Staff and students' conceptions of good written feedback: Implications for Practice

Philip Long
Anglia Ruskin University
Phil.Long@anglia.ac.uk

Abstract

The assessment of students' work has long been recognised as a key part of the learning process and yet some research suggests that despite considerable advances in recent years in terms of developing a greater variety of assessment forms, the contribution made by feedback on assessment to student learning remains a problematic area. In this paper I explore the concept of good written feedback as defined by first and third year undergraduates and academic staff in a post 1992 British university. This paper focuses on summative written feedback which I define as feedback provided on a student's assignment, after it has been submitted, which contributes to a final grade. My analysis of the data collected via semi structured interviews highlights the importance of the pre-conceptions of staff and students on their conception of the role and form of effective feedback. Although there are similarities in the staff and student conceptions of good written feedback there are significant areas of difference which, it is argued, can best be resolved by the adoption of more dialogic forms of feedback.

Key words
Feedback, students', staff, dialogue.

Introduction
There is a growing body of literature drawing on data derived from Higher Education which emphasises the need to reconceptualise feedback, moving it from a monologue to a dialogue (Gibbs, 2006; Carless, 2006, Defeyter and McPartlin, 2007; McDowell *et al.*, 2008; Sadler, 2010; Nicol, 2010) in which students are actively involved in the process of creating the feedback. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that the tendency, at an institutional level, is to adopt what might be described as a structural response which emphasises the time within which feedback is provided and, perhaps, sees an insistence on typed or word processed feedback which can more easily be read by students. Doubtless these processes will help improve some aspects of feedback practice but in essence they represent more of the same and are not consistent with the literature relating to good feedback practice in which students are actively engaged in the creation of the dialogue which is seen to lie at the heart of the link between assessment, feedback and learning. In this paper I will explore the concept of feedback as defined by undergraduates and academic staff and how they construct their understanding of what good feedback looks like.

Short literature review
It is an observation widely acknowledged within the academic literature, (Biggs, 2006; Boud, 1995; Brown, 1998; Dunn *et al.*, 2004; Gibbs, 2006; Ramsden, 2006; Tang, 1994; Tian, 2007) that assessment is a key driver in terms of students' approach to their courses. Alongside that overarching principle is the evidence which suggests that what helps to improve student learning more than any other single factor is feedback on their learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Where feedback on learning, especially in summative mode, takes the form of comments on assignments the nature of those comments and the extent to which they support and promote student learning is

a key issue for students and their lecturers alike. Despite considerable effort being put into helping students and lecturers understand feedback and produce more effective feedback, there is little evidence to suggest that a significant shift in understanding or behaviour has occurred within the HE sector. The work of a range of writers (Biggs, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Brown, 1998; Clegg and Bryan, 2006; Falchikov, 2005; Gibbs, 2006; Nicol, 2010; Ramsden, 2006; Rust, 2002 and Yorke, 2003), has been fairly consistent in both spelling out the nature of the problems related to assessment and feedback in universities and in putting forward proposals for how those problems may be militated. In short, the structural changes in higher education, in particular the processes of massification, reductions in funding and consequent increases in class size, have combined to create a near perfect storm around assessment which, in Ramsden's phrase, remains '...a serious and often tragic enterprise' (Ramsden, 2006:176).

The failure to adequately resolve the problems related to assessment in universities is noted by Norton (2009) who argues 'Few topics create such divided opinions and raise such passions as assessment and yet, in higher education, we still seem relatively bad at it' (Norton, 2009:132). In order to improve our practices we need to have a better understanding of how students and staff think about assessment in general and summative feedback on assessment in particular. Carless' (2006) study of staff and student perceptions of the quality and usefulness of written feedback suggests that staff have a higher opinion of the helpfulness of their feedback than students do. The solution put forward by Carless and many of the other writers mentioned in this brief review is the development of:

> 'Assessment dialogues [which] can help students to clarify 'the rules of the game', the assumptions known to lecturers but less transparent to students'
>
> (Carless, 2006:130).

