

Negotiating feedback: lecturer perceptions of feedback dissatisfaction

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Abstract

This study analyses lecturers' perceptions of feedback provided to university undergraduates and why in many cases it appears to prove so unsatisfactory to students. Recent research into the issue of feedback in higher education (HE) suggests that most existing studies on the subject have focused on students, whereas there is far less work on teachers in relation to formative learning (Bailey, 2008; Bailey and Garner, 2010). Indeed, Evans (2013) notes that only 7.1% of research articles she explored in her wide-ranging review of existing assessment and feedback literature focused exclusively on lecturer perspectives. Therefore, in addition to considering the findings of existing literature, this study explores the results of five interviews with HE History lecturers to explore their understanding of the issue of student dissatisfaction with feedback.

Keywords: higher education; feedback; assessment; lecturers; National Student Survey.

Introduction

This study analyses lecturers' perceptions of feedback provided to university undergraduates and why in many cases it appears to prove so unsatisfactory to students. Recent research into the issue of feedback in higher education (HE) suggests that most existing studies on the subject have focused on students, whereas there is far less work on teachers in relation to formative learning (Bailey, 2008; Bailey and Garner, 2010). Indeed, Evans (2013) notes that only 7.1% of research articles she explored in her wide-ranging review of existing assessment and feedback literature focused exclusively on lecturer perspectives. Therefore, in addition to considering the findings of existing literature, this study explores the results of five interviews with HE History lecturers to

explore their understanding of the issue of student dissatisfaction with feedback.

In 2005, with the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) to most of the UK's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the 'realities' of student satisfaction were brought an unprecedented national platform. Of the main thematic sections in the NSS questionnaire, five statements fall into the section entitled 'assessment and feedback':

Q5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.

Q6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.

Q7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.

Q8. I have received detailed comments on my work.

Q9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.

With the exception of a newer section on student unions added in 2012, the section on 'assessment and feedback' has consistently ranked bottom overall in student perceptions (HEFCE, 2013). The university at the heart of this study ranked in the bottom 10% of universities for the section 'assessment and feedback' during the period in which this study was undertaken and had initiated various awareness measures to try and remedy this situation.

Of course, in recent years the NSS has had an increasingly direct impact on HEIs via the main university rankings lists. The *Guardian*, the Complete University Guide, the *Times* University Guide and the *Sunday Times* Good University Guide all incorporate data from the NSS in order to take into consideration student satisfaction when ranking institutions. Universities with impressive research impact, infrastructure spending, staff-student ratios and demanding entry tariffs cannot rely entirely upon these factors to keep their national ranking high: student satisfaction counts. In reaction to this impact on university rankings, some doubt has been cast over whether the NSS can be a true reflection of student feelings and it has been argued that some institutions, or at least some faculty members, have been instructing students to answer positively in the NSS to influence their HEI's ranking in the league tables (Swain, 2009). Indeed, universities and their staff are becoming increasingly aware of (and concerned about) student perceptions of feedback and the need to improve satisfaction, both as a matter of education and as a matter of self-interest.

Existing literature

Feedback as a subject in existing higher education literature is frequently divided into two broad categories: formative and summative. What is immediately clear is that formative feedback is held up as the golden standard in the modern higher education environment and seen as the area where greater emphasis is needed (Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003; Deeprose and Armitage, 2004). Lilly et al. (2010) argue that, in the main, staff and students share a sense of what constitutes good quality feedback, especially that it should be formative in nature (whether serving a formative or summative purpose), a finding echoed in Drew (2001).

Conversely, summative feedback is regarded as something that has always been a 'vexed business' and is still in disarray (Knight, 2002). Knight (2002, p.278) argues that summative assessment is being 'stretched to cover learning goals that resist robust, reliable and affordable summation', as well as being fraught with contradictions. However, despite the recognition of the preference for formative feedback within the academe, one wonders whether all practitioners and – even more so – consumers of feedback understand the difference. In spite of recognition of the importance of feedback among both students and academics, the matter too often causes frustration for both (Orrell, 2006).

