion. Some staff gave students typed feedback via email, globally or individually; some gave students typed feedback as hard copy; some gave hand-written mark-sheets; some offered global feedback orally in seminars or lectures; some offered individual feedback in optional one-to-one meetings; and some insisted upon students attending one-to-one meetings.

Certain conditions governed the types of feedback offered. On well-subscribed modules one-to-one meetings were not always possible (though seminar tutors might have offered them). Equally, due to student numbers, students' oral work was often not formatively assessed, whether those contributions were continuously assessed classroom contributions, or individual presentations.

With regard to feedback on summative work, the School's guidelines insisted that students seeking such feedback had to contact the School's Exams Officer, who then determined whether the student had a legitimate claim to access any records on their summative assessment. If the student did have such a claim, the Exams Officer then contacted the course convenor who then contacted the specific marker. The marker passed on their comments and notes up to the convenor, who passed them on to the Exams Officer, who then discussed them with the student.

The Issue

A wealth of recent educational literature and research has affirmed the fundamental importance of feedback in and to learning (Race, 2001; Race, 1999; Race, 2007; Askew and Lodge, 2000; Harris and Bell, 1994; Sadler, 1989; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Race (2007, pp.12-16), particularly, has emphasised how feedback can operate in a '*ripples on the pond*' model of learning processes, '*as feedback interacts with the **digesting** and **doing** stages*' of this model, '*and keeps the learning moving*'.

Certainly students in the School of English at Queen's recognised some value to feedback. Evidence from the questionnaires showed that 97% of respondents reported that feedback was important or very important to them.

Moreover, Johnson and O'Neill (2000, pp. 6-7) have shown how feedback can and should be integrated into developing innovative delivery and practice in English-based subjects. They go on to assert that in such subjects, *'effective feedback is an essential part of the assessment and learning process'*, not least because using formative assessment can *'provide early feedback to students on core skills required for weightier summative assessments'*. In summary, because teachers often link feedback to assessment and because assessment matters to students, feedback has a vital role to play in learners' motivation and performance.

But what is feedback, and how does it work in practice? Equally, how might these potent investments in feedback translate into teaching delivery? Addressing these questions will further contextualise the issue being discussed here. Harris and Bell (1994, pp. 97-105) established a series of *'bipolar constructs'* to characterise modes of assessing. These are linked to feedback most notably in terms of whether the assessment is 'Formative' or 'Summative':

'Formative assessing is about using the processes and results of assessing to influence (hopefully to facilitate) the learning process. Summative assessing is focused more on using results for some external reason, perhaps for deciding whether or not a particular learner be allowed to continue with a course of study or has achieved the required competencies.'

In other words, feedback is implicated in formative assessment, and works to improve learning, in advance of summative assessments where that learning is terminally quantified. And yet, as Race advises (2007, p. 30): *'Assessment should be formative – even when it is primarily intended to be summative'*. Hargreaves et al (2000, p. 21) take a stronger line: *'if feedback does not have a formative effect on learning then it is not truly feedback'*. Harris and Bell (1994, p. 99) admit this, and offer some resolution to the issue: *'The distinction [between formative and summative assessment] is blurred; a terminal test may also help the learner realise their strengths and weaknesses and modify learning (and teaching)'*. Indeed, Race (2007, p. 74) suggests modifying the term 'feedback' to reflect this emphasis:

'In practice, most feedback comprises not just commentary about what has been done, but suggestions for what can be done next. ... It can be worth checking that enough 'feed-forward' is being given, rather than merely feedback on what has already been done.'

Evidence from the questionnaires suggested students sampled in the School had a similar view of the value of feedback/feed-forward on summative work, and saw summative feedback as formative feedback. Of those respondents who had experienced feedback on summative work (more than just a grade), 77% found it useful or very useful, and none found it not useful or not very useful. Of those who had not experienced such feedback on summative work, 96% thought it would be useful or very useful, while the remaining 4% were unsure whether it would be useful.