The message from the research literature reviewed so far seems clear, universities are not very good at providing summative feedback on assessment as a way of promoting learning and the best solution seems likely to be one which moves feedback from a passive, transmissive mode to one which requires active engagement on the part of the student and the assessor thus opening up a dialogue. The capacity to engage in dialogue around assessment, as well as other more specific discipline related areas, can be considered to be an essential skill for undergraduates in terms of enhancing their performance and it is also a transferable skill with wider applications to the world of work (Boud and Falchikov, 2006).

Trigwell *et al.'s* (1999) study, suggests that there is a high degree of convergence in the ways different groups, for example students and lecturers, construct their understanding about what good teaching is which, according to Lo's work (2010), leads in turn to heightened levels of student satisfaction. If, as Trigwell *et al.* and Lo suggest, shared conceptions between students and lecturers about what good teaching is can enhance learning and student satisfaction, then it would be reasonable to suggest that the same might be true where students and lecturers develop a shared conception of what good assessment and feedback practices are, a suggestion which appears to be borne out by Amrhein and Nassaji's (2010) research. Amrhein and Nassaji's work also makes it very clear that such convergence between student and lecturer in terms of what makes for good assessment and feedback are comparatively rare and moreover are rarely implemented due to resource constraints. It is precisely the degree to which the staff and students who were my respondents share conceptions of what good assessment and feedback practices that I am interested in exploring in my research whilst the areas of difference will provide the basis for the dialogic processes which both students and staff need to discuss and understand.

A number of key points emerged from the literature reviewed for this paper: firstly feedback on assessed work is a problematic area for HE in general; secondly current attempts to improve feedback both in terms of its quality and the degree to which it is useful for students have had limited success; thirdly the solution to the first two problems may lie in the adoption of more explicitly dialogic forms of assessment. The work of Carless *et al.* (2010) indicates that developing truly dialogic forms of assessment and feedback in higher education is likely to prove challenging as the concerns of both staff and students need to be satisfied, a point echoed by Hargreaves (2007). The findings from the literature and my own experience as a university lecturer lead me to pose two research questions for this paper:

1. What influences the ways in which staff and students construct their understanding of good feedback?
2. Do staff and students differ in their understanding of what good feedback is?

Theoretical and Methodological Perspective

My epistemological stance is informed by the principles of Constructivism, defined by Robson (2007) as being concerned with understanding the multiplicity of social constructs, meaning and knowledge (Robson, 2007:27). Constructivism is firmly located within the interpretivist paradigm and within that paradigm I am strongly drawn to phenomenology as a way of thinking about how people experience the world. I approached this research through a constructivist epistemology because twenty three years of teaching has led me to believe that whilst people's beliefs and actions tend to reflect the way in which they experience and make sense of the world as individuals, those beliefs and actions will also be constructed by their interaction with the groups to which they belong (see also Tuominen and Savolainen, 1997). As a theory of knowledge, Constructivism is useful in that it allows us to recognise that different social groups inhabiting the same or similar arenas may well construct different ways of thinking about, and understanding, the same phenomena.

Data collection and analysis

Consistent with Interpretivist and phenenomenological principles, data for this research were collected via a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with first and third year undergraduates and academic staff from across a post 1992 University. Before the interviews were carried out ethical approval was sought and gained from the relevant university ethics panel and all respondents were asked to sign a consent form setting out what was being asked of them and guaranteeing their anonymity and right to withdraw from the project. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, was recorded on a digital recorder and then fully transcribed. Each respondent was sent a copy of their transcript for checking and some minor changes were made before the analysis of the data in the transcripts was undertaken. The students who were interviewed were drawn for the first and third years of their undergraduate courses within the Faculty of Education. Including first and third year students would allow me to interpret the views of those students very early on in their academic studies who had not yet received feedback on any work and those who had had almost three years experience of feedback as undergraduates. The staff who participated were drawn from the members of a university wide working party which had previously looked into the way in which written feedback was provided across the whole university. The choice of student respondents from the faculty of Education made it likely that they would have an academic as well as a personal insight into the process of feedback on written work. Thus the expertise of the student respondents would most closely align with that of the staff respondents allowing valid comparisons to be drawn. All the students in each of the two year groups were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate. Of 21 students who responded positively to the e-mail I was able to interview 18 of them, nine first year students and nine third year students. The completed transcripts were analysed using Nvivo 9 QDA.