One recent study posits that the purpose of feedback can be divided into roughly five areas: corrections, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, bench-marking and longitudinal development/feed-forward (Price et al., 2010). However, it is marks, grades and classifications – often cited as a student's main concern – which seem to be both the least effective and most sought after form of feedback (Knight, 2002). Here, from the start, we see the beginnings of a problem that this piece seeks to address – the gap between expectations and reality when it comes to feedback for both the provider and the consumer. Bailey and Garner (2010, p. 196) contend that there is indeed a 'common ground' in the higher education experience: students and teachers alike share a 'sense of disengagement with higher education practices ostensibly designed to support pedagogical and communicative interactions'. They conclude that both parties might be left wondering 'if feedback is worth the paper it is written on' (Bailey and Garner, 2010, p.196).

Glover and Brown (2006) suggest that one key concern for teaching staff is that providing written feedback is a time-consuming process. With departments across universities looking for ever more comprehensive written feedback as quickly as possible in order to address student dissatisfaction concerns, educators are beginning to feel the strain. Despite the time-consuming nature of the process, many educators feel as though the time spent on feedback is somewhat wasted, as there is a perception that students are only interested in marks and pay little – if any – attention to written feedback (Glover and Brown, 2006; Weaver, 2006).

Bailey (2008) found that teachers experienced a 'conflict between their conceptions of the purpose of feedback, their intentions and the requirements of the system'. Due to this conflict, Bailey suggests that educators might become more indifferent to the feedback they provide, other than as it relates to 'their performance in assessments and to comply with university standards and regulations' (Bailey, 2008, p.5). Educators' understanding of the role and utility of feedback becomes all the more challenging when they take into consideration not only their own ideas of its purpose, but also the ideas of their employers and their students.

Orrell (2006) suggests that many academics see feedback as a **postscript** activity and formative feedback as an **add-on** to teaching and learning responsibilities. Orrell argues that for staff to be fully committed to feedback they require the support and guidance of their institution. However, as teaching staff across the educational spectrum often note, time – or lack thereof – is a decisive factor in the quality and quantity of feedback provided.

Finally, one must also consider that many higher education practitioners have little – if any – formal pedagogical training and therefore institutional support is even more integral to the success of feedback provision. As Weaver (2006) suggests, though many educators try to provide effective feedback, many also lack the knowledge of how to provide it. However, she feels this is a weak argument since there are plenty of resources available to staff to rectify this deficit (Weaver, 2006). In this instance perhaps the question mark remains over whether teaching staff make use of the resources and support that are already out there.

Methodology and ethics

To collect data for this study, I carried out separate interviews of five History lecturers at Jones University (name changed for purposes of anonymity). These interviews were conducted in each interviewee's own office at a time of their choosing and took place intermittently over several weeks (as was convenient for those involved). My main aim was for the interviewees to give as much information as they could without feeling overly restricted by my questions, but at the same time trying to assure that the necessary key themes were covered in sufficient depth.

Each interview lasted no more than one hour, and was based around thematic concerns that arose from the existing literature (and an earlier questionnaire that I had distributed to students in the department that is not explored here for lack of space), much like the 'shopping list of topics' suggested by Robson (2002). Having explained the nature of the investigation, I proceeded to ask the lecturers to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the following issues: timing of feedback; the role of feedback; students' perceptions of feedback; the gaps between staff and student perceptions of feedback; and finally, solutions to the problem. This was based on the idea of an 'interview schedule' where the interview would not be restricted by the list but instead the list merely acted as a reminder of my research priorities (Thomas, 2009). The interviews are best described as semi-structured, in that the area of interest was chosen and identified, and the questions were open-ended but allowed for modification of format and wording in relation to each individual interview (Ary et al., 2010). I assured each staff member their comments would remain anonymous, for the value of the study and for their own reassurance.

In terms of recording the interviews, I felt that taking written notes allowed for a more informal atmosphere and would lead to less concern among participants about the nature of their comments, despite the obvious benefits offered by recording equipment. Each participant was able to independently consent to partaking (or not) to the extent they felt comfortable, was made aware that this information was being used for university research into feedback that would be written up and read by other academics. Therefore, my research adheres to all of the conditions expected of informed consent: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, the research topic is not of a particularly personal, intrusive or intimate nature and I felt that it was unlikely that any major ethical dilemmas were likely to arise as a result of my

questions.

