Formative feedback in a Business School: understanding the student perspective

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Abstract

Inspired by a desire to improve the student experience, this paper reviews primary research carried out into the use of formative feedback within a Business School at a 'new' university in the UK. The research adopted a qualitative approach with key objectives to gain staff and student perspectives on the role and practice of feedback within the School. The initial findings have identified several issues: a need for greater consistency in the quality of the feedback; further opportunities to get feedback; and a need to understand the role accorded to feedback by the students, who see its value in terms of personal development and enhancing overall performance on assessed work. The research has been informed by, and, builds upon, existing literature in this area, for example: Pitts, 2005; Crisp, 2007; O'Brien and Sparshatt, 2007; Mutch, 2003. The findings are providing an impetus to develop current practice which is both effective and realistic and can be embedded in the School to enhance the student experience.

Keywords
Formative feedback, feedback, assessment.

Introduction and background to the research
The underlying purpose of this research study was to better inform and develop feedback practice within a business school at a 'new' university within the UK. The research has been carried out at a university where feedback and the broader area of assessments are very high profile in terms of its importance both at university and school level. In the university's learning teaching and assessment strategy there are six priority areas, one of which is assessment. Within this priority area a particular emphasis is given to:

> … *increasing use of formative work and feedback both alongside, and separate from, summative assessment.*
> (University Strategic Document, 2005:17)

Following on from this university strategy the business school developed its own implementation plan which incorporated activities addressing both the broader priority area of assessment and more specifically addressing issues around formative work and feedback.

Analysis of data from the UK National Student Survey has also played a role in focusing on enhancing the student experience of feedback and assessment. From a school perspective there was an improvement made in the 'assessment and feedback' category of questions, from an average of 3.4 in 2005 to 3.6 in 2006 (one is low and five is high). This was equal to the university's average and above the business sector average. However, further analysis revealed a mixed response to this category of questions.

The school received more positive scores with regards to the statements around 'clear in advance' criteria used in marking, and fair marking and assessment arrangements. Relatively lower scores were, however, received for those statements relating to feedback which focused around: the promptness of feedback; detail of comments provided on work; and feedback helping to clarify things not understood. The 2007 National Student Survey results revealed that the School had further improved in the area of 'assessments and feedback', although further analysis did reveal a similar trend to that of the previous year in that the scores were lower to the statements around feedback.

Responding to these internal and external factors, the school has already implemented several initiatives around the area of feedback, including a formative feedback policy which particularly focuses around handling the feedback on summative work submitted at the end of the academic year. Demonstrating the school's continued support and commitment to improving feedback, it chose to fund this research recognising the value of gaining empirical evidence to further inform the improvement and development of feedback within the school.

There is a significant amount of literature around varying aspects of assessments but the literature specifically focusing on formative feedback is somewhat more limiting.

> *Feedback to students is a vital but relatively under-researched area.*
>
> (Mutch, 2003:24)

The work of Mutch (2003) provides some valuable contributions to the area of feedback and while this study focused on practices within a business school generally, few studies were found specifically focusing on the element of feedback in the discipline of business.

Key literature, however, does emphasise the importance of feedback in enhancing the level of learning and achievement, and stresses the necessity for higher education to ensure that feedback is an integral part of the learning experience (Yorke, 2003; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

Literature review

Feedback is something that we all do in some shape or form but it is this 'shape and form' that must be explored further if feedback is to be effective in terms of its intended purpose of improving performance and achievement. A logical assumption would be that students will engage with feedback they receive and act upon it accordingly to improve future work. This, however, has been questioned in a recent study that sought to explore the extent to which students act on feedback they receive (Crisp, 2007). Crisp summarises that:

> … this study found only limited support for the idea that students respond to feedback by making changes which are consistent with the intent of the feedback received.
>
> (2007:571)

From the academic perspective such experiences can be frustrating. We do not operate in an era of endless resources and as such there must come a time when the old adage becomes a reality: 'you can lead a horse to water…' As professionals, however, we must continuously reflect on, and question, the extent to which our understanding and purpose of the feedback we provide matches those of the student.