Before carrying out my research I had assumed that the students would define feedback largely in terms ofa crude good/bad dichotomy in which good feedback confirmed their perceived ability and the quality of their work and bad feedback was anything which challenged their view of themselves as learners. I had also assumed that the staffs' view of feedback would be rather world weary and they might, perhaps, be a little cynical and quick to criticise those students they perceived as in some way being undeserving of their efforts. Being aware of these pre-conceptions on my part allowed me to ask very open questions designed to minimise any undue influence. Typically an interview would begin with me inviting respondents to talk about themselves as students or as teachers and as my respondents added depth and detail to the answers they gave so the questions became increasingly focused on feedback. Whilst some of what I found seemed to confirm my initial scepticism, the full range of responses from staff and students was far more complex, and far more interesting, than I had anticipated.

Results
The key findings which emerged from the analysis of the data are listed below and the significance of these findings will be discussed in the following section:

- Students had a very clear idea of what good feedback is which was largely formed before they arrived at university and which provided the yardstick by which the value of subsequent feedback was measured.
- Overwhelmingly the students in my study wanted feedback to tell them how to improve and were less interested in feedback which told them how well or badly they had done unless it made clear what they should do in future assignments to improve their grades
- Students' perception of what constituted good feedback seemed to shift as they progressed from the first year of their degree to the third and final year although the cause of this shift is not clear.
- Most of the staff in this research thought that their students did not value the feedback they were given or they believed that students wanted more feedback than can be provided given the time and other resourcing constraints imposed on the staff.
- Staff in this study frequently located themselves as discipline based gate keepers whose job it was to use feedback to students to enculture them into the relevant academic discipline.

Discussion
The extent to which the students in my study arrived at university with well-formed conceptions of what constituted good feedback is evident from the following extracts. The first student I interviewed had completed an Access to Higher Education course prior to attending university and used that experience as the basis for constructing an idea of what constituted good feedback which she described as:

> 'you'd submit a draft, you'd have some feedback on that draft and then you'd submit your final one. That was the standard way of doing it and when we initially started the course, we were allowed two submissions of a draft but then in the later stages, once that first term was out the way, then it was just one draft and one submission and that was it.'

A less helpful experience was related by a student who had completed their preparation for university at a sixth form college:

> 'I think when I was in my first year in college we had an essay to hand in for performance studies and my tutor ... gave it back to me two days before it had to be re-submitted, so I found that very unhelpful. '

The students' experience of feedback at school and college was variable although some students were clearly able to articulate what made the feedback they received prior to joining the university successful:

> 'Feedback was pretty good. Like, it was detailed and you knew exactly what to work on next time and, they would also give you face to face feedback before you submitted and things like that, they were very helpful, very helpful, very good feedback from them.'

Not all of the students had attended college or school immediately before enrolling at university and some had worked in various occupations but they still received feedback as the following makes clear:

Did you receive feedback whilst you were running the bar?

> 'Yes, from my General Manager and from my Area Manager regarding the events, whether I'd met targets that I'd set out for myself in my business plans; if I hadn't I had to try and explain why I hadn't met them, how I could have improved it so that next time I did an event I'd learnt from the previous one. Then also feedback from the staff towards my training that I'd done ... it was important to know that they'd got it and that I was clear.'

What this extract highlights is the importance of the dialogic process in developing effective feedback. The dialogic principle was also significant in the experience of the next student who described a conversation she had about a piece of work she had produced for her A level course:

> 'It was from my psychology teacher [a former university professor] and she said if I'd have been marking that in a university grading, I would've given it a 2:1 which was, for me, which was exactly what I needed to hear ... It was like ah, right, okay. I can work at university level. That's all I need to know just in that one sentence. '

A different perspective came from this third year student:

what's been the most useful piece of feedback you've had?