Results of investigation

For the purposes of anonymity, the interview participants are identified here by the letters A-E and are referred to in gender-neutral terms. They were asked a number of broad questions on feedback in order to elicit wide-ranging responses, as noted above. Given the variety of the discourse, and the tangential directions of some of the interviews, the specific questions varied as sometimes they had already been partially answered.

Timing of feedback

The issue of timing of feedback is a subject addressed directly by the NSS and one that seemed to elicit strong views in these interviews. Lecturer C suggested that one of the key reasons for dissatisfaction with timing – for both marker and student – was that of **bureaucratisation**. Students hand essays in to the course secretary, they are then processed, marked, moderated (in some cases externally), handed back to the secretaries and then reprocessed: given the number of steps involved, the process takes a long time. The relatively recent departmental guidelines affecting all five lecturers involved in these interviews mandated a turnaround period of three weeks from hand-in to return of work. Lecturer E noted that although ‘the three-week period is tight...students always underestimate our processes’. Lecturer B was less concerned with time, suggesting that – new regulations aside – they were able to give a similar amount of feedback to that which they had always provided.

Lecturer A stated that ‘feedback absorbs a lot of my time’, as there are often ‘a lot of pieces to mark in a relatively short space of time’ and there are ‘no incentives, no rewards to spend another 45 minutes on something’. Lecturer D was also concerned, noting also that despite the tighter deadlines, class sizes and workloads continued to increase. Lecturer E commented that, since feedback on written work has ‘got to be fast’, there was no time to become ‘excessively devoted to it’. Here the lecturers raised concerns relating to both motivation and financial remuneration when considering the time spent on feedback.

Lecturer A identified that engaging in a dialogue with students was an important facet of the feedback process but also stressed that this process was time consuming, and that one had to rely to some extent on 'not too much student uptake' in this regard. Unlike Lecturer A, when first questioned on the idea of feedback in relation to time issues, the other lecturers made the connection to written feedback to start with and then went on to note other types of feedback given more time to consider the issue.

The role of feedback

Lecturer A saw the primary function of feedback as 'helping students to identify what they need to do in order to improve'. Lecturer D put it a little differently, saying that firstly students should be made aware of 'what they are doing right' (summative assessment) and that secondly they should be told 'how to get better' (formative assessment). However, what became clear was a firm adherence among all lecturers interviewed as to the formative role of feedback being a primary function, at least in theory.

Lecturer C mentioned a different issue first of all – the issue of 'explaining the mark that they got', before noting the aim of future improvement. Lecturer C then went on to argue that these 'quite different aims can make feedback quite disjointed'. The interviewees were united in noting that there was some conflict between the roles feedback is expected to play. Lecturer A argued that feedback should not be used to 'rationalise' the grade given to students, although they conceded that good feedback should suggest why the resulting grade had been awarded, adding, 'we can all become a little mark obsessed'. Though Lecturer A hinted at the role of summative feedback, Lecturer B went much further in their outright acknowledgement of the other roles of feedback. Lecturer B stated clearly that one of the less acknowledged roles of feedback was its summative purpose: 'to protect ourselves in the event of an appeal and to justify the mark you've given'. In this sense, they felt one needed more often to focus on what was wrong with a piece of work and this would not necessarily help a student to improve in the future. They concluded that the two aims of developmental feedback and justification of a grade were often at odds, but almost always present to some extent.

Perceptions of student views on feedback

Given that feedback should ideally be a dialogic process, it was important to establish not

only what the interviewees thought of feedback as a process but also to ask more specifically how they thought students viewed the feedback they received. Lecturer A argued that, particularly on a single-semester course, students might view feedback as useless because they would not have that lecturer again. In this sense, they suggested, students often tailored an essay to a particular teacher and when it came to feedback they might no longer be interested unless they were to have the same teacher again the following semester/year. Lecturer A suggested that often what a student sought was feedback that might 'transform their mark', or some 'secret to doing well'. The issue of grades as the primary focus of student concerns was one that united the lecturers.