With these concerns in mind, Askew and Lodge (2000, p.1) offer a usefully broad definition of feedback which includes *'all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations'*. As they observe, this breadth is necessary, since the concept and practice of feedback are not *'simple and uncomplicated'*, but *'complex'*, not least because they are *'embedded in a common sense and simplistic dominant discourse'*. Askew and Lodge (pp.3-15) seek to provide focus to this breadth, and a way into reflecting on and evaluating feedback, rather than passively reproducing existing norms. As such, they describe three models of feedback, each with different forms, roles for teachers and learners, benefits and risks: *'receptive-transmission'*, *'constructive'* and *'co-constructive'*.

In the first model, feedback occurs in a *'mechanistic'* and *'non-negotiable'* way, as learning students and teaching experts are fixed in *'distinct'* and separate roles. In this model, feedback is characterised as a *'gift'* – something earned by the student, and conferred by the teacher. Feedback can also be *'killer'* though, as its role is primarily evaluative. Askew and Lodge note that this traditionalist and hierarchical model is not now generally employed in Higher Education. Instead, the constructive model tends to be common. Here the roles are similar to the *'receptive-transmission'* model, but the type of *'feedback discourse'* is not. The *'primary goal'* of *'constructive'* feedback is *'to describe and discuss'* work and learning in a *'two-way process (ping pong)'*. Yet Askew and Lodge suggest the benefits of *'constructive'* feedback might be extended through the development of the third, *'co-constructive'*, approach:

'Learning, in this model, involves reflective processes, critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganisation of knowledge. Personal meanings and constructs are understood in their unique social and political context.'

The role of the teacher is to *'instigate a dialogue'* between and with their students; the role of the learner is *'to actively engage in this process'*; and feedback is therefore constructed *'through loops of dialogue and information'*. At its best, this type of feedback discourse can entwine with *'reflection'* by the students on the qualities and areas for improvement in their own work.

Of these three models of feedback, the *'co-constructive'* approach was perhaps most appropriate to English studies, not least at Queen's. According to guidelines issued to students by the School of English (2007), to perform well, students were required to offer oral and written work that correlated texts and contexts, was relevant to the assignments set, and generated critical interpretations and analyses of primary and secondary material, while also being knowledgeable, original, well-presented, coherent and structured. As described by Askew and Lodge, a *'co-constructive'* approach would facilitate this kind of work, and the holistic approach it necessitates.

However, anecdotal evidence from discussions with staff in the School of English suggested that such an approach was considered time-and-labour-intensive given the large numbers of students enrolled on modules. Equally, staff seemed unsure about the function, or distinction, of formative and summative assessment. The fruitful cross-fertilisation between both modes identified in educational literature can translate into confusion and frustration in practice. Staff noted that students often seemed reluctant to produce work that will be formatively assessed, and about which they can receive feedback, precisely because it is

not summatively assessed. Yet any concerns and confusions voiced by staff were amplified by students themselves.

The Problems

Race (2007, p. 74) notes that the National Student Survey (NSS) in England and Wales in 2005 '*showed that areas where students expressed least satisfaction regarding their experience of final-year university studies were those linking to assessment and feedback*'. Unfortunately, exactly the same was evident in the results of the Survey in 2006, not least in English-based studies.

This is apparent in the NSS statistics from 2006 for a range of Queen's comparator universities (either Russell Group, or established provincial). On a Likert scale of 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree), the NSS results for the University of Nottingham showed that out of a range of criteria, including 'Learning resources' and 'Personal development', students rated the 'Assessment and feedback' they experienced on their English-based courses as the least satisfactory element of their degree (3.5, against an average of 3.9). Similarly, at the University of Sheffield, 'Assessment and feedback' received a satisfaction rating of 3.5 as opposed to an average of 3.8. At the University of York, the disparity between 'average' satisfaction ratings for certain criteria, and the satisfaction rating for 'Assessment and feedback', was even greater (2.9, against an average of 3.8). Breaking down the results at this institution reveals why students at York were so unlikely to express satisfaction. Students asked to 'agree or disagree' with the statements 'I have received detailed feedback on my work' and 'Feedback on my work has helped me to clarify things I did not understand' were most likely to 'definitely disagree', giving their satisfaction rating in response to those questions as 2.4 and 2.6 respectively.