Literature specifically focusing on formative feedback is rather limited, although clearly it is integral to work that has been carried out in the broader area of assessment (Boston, 2002; Yorke 2003; Higgins et al., 2001). Research has highlighted more specific problems associated with providing effective feedback for example: quality and quantity of feedback (Pitts, 2005; Higgins et al., 2002); timing of feedback (Crisp, 2007); inconsistencies within organisations (Mutch, 2003; Crisp, 2007); and students not engaging in feedback comments (Duncan, 2007).

There have been studies which have explored more fully the differing perceptions among staff and students (Maclellan, 2001; O'Brien and Sparshatt, 2007. The value of feedback has been recognised by both staff and students but interestingly while many students see the value of feedback they did not feel it was as valuable as staff reported it to be (Maclellan, 2001). Following on from the work of Maclellan (2001) around the area of assessments, O'Brien and Sparshatt (2007) have completed work on the staff perceptions of student perceptions focusing more on assessment feedback. Initial findings have suggested that staff have a clear idea of what makes good feedback but did feel that the feedback provided was not appreciated by students. The researchers have acknowledged a need for further research with students in this area to see if the perceptions of staff match those of the students (O'Brien and Sparshatt, 2007).

Inconsistencies around feedback are well documented and the practice around providing feedback can significantly vary between individuals and schools within higher education institutions (Mutch, 2003). Further research has also provided some support to this argument. Crisp (2007) questioned as to why students may not take on feedback from staff, and suggested that one reason may be the conflicting feedback from staff in other areas of study. Pitts clearly acknowledged the need for greater consistency and improved levels of communication with tutors:

My findings have shown a student body who are 'surviving the system', tolerating feedback of variable quality whilst seeing the benefits and potential of more effective communication with their tutors.

(Pitts, 2005:227)

Earl (2003) (in Bloxham and Boyd, 2007) distinguishes between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. It is the latter which is of significance to this research as assessment for learning is formative and is about generating information on student performance and achievement. This provides opportunities for staff and students to see where strengths and weaknesses are and respond accordingly to improve student performance and achievement. It is through a variety of (formative) feedback processes that this can be achieved.

More recently the concept of feed forward has become more widely acknowledged and is concerned with those areas a student should focus on in order to improve performance (Torrance, 1993; Hounsell, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). With relation to 'assessment for learning' the practice of 'feed forward' is essential; feedback provided to students must ensure that it feeds into future work and provides explicit guidance as to how the students can further improve their level of performance and achievement. Higgins et al. (2001), supporting the practice of feed forward, provide a useful concluding remark in their paper:

Perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to "feeding forward" into a piece of work, rather than simply "feeding back".

(2001:274)

A recent study exploring how students could become more engaged with their feedback revealed some evidence that how and why feedback is written can improve the student's level of learning and supported feed forward as a useful teaching and learning activity (Duncan, 2007).

Further supporting the concept of feed forward, in discussing formative feedback Smith and Gorard (2005:32) refer to work of Stobart and Gipps (1997) who acknowledge that assessment can only be formative if it:

… feeds back into the teaching-learning process.

(1997:19)

'In order for students to improve, effective feedback should enable the student to know exactly what they would have to do to close the gap between actual and desired performance.'
(Stobart and Gipps (1997) in Smith and Gorard 2005:32).

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative methodology and gathered the perspectives of both staff and students through semi-structured interviews and focus groups respectively. It was a small-scale study carried out during the 2007/2008 academic year. The participants within the research were academic staff and undergraduate students working or studying within the business school. Through self-selection and convenience sampling strategies interviews were held with 11 members of academic staff (approximately 20%). There was some element of stratified sampling to ensure that the participants were from different business subject disciplines, this ensured representation of the various subject groups within the business school.