Lecturer B felt that students' main expectations were linked to justifying grades and that (if they were to be cynical) they might say: if they all had first class grades 'they wouldn't care if they had feedback'. Indeed, Lecturer B went on to suggest that no matter how quickly comments were delivered – or how detailed the comments were – students were rarely satisfied with feedback unless it said 'good things'. Lecturer E agreed that 'unfortunately students focus more and more on the mark' and echoed Lecturer B when they noted that for some students 'the feedback is only good if the mark is good'. This factor of 'mark-fixation' is pointed to prominently in both HE literature and school-targeted Assessment for Learning (AfL) literature and it is no surprise that lecturers singled it out as a key issue (Knight, 2002; Black et al., 2005; Glover and Brown, 2006; Weaver, 2006).

Interestingly, Lecturer E felt that it was high performing students who were most likely 'to seek additional oral feedback' and that one of the main things they tried to stress to all students was the importance of 'seeking' feedback. In a related comment, Lecturer D said that they feared that it was often those who query their written feedback that 'least need the oral feedback'. In this sense, a number of the interviewees were worried that only a small group of high achieving students read, considered and then sought further clarification on their written feedback, but that the majority – who might benefit most from oral feedback – did not seek it. The answer to this particular conundrum seems to lie in setting aside specific tutorial time for oral feedback – though the drawbacks of time restrictions are once again paramount.

The 'disconnect' between the providers and consumers of feedback, potentially leading to dissatisfaction, was an important focus in this investigation and therefore it was important to establish what the five interviewees felt caused this disconnect. Lecturer D started out

by suggesting that, when it comes to the question of why feedback scores so badly on the NSS: 'nobody seems to know'. Most of the lecturers pointed to the most basic of disconnections: communication. Lecturer C argued that students 'don't necessarily understand what feedback means', but that markers can avoid this problem by fleshing out their feedback with examples.

Lecturer A suggested that a 'communication gap' often occurred, but that this was often because 'students rarely came to take advantage' of one-to-one feedback. This same lecturer felt that the 'fixation with anonymity' when it comes to assessment led to a disconnection with students, regarding how one can measure their individual progress and problems. Indeed, they felt that anonymous marking served to alienate students, making them feel that feedback was less targeted and less useful. Another way this anonymity manifested was that, as Lecturer C noted, in changing tutors frequently across years and semesters, students began to see developmental feedback as less feasible – as, to a different lecturer, they were a new student. Lecturer D also felt that anonymous marking broke the 'links' with the student and stopped people being able to 'track progress'. Connected to this idea of anonymity of students, Lecturer D also noted that with increasing class sizes, lecturers found it more and more difficult to gain a sense of 'connectedness' with their students. Here communication as an issue broadens out to anonymity and lack of continuity in the teacher-student relationship.

Finally, some of the lecturers looked more specifically to the NSS as playing a role in dissatisfaction, directly or indirectly. Lecturer B suggested that one of the main reasons Jones university scored badly in the NSS when it comes to feedback is because the students have such a 'high opinion of their ability' and that the NSS results reflect their 'disappointment in attainment'. Lecturer E felt that in many cases students do not seek feedback or take it seriously and therefore one should perhaps be asking 'why take the rubric in the National Student Survey seriously? How do we know [students] have a problem if [they] don't tell us?' They suggested students did not seek feedback when they wanted it and then vented this frustration at the end of their studies through the NSS.

Solutions?

Moving on to the issue of solving the many problems that had been flagged up, the

interviewees tackled the potential solutions often with a degree of scepticism: there was certainly a suggestion that the university's attempts to address feedback dissatisfaction in the NSS had led to at least a small amount of wariness when it came to 'solutions'. Lecturer A warned of the pitfalls of tackling the problem of student dissatisfaction with feedback by providing a 'common format for feedback', as they felt this would 'stifle creativity and innovation' and promote a feeling of 'increasing bureaucratisation', leading to students feeling they 'were being taught by a machine'. Lecturer C saw the best solution to the problem as more feedback throughout the semester, even if it did not come with a grade attached. In line with their concerns over time, Lecturer C also felt that quicker turnaround across the board and a one-to-one hand-back to students would help. Finally, they felt that anonymous marking should end, as it does not allow for 'personalised' feedback.