These results contextualised, but did not mitigate, the problems at Queen's. NSS results from 2006 show that, on average, respondents from Final Year students on English-based studies at Queen's agreed with the statement 'Overall, I am satisfied with the course' (average rating = 4.1). However, as in comparator institutions, they reported relatively lower ratings for statements about 'Assessment and feedback' (overall, the average rating reported for assessment and feedback = 3.5). More pertinently, the statement 'the criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance' received the lowest reported average rating (average rating = 3.4) indicating that fewer students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this.

Concerns about feedback in the School of English at Queen's were not just restricted to, or evinced by, Final Year students. In 2007, Queen's investigated the 'First Year' experience at the university, surveying student attitudes to a range of pastoral, academic and vocational issues. The 'Teaching' section of the survey prompted students in all Schools to respond to questions about their satisfaction with 'Assessment and feedback' at the University on a scale of 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). Responses to the question 'Feedback on my work has been prompt' revealed the School of English performed slightly above average (3.9 to 3.6), yet well below the performance of the best-rated School (Maths and Physics, at 4.6). Moreover, responses to the question 'Feedback on my work has helped me in my learning' revealed that English was below average (3.5 to 3.6), and, again, well below the performance of the best-rated School (Maths and Physics, at 4.0).

Obviously, with regard to the first of these two questions, modes of assessment and feedback in different Schools differed, and some feedback may have been quicker to administer than others, especially when, as in Science-based subjects, assignments might be quantitatively marked to pre-established answer sheets. However, the responses to the second question were concerning precisely because no such discipline-related differences applied: simply put, and recollecting Race, First Year students in English were not satisfied that their tutors' feedback was 'feeding-forward' enough.

Furthermore, evidence from practitioners in English studies in other universities signals that the importance of feedback in teaching and learning, and concerns about 'feeding-forward', only intensify as students progress from First Year. Describing working in the English department at Lancaster University, Bushell (2004) has observed that while her Final or Third Year students '*seemed to need feedback less*', seminar work with Second Year students '*had to be very closely tied to feedback to ensure that students kept focussed on the task and engaged fully, and with energy*'.

Evidence from the questionnaires completed by the students sampled for this paper shows that 40% of respondents were very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the feedback they received in the School. That said, roughly 40% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the feedback they received. Across all years, levels of satisfaction were proportionately equally distributed. This would suggest the School had much to be proud of, and current modes of feedback were working well. However, 40% is still a high number of dissatisfied students. Equally, there was no correlation between satisfaction and wanting more information on assessment criteria. In other words, even those satisfied or very satisfied with feedback in the School wanted more information on assessment criteria.

The results of the focus group and email discussion group conducted for this paper also mitigated any triumphalism. One student observed: "*There's no rule, one module I had was fantastic, I got a typed page, but that didn't happen with any other module...so you are just kind of left.*" Students were also concerned about the lack of feedback on summative work, and also what seemed like an intimidating and laborious process to attain such feedback. One noted: "*If you're not happy with something, you know, a mark that you've got ... and you express an interest in getting a response, well, you don't get it.*" In turn, several students suggested this threatened to invalidate the whole assessment process: "*If you can't get back any of your results, it makes your grade feel much more subjective.*" Comparably, a respondent on a questionnaire argued that marks on oral work were "*highly disputable*" because there seemed to be a "*complete lack of evidence*" to justify how grades were awarded (it should be noted that while oral assessment is single-marked, external examiners did ask to see work submitted by students working on summatively assessed oral presentations, such as handouts). One questionnaire respondent doubted if their work had even been marked.

Several focus group students corroborated any amount of educational literature, to recognise the implications of this for motivation: "*I think that there's a point where there'll be a student who wants to improve, but then they'll feel like they don't know how, they might give up.*" Comparably, one questionnaire respondent asked: "*How are you meant to learn from mistakes if mistakes are not communicated?*" These concerns were clearly evident at undergraduate level, but intensified for some graduates, as one affirmed: "*some of my*

colleagues...were saying that we don't get anything back from our assessed essays, and that's really disturbing to me because, at a Masters level I might want to change a paper into a conference paper or a publication, or use it for something else".