> 'The one that sticks in my mind – whether it's useful or not, but I guess it is – is when I was doing GCSEs and my English teacher got really frustrated with me ... she's really good – we had to write a paragraph about something – and she red-penned everywhere ... but at the end of it, it said 'this is actually a really good beginning piece of work, if you'd written more or if you'd finished it, this could have been a such-and-such a grade. '

It is profoundly disappointing to learn that after three years of undergraduate study the best piece of feedback this participant could identify was something which had occurred at least 5 years earlier. Taken together these extracts suggest that far from being tabula rasa when it came to understanding what good feedback was the students arrived at university with clearly develop concepts of good and bad feedback based on their previous experience of learning. It is against these pre-existing schema that the students judged their subsequent experience of feedback and central to the students' schema was the widely held view that good feedback could help them improve their performance. Most of the students in my study wanted feedback which would help them improve their work rather than feedback which justified a mark or only told them what they had done wrong as the following extracts indicate:

'so most of the time I read it and think 'okay yes, I know what to do for next time', if such a situation should arise. But it's nice - it makes me feel good sometimes if you … I think – and I know a lot of what they say I'd definitely read it and take it in.'

'Yes, because if I see it as, if it's not an A [grade], this is going to come out wrong, basically I have done something wrong, I have missed something out to get the golden ticket, so tell me what I need to do. '

'Because I feel that no matter how good you are at something there is always something you can improve on, there is always somewhere to go up from that. So I think it is really important that even though you can see that you have done well by your grade and the comments you have been given, I think it is always important to be given a next step … and it is hard to discuss what they mean by certain terms as well, clarifying oh that was really good, well what constitutes good, how could I make it…is good alright or is it really good or is it excellent? It is not defined as anything it is just good. '

'… when you were doing something that you have done for quite a long time and then someone comes along and says actually this is a really good piece of work, if you haven't heard it before … you know it is very very good. '

'It's like I never, I don't know how well I have to write to get those [marks] or which good words or sentences I need to use. So it's the first time giving it in. If they tell me this is a 40% essay then I will know for the other essays that this is how I need to write to get that amount.'

In terms of the function of grades in relation to feedback the situation was far more fluid and ambiguous than I had anticipated it would be. Three of the third year students I interviewed made their views on feedback versus grades quite clear:

'It's the grade, it's always the grade. There's no point getting feedback from a really nice friendly lecturer saying well done for getting a two and you've done brilliantly if what you wanted was the first.'

'It's [feedback] not the point. The point is the grade. That is what you are marked on and that's what society marks you on. You can't go for a job and go 'oh, do you know what? I got a third but they said it was lovely.'

'I only want feedback to tell me what I need to do to get what I feel I want to get. '

These, perhaps predictable responses, need to be contrasted with the following statements from two first year students:

'I'm not worried this year about my grades because I just want to get the feedback on how to improve so if I come out you know of my first year and I've got really low grades I'm not going to think oh, I'm going to look at the feedback and think right this is where I'm going wrong and then … a grade's just a number really right?'

Yeah, it [feedback] is a constructive process and I think as well, when there is so many outside pressures as a mature student has with trying to manage a family, your work life and everything, it is a great motivator to keep you going on the course.

Clearly the extent to which students share a common view of the relative importance of grades over feedback is limited and my research suggest that there is a distinction to be made between the views of first year students and those of third years. The explanation for this divergence of views may lie in the fact that none of the work carried out by the first years counts towards their final degree classification whilst all of the work carried out in the third year counts. Given the message from the literature such a perspective is counter intuitive if we accept that what improves student performance is feedback not marks alone. The comments from the staff suggested that they were not particularly aware of the students' more positive perception of feedback and their responses tended to assume that all their students took a largely instrumental approach to feedback and were far more interested in the final grade than on the written comments:

> 'I think [students] are socially acclimatised to wanting to know a number in a lot of cases rather than just the feedback …from all of the observation I have of doing this job, the mark is the thing that they think about primarily.'

> 'I think, unfortunately, that on the whole, students are more interested in the mark I guess one would hope that they do read the feedback … the fact they don't, the work quite often seems it's not a major part of their lives, that the mark is more important.'

> 'Well I do think that there are some students who will just be interested in the mark. That's it. Full stop.'

> 'most of our students have got their eye very much on the summative marks all the time, they're not, many of them are not here with a burning thirst to drink deeply of the well of knowledge they're here to get a degree and the best degree they can get, and I don't mean they're necessarily kind of lazy, but they're much more instrumentalist in their approach and so anything that doesn't count has to be discarded because they haven't got time.'

> 'students always want a mark don't they? They want to know where they are. Feedback without a mark can leave them still in a bit of a limbo without being able to pinpoint how well they're doing ... without putting a mark on it students can interpret it in quite different ways.'