An interview schedule was developed with a series of open-ended questions around key themes informed by existing literature and the research steering group in terms of what it felt would be useful to know to about current practice within the school. There was, however, a certain level of flexibility in administering the interviews; while the interview schedule kept the discussion relevant, it was important to ensure that key issues did emerge from the research that were very much the participants' perspective; this was paramount in gaining empirical data relating to the context of the school.

Focus groups were carried out with undergraduate students (years 1, 2 and 3) to gain their perspectives with regards to formative feedback. All students were given the opportunity to participate in the research and were encouraged to do so in a number of ways, including:
• adverts on the school's intranet and Blackboard sites
• visiting a number of lectures and seminars to present the research and gain focus group participants
• offering book vouchers for participants.

Twenty-eight full-time undergraduate students participated in the research with the majority of participants (15) being full-time year 3 undergraduate students. Clearly there was a bias towards full-time final year students but this was not recognised as a significant weakness given year 3 students would have more experience on which to reflect with regards to their exposure to feedback. Students were encouraged to discuss their perspectives and experience of feedback practice by responding to general questions around themes previously identified. The same principles adopted in the interviews – in terms of the design of the interview schedule and the administration of it – also applied to the focus groups.

The interviews and the focus groups were digitally recorded, allowing for transcription to facilitate analysis. The analysis involved a reiterative process whereby data within the transcriptions were coded around the key themes that emerged.

Findings and discussion

The importance of feedback in higher education and its fundamental role in enhancing both the student experience and level achievement are acknowledged in literature (Yorke, 2003; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). The findings from this research have proved as no exception and evidence from both students and staff supported the importance of feedback.

> *Feedback is really important for us, as it tells us how well we are doing. I know the lectures are really busy but they should build in time to give us good feedback.*
>
> (focus group 2, year 3 student)

> *I think formative feedback is essential for everyone really. In terms of students I think it shapes one's knowledge, points people in the right direction, how they build on existing knowledge, capitalise on strengths and minimise weaknesses.*
>
> (interviewee 4)

The student focus groups did reveal some negative comments around the timing and quality of feedback, reflecting results from the National Student Survey. It would appear that comments generated around the timing of feedback related to feedback on summative work. The school has a policy of a 4-week turnaround time from the submission of work to receiving feedback but the findings indicated that some students felt that this was not achieved.

> *It would help if we got feedback quicker, sometimes it is so far after you can't remember the assignment. We never had the 4-week turnaround – it can be up to 8–9 weeks.*
>
> (focus group 2, year 3 student)

> *We don't get much feedback when we are going to do assignments and by the time we get it, it's usually too late.*
>
> (focus group 3, year 3 student)

One of the statements within the NSS specifically related to this: 'Feedback on my work has been prompt' so the concerns expressed by some students would reflect the lower scores received on this statement. There was some sympathy from staff with relation to this student concern.

> *Students do want feedback quickly after submitting an assignment but sometimes this is not the case. I think there are a lot of inconsistencies with how long feedback gets back to students although it should be 4 weeks.*
>
> (interviewee 7)

The very fact that it gets a specific statement in the NSS illustrates its importance and other work has also acknowledged the importance of timely feedback (Crisp, 2007).

Many of the comments from the students relating to the quality of feedback tended to focus around the detail provided and the extent to which the feedback provided constructive criticism to help the students improve. There has been a suggestion in other research that staff may recognise a good or poor piece of work but not able to communicate to the student why this is the case and particularly if it is a poor piece of work where it could be improved (Crisp, 2007).

Lecturers don't seem to give any negative feedback. Sometimes you need a bit of criticism to improve… I like feedback with a lot of comments. It shows the tutors have really looked at it and made an effort.

(focus group 4, year 2 student)

It's hit and miss from module to module, I've had some where the comments are, 'This is a very good piece of work'. This does not tell me anything.

(focus group 1, year 2 student)

Clearly some students felt that their feedback lacked constructive criticism in that it did not fully justify weaknesses that were highlighted and specifically what could be done in the future to improve assessed work. These findings undermine the concept of feed forward (Torrance, 1993; Hounsell, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007) and would very much support Higgins et al. (2001) in their call for a shift to feed forward as opposed to feeding back.