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence seems to suggest that modes of 'Feedback and assessment' in English-based studies in a range of comparator universities are not satisfying to students. Hence, this is a subject-specific problem. Statistics generated by Queen's confirmed these trends. Yet they also suggest that the School of English might have benefitted from looking more closely at how assessment criteria and feedback were delivered to students, and improving the methods of delivering it where possible.

Conclusions

All students are individuals, with diverse needs and competencies. Just as we should try to develop modes of assessment that respond appropriately to this diversity, accommodating these needs and respecting these preferences and competencies, so we should seek to deliver feedback in appropriate and diverse ways. The research undertaken for this paper in part sought to identify what these needs, preferences and competencies were. So what types of feedback do students want?

The simple answer is a *range* of types of feedback as diverse as the students themselves. Each type of feedback (including written, typed and oral feedback) listed in the questionnaire was rated by more than 60% of respondents as useful or very useful. Some types of feedback stood out as particularly preferred: 83% of respondents thought that one-to-one discussions of their written and oral work at the end of the semester was useful or very useful. The most consistently employed mode of feedback (tutors giving students a hand-written sheet), was rated as useful or very useful by 79% of respondents.

Evidence from the focus groups substantiated the idea that diversity was key. One student may consider written feedback "*really inadequate*", one might demand computerised feedback to avoid receiving "*scribbles under words with no explanation*", while another will state such feedback is "*just the basic*" sort. Additionally, students argued oral feedback supplemented or superseded written comments. However, one appreciated how written feedback removed the need for "*nerve-wracking*" one-to-one encounters, and another recognised how motivating "*marginal comments*" can be. Equally, one questionnaire respondent noted that written feedback was very useful because it "*allows you to re-read it*"; another requested "*written feedback that goes into detail*" because "*one to one is often mostly forgotten*".

Perhaps most interestingly, one student affirmed that since oral and written feedback were "*equally essential*" to their peers, they should be given the option and opportunity to combine the two. This issue of combined and diverse modes of feedback was vital. Clearly, though, so too was consistency across the School. Writing in emphatic capitals, one questionnaire respondent demanded "*MORE ORGANISED FEEDBACK PROCESSES*". Johnson and O'Neill (2000, p.18) offer ample evidence of the benefits of multiple modes of assessment in English studies for diversifying modes and effectiveness of feedback, noting the effects of employing reading dossiers, drafts, learning journals, peer review, and self-assessment. Indeed, they cite (p.25) one student extolling the benefits of this diversity: *[The feedback on the proposal] helped me with the structure, because I was going to do two texts, and she*

helped me to see how I could do them together, rather than keeping them separate. So I'm changing the structure and it's loads better!

Evidence from the focus groups and questionnaires was divided about whether the School should employ more of these kinds of innovative modes of feedback, related to innovative modes of assessment. With regard to peer assessment, some students were fiercely territorial towards their work, and unconvinced of their peers' ability to offer useful feedback. However, some respondents recognised that peer feedback could be very worthwhile for certain aspects of their work (for example for checking style and clarity).

Evidence from the questionnaires suggested that of those respondents who had experienced peer assessment 46% found it useful or very useful, while only 13% found it not useful, and none found it not very useful. Of those who had *not* experienced peer assessment, 28% reported that it would not be very useful. These figures indicate that peer assessment might not be a popular mode of giving feedback. That said, 37% reported that they were unsure whether it would be useful. This suggests that there was a large pool of 'floating voters' who are as yet undecided as to the merits of this innovative mode of feedback, but remain to be convinced.

Of those who had experienced self assessment, 65% found it useful or very useful. Only 5% had found it not very useful. Yet, as with peer assessment, there seemed to be some negativity amongst those respondents who had not yet experienced self assessment: 37% reported that they would find it not very useful or not useful. Again, though, there was also uncertainty: the majority of respondents who had not experienced self assessment reported that they were unsure whether self assessment would be useful. Even more positively, 26% thought it would be useful or very useful.