Seven out of nine of my staff participants clearly indicated that they believed the mark was more important to the students than the feedback. When asked why they thought students were taking such an instrumental approach to feedback the most common responses stressed what staff saw as the impact of the marketisation of higher education as is clear from the following comments:

> 'a number of students who are paying for themselves ... want value for money and I do think feedback is about value for money.'

> 'The other thing is if you think about it on a very basic cost benefit model and from a marketised model, they are paying for a service, so I think that influences the way I am as well, because I do tend to think of it a bit like that.'

It does seem clear that from the lecturers' comments above that they hold what can be seen as a consumerist model of higher education. None of the students in this study identified themselves explicitly as consumers and all of the students were keen to position themselves as active participants in the learning process. In terms of developing an identity it was important to these students that their lecturers should form and maintain a good opinion of them as effective learners and it was important for them that the feedback they received both in written and in verbal forms confirmed their identity as successful learners. The construction by staff of a student identity which

defined students as largely extrinsically focused with little regard for learning was not universal but it was fairly common amongst the staff who participated. This perception of students by staff may help explain why in some cases, and in relation to some staff, students felt awkward or even intimidated when seeking feedback on their work. The staff in my project saw themselves as conscientious producers of high quality feedback but, as was the case with the students, they were also aware of the extent to which their approach to feedback was a construction based on their own sense of identity. The staffs' construction of their individual identity was a combination of their past experience and their current practice as the extracts below illustrate:

> '... when I worked in industry I was line managing people every day and so I had to learn very quickly about managing and improving people without being negative and without de-motivating them, without being personal and by trying to get the best out of people. And a lot of the ways and techniques I used then I have transferred into what I do now.'

> '... as a person who is quite mechanistic in their approach doing this step, then that step and whatever, … I tend to prefer to give feedback that is quite mechanistic in that way, rather than feedback which is global and more generic. '

> 'A teacher is like a priest he's getting there with a sense of purpose and a sense that goes beyond the time of today and you must forget if you're hungry or cold or whatever … and your relationship with your students should be that of a priest with his congregation …so I see it as my duty. I don't judge if they don't take the feedback the way I would like them to do.'

What this discussion highlights is the extent to which the staff and students in my study held views on feedback which differed to a greater or lesser extent and that both groups had constructed conceptions of the purpose of feedback which, whilst clearly linked and therefore not wholly incompatible, focus on very different sets of needs and expectations.

Conclusion

What emerges from my research is that both staff and students perception of the role and purpose of feedback is influenced by different considerations and therefore constructed in different ways. For students the main purpose of feedback should be to help them improve, in effect they want to 'close the gap', to borrow Sadler's (1989) phrase. A good deal of the staff's approach to feedback focused on correcting errors, and justifying the grade. Students' sense of what makes feedback valuable is linked to the extent to which it will help them improve and also to their perception of the relative credibility or capability of the person providing the feedback. Staff seem to be convinced that whilst some students are willing to learn from feedback too many simply dismiss it or disregard it and yet there was little evidence of such an attitude amongst the student responses.

For staff and students alike written feedback was seen as essential, it was the different ways in which staff and students in my study constructed their views on feedback which increased the potential for misunderstandings. My research underlined the extent to which staff and students come to feedback with a wealth of past experience which shapes and informs their attitudes and response to feedback. Whilst students need to recognise that university is not merely an extension of school or college and they need to accept that they may well receive fewer opportunities to engage in iterative forms of feedback, it is also clear that if staff adopt a deficit model of the student as a learner and take little notice of what the student wants or needs from feedback, the effort they put in is unlikely to generate the positive outcomes they are looking for. It is clear from the literature that adopting a more dialogic approach to feedback may provide a mechanism by which the barriers and misunderstandings highlighted in my research might be overcome. In Nicol's words '...feedback should be framed as a dialogical process' (Nicol, 2010:513) involving staff and students

rather than be seen as a monologue in which only the lecturer's voice is heard. The challenges faced by students and teaching staff in moving towards a more dialogic form of feedback should not be underestimated but neither should the consequences of continuing current practice in which feedback remains a largely one-way, transmissive, process.

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