Lecturer E felt that explaining the nature of feedback was a key factor that needed to be addressed. They suggested that if time was an issue, lecturers should make it clear why time was needed and help students to understand the nature of the processes marking goes through. They also felt that the students should be made aware that the onus was on them to seek feedback and use it. Lecturer E saw the primary cause of dissatisfaction with feedback as the 'disparity' in quality across different markers. However, they also pointed to the difficulties that one faces in trying to achieve uniformity in feedback. They felt it impeded the relative independence of tutors and that if it became too uniform, everyone would become dissatisfied. The idea of a 'feedback tsar' to oversee feedback continuity was also fraught with the same difficulties in the eyes of Lecturer E, and they argued that the problem was that the content and quality of feedback would always be subjective.

Conclusion

What the results of this study seem to indicate is that, as the existing literature suggests, there are a multitude of reasons for problems encountered in the feedback process. A recent study by Adams and McNab (2013) suggest four main areas that learning developers might look to focus upon to improve assessment and feedback: that goals and standards are clearly communicated; that feedback is useful and meaningful (and formative); that students receive feedback in time for application to their next similar assignment; and that assessments encourage a deep approach to learning (intellectual

engagement). The interviews discussed above show clearly that the lecturers interviewed were aware of many, if not all, of these suggestions. However, perhaps the primary causes of concern here were: students' understanding of the purpose and meaning of feedback, and time restraints on lecturers in the provision of feedback.

Considering the issue of 'understanding', those questioned felt that feedback was most effective if students sought verbal feedback, rather than relying entirely on written comments, in line with the findings of numerous educationalists (Drew, 2001; Anderson and Hounsell, 2007; Duncan, 2007; Bloxham and Campell, 2010). Though this study has revealed much of what the existing literature has already found, it has also highlighted the fact that university lecturers felt that there is often more discussion of problems than production of practicable solutions. Carless (2006) posits that a solution to the differences in student expectations of feedback could be found through 'assessment dialogues', where staff would be more explicit about assessment procedures and more open to questions from students in this regard. The author feels that such 'assessment dialogues' could help students clarify 'the assumptions known to lecturers but less transparent to students' (Carless, 2006, p.230).

In terms of the timing of feedback, the interviewees raised important points regarding institutional bureaucracy, and in relation to optimal timing for feedback in terms of its usefulness to students. However, the interviews also raised the idea that students were often uninterested in the feedback beyond the mark awarded, especially if they were not likely to be taught by the same lecturer again. Here the issue of subjectivity – in the (perceived) eyes of the student – is apparent, and suggests that for some of those interviewed, their feedback might be viewed as overly-subjective (or to a lecturer's personal-taste) by the student and therefore less useful. On this matter, Sadler (2009) provides a compelling argument for increased grade integrity, whereby a mark awarded is a truer reflection of wider student performance.

Although raised less often in the interviews, the issue of consistency across different teachers/lecturers is, perhaps, one of the most troublesome of all the issues that was mentioned, and is highlighted in a number of existing studies (Read et al., 2005; Hounsell et al., 2008). Whereas the idea of better communication could be remedied through one-to-one meetings for feedback provision, or various other methods, there seems to be little in the way of concrete suggestions as to how one combats inconsistency among staff

providing feedback. Price et al. (2011, p.490) identify inconsistency as a key challenge, which 'exacerbates tensions within the assessment process producing varying expectations among the stakeholders'. This, above all, seems to be an area that needs further investigation. Price et al. (2011, p.480) suggest that the development of 'pedagogic literacy among staff and students' would allow for the debate to move towards establishing long-term, sustainable improvements in assessment.

Overall, though this study is limited in scope, it brings to light some avenues that need to be addressed not only through NSS-driven institutional initiatives, but also through a more circumspect discussion of the nature of university teaching itself. The improvement and consistency of feedback certainly needs to be considered in more practicable terms, but one also needs to bear in mind the fact that lecturers are feeling increasingly distanced from their students as a consequence not of one, but of a variety of factors.

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