Hence, perhaps any negativity to peer and self assessment processes was due to a lack of experience of, and so confidence in, these processes. Only 22% of those students surveyed by the questionnaire had experienced peer assessment; only 30% had experienced self assessment.

Evidence from the focus groups also suggested other areas where the School might have improved the types and effects of feedback. Though the School issued information about general assessment criteria on its website and in the Handbook distributed to students, this was clearly not enough. According to one focus group respondent, the lack of information about criteria was "*felt universally*" amongst their peers. One questionnaire respondent not only asked for "*much more feedback*", but also demanded that "*what is wanted*" by markers "*should be clearly stated*". As aforementioned, almost 40% of questionnaire respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their awareness of assessment criteria; again, though, almost 100% of respondents wanted more information on assessment criteria, regardless of their level of satisfaction. Equally, while the percentages of respondents who had had the opportunity to discuss criteria for their assessed essays was fairly evenly split (60% had not, 40% had), the proportions were less positive when respondents were asked if they had had opportunity to discuss oral assessment criteria: while 26% had, 74 % had not.

Race (2007, p.79) argues that the frequency and speed of feedback matters to students: it should be '*Timely – the sooner the better*'. Certainly those surveyed for this paper affirmed that the timing and frequency of feedback was important, but made no comments on its

speed: 'around twice a semester' was fine. Demand for this rate and frequency need not be a burden to staff, however, as it allows the opportunity for more strategic and effective feedback. Johnson and O'Neill (2000, p. 9) note that when formative assessment was diversified from once to twice a semester, and when its dates were re-arranged, *'feedback and dialogue between student and tutor about the purpose and function of the unit and course...improved'*.

Perhaps the biggest issue to be resolved by the School (staff and students) was giving feedback on summative work. 68% of questionnaire respondents wanted more feedback on summative work (more than just a grade). Equally, as noted above, of those respondents who *had* experienced feedback on summative work, 77% found it useful or very useful. Of those who had *not* experienced such feedback on summative work, 96% thought it would be useful or very useful. One questionnaire respondent who had obtained such feedback observed: *"But only because I asked for it. Should always be offered."* Another respondent commented (again in emphatic capitals) *"DO NOT GET FEEDBACK FOR SUMMATIVE WORK > VERY DISSATISFIED"*; yet another did the same to note this lack of feedback was *"unacceptable"*. This sums up the mood amongst students, not least because, as one respondent noted, other Schools offered such feedback. Sadly, another confessed they were *"at a loss due to my assessed marks"*. There were huge implications of this dissatisfaction and confusion for student progression and motivation, and hence learning, in Queen's and elsewhere. There are also implications for staffing and workloads. As described above, some staff at Queen's felt more 'co-constructive' models of assessment and feedback could be time-and-labour-intensive given the large numbers of students enrolled on modules. At Northumbria, where modules in English-related disciplines are also well-subscribed, perhaps one solution might be to modify workload models to accommodate the time required for staff to innovate in assessment. Equally, on large core modules, the Division has started to introduce mid-module questionnaires as a mode of dialogue to elicit responses from students on appropriate modes of feedback, and to manage their expectations about the sort of feedback they might receive.

Following Boud (1992), Harris and Bell (1994, p.111) suggest that *'collaborative assessing'* – establishing criteria for assessment and feedback in dialogue between teachers and learners – increases students' responsibility, reflexivity, ownership and investment, and hence motivation. They note (p.114) that this can perhaps lead to an assessment 'contract'. This might facilitate the kinds of 'co-constructive' assessment and feedback identified and advocated by Askew and Lodge (2000, p.11) that 'incorporates meta-learning' in ways so important to English-based studies. Whatever the future for feedback, at Queen's, and in the English and Creative Writing Division at Northumbria, it is perhaps worth noting the point made by Race (1999, p.58): *'Ultimately, assessment should be for students'*. Regardless of whether assessment is formative or summative, it should generate meaningful feedback.

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