Interestingly this did not fully reflect the findings from the staff interviews as when asked to comment on the role of formative feedback there was a complete consensus in that formative feedback was about explaining to students what they were doing well and how they could improve. Many staff commented that it was about highlighting weaknesses so the students could develop and further improve their performance.

Helping the student to identify their strengths/weaknesses… helping students gain a focus and direction and being critical for where improvements can be made and something students can use to reflect upon and self-improve.

(interviewee 1)

It gives students the opportunity to get an idea of their performance. It is important because students can assess their own performance and self-development.

(interviewee 7)

Further evidence (highlighted later in this discussion) from the staff interviews also indicated a number of good practices in terms of providing feedback such as:
• providing opportunities for student to discuss work
• verbal feedback in addition to written feedback
• emails providing feedback.

Students however, taking part in the research did not refer to such practices. This does raise a number of key questions including: do the students understand the nature of formative feedback and when they are getting it; are they solely commenting on the feedback they received on summative work and dismiss other more informal feedback; and, are there gaps in the perceptions and expectations of both staff and students?

Other research has explored the perceptions of both staff and students with relation to assessment for learning (Maclellan, 2001) and assessment feedback (O'Brien and Sparshatt, 2007). This research did not directly link students and staff but irrespective of this there are clear gaps emerging in terms of staff and student perspectives around a number of feedback related issues.

Responses relating to quality were not always negative and some students stressed how feedback quality essentially depended upon tutors' attitudes and how they perceived the importance of giving feedback.

Feedback is sometimes useful and sometimes its not. It depends upon who the lecturer is. Some lecturers emphasise the importance of feedback and they do everything they can and do extra stuff to make sure you get feedback, whereas others don't seem to be as keen, they may just say a couple of words and they won't go into detail.

(focus group 2, year 3 student)

It needs to be consistent for each module because it is annoying when in some modules it is in-depth then you get another and it is way too brief and you can't see where you went wrong unless they tell you why they have done it wrong.

(focus group 3, year 3 student)

The above comments add further support and strength to the notion of inconsistencies across the school; other related research has also discussed how feedback practices can vary between individuals, and departments and schools within HE institutions (Mutch, 2003; Crisp 2007).

Students in this study frequently mentioned the issue of receiving vague comments and there was a common view that feedback was inconsistent from module to module.

> *Feedback needs to be more consistent from module-to-module. At the moment it is hit and miss and this is a big issue.*
>
> (focus group 1, year 2 student)

Issues identified around the use of school standardised feedback sheets also generated some interesting findings around inconsistencies. Some students did comment that they received different feedback sheets and not a standard one. While this is a concern, given that the school has as a standard feedback sheet, the majority of students and staff generally regarded the school's feedback sheets to be appropriate, providing a standard and level of consistency.

> *The feedback sheets are good. It comes down to how well the lecturers use it.*
>
> (focus group 6, year 2 student)

In addition to the lack of constructive criticism and inconsistencies, the lack of detail and quantity of feedback also emerged as factors that can undermine effective feedback. Students in particular commented about:
• the lack of feedback in taught modules
• the necessity for more detailed timely feedback
• the need for more regular feedback
• more feedback beyond that provided on summative work, which is sometimes very limiting, particularly on that work submitted towards the end of the academic year.

> *We don't get much feedback for work submitted at the end of the year. Feedback is non-existent for work submitted just before the exams. They tell us they will leave feedback at reception for us but don't.*
>
> (focus group 2, year 3 student)

> *Our feedback has never been amazing and hasn't been that much.*
>
> (focus group 3, year 3 student)

It became apparent from the focus groups that students wanted more detailed feedback and more opportunities to get feedback throughout their studies. When staff were asked to comment on whether they felt that students received enough formative feedback the interviews generated mixed responses, with some expressing sympathy to the concerns of students. Five participants believed that generally students did not receive enough formative feedback.

> *Overall I don't think so, due to large number of students on certain programmes and the large numbers in formal lectures.*
>
> (interviewee 2)

> *No, I think we should in our personal teaching give a lot more feedback through informal means. It does not take too long and if it is done correctly the payback is worth it.*
>
> (interviewee 3)

One participant felt unable to comment, while a further five felt that students did receive enough formative feedback. Those who responded positively tended to draw on their own personal practice, while more negative responses tended to provide a more general view that school practice could be improved.

> *From my perspective I give a lot of formative feedback. I am not convinced it happens in every module, especially at level 1, it is very important students get as much formative feedback as possible… I think people are frightened of the word feedback because they automatically think you are going to have to type reams of it.*
>
> (interviewee 4)

Yes, mine do. I give them enough opportunities and it's up to them if they want to attend.

(interviewee 8)

Clearly there is support from both staff and students that there could be more formative feedback, the research in particular highlights the need to share practice among staff and increase awareness and knowledge, as to the full extent of formative feedback, among students.

Some students commented that feedback was only given when work was assessed and not enough feedback was given verbally or informally. There was strong support among students that more informal feedback (verbal, email) would be a valuable and a good indication as to how they were progressing.

I say verbal feedback is most effective for me. Someone talks through it then you can ask questions.

(focus group 2, year 3 student)

We don't get any verbal feedback.

It would be good if someone just sat down with us to discuss where you had gone wrong.

(focus group 3, year 3 student)

I think feedback should be more regular. Not formal but more informal feedback like in emails… I think a tutor sitting down with you and going through the feedback would be most effective. You can talk about anything on one-to-one which you might not be able to talk about in a group.

(focus group 4, year 2 student)

Some students very much supported a greater level of more informal communication with staff around feedback. This reflects other research, which has suggested that students would welcome more effective communication with staff (Pitts, 2005; Higgins et al., 2001). The format for providing feedback was probably the most notable area in terms of yielding different responses from students and staff. In contrast to a number of students calling for more informal feedback mechanisms, there were a number of staff who clearly engaged in informal feedback; throughout the interviews they were enthusiastic to discuss their personal methods of giving formative feedback, feeling that these individualistic styles were most effective in their teaching.

My main formative feedback comes from student presentations feedback in tutorials, which is verbal.

(interviewee 8)

I do it through a variety of methods, including written comments on work as well as verbal feedback in seminars/lectures.

(interviewee 1)

I believe having a discussion is the best way, as well as giving written comments through email, but I find it easiest way is to talk the students.

(interviewee 9)

The above raises clear concerns in terms of staff and student perceptions – staff appear to use a range of methods to communicate feedback, including verbal mechanisms. However, from the students' perspective they would like to see more informal mechanisms supporting Higgins et al:

'Feedback may need to be more dialogical and ongoing.'

(2001: 274)

Conclusion

This paper has presented some of the key findings from a school-based qualitative research study exploring the perspectives of both staff and students with regards to formative feedback. The findings are helping to inform the action that can be implemented to address key concerns that the research highlighted around feedback, which included: inconsistencies, quality, the purpose of feedback and the methods of communicating feedback.

Students expressed mixed views about feedback within the school. Some described limited opportunities for feedback, with tutors only providing written feedback on assessments without any informal/verbal feedback.

Other students discussed how some tutors provided more formative feedback through emails and comments on draft work. This recurring concern throughout the research relating to inconsistencies was supported by both staff and students.

Students wanted detailed feedback that provided specific guidance on improving achievement and personal development in addition to more frequent informal feedback through tutor/student discussions. In contrast, some staff commented specifically about their continuous mechanisms of delivering feedback. This highlights a particular need to share practice and ensure that students are aware of the more subtle ways in which formative feedback is provided.

From the outset the main purpose of this research has been to bring about positive change within the school, and initial steps have been taken to disseminate the findings through workshops. A number of drivers for change have emerged and these are feeding into the undergraduate review process and other academic development areas. It is anticipated that the findings from this research will be instrumental in developing and improving the student experience in the area of feedback practice.

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