

Case Study: **Democratic Feedback**

Abstract

Our project aimed to question the extent that meaningful dialogue can take place within this transmission-based model. We aimed to develop an alternative feedback model in which dialogue would precede and inform the grading of students' work. In doing so, we engaged with literature relating to democratic education and aimed to identify characteristics of feedback that are not only more collaborative and dialogic, but also more democratic.

Key words: feedback, dialogue

Context	Project rationale (link to pedagogic research)
<p>Subject:</p> <p>NB. This is a project based in Education Studies but with possibilities in the Humanities.</p> <p>Level: Level 1 & Level 3 Education Studies</p> <p>Number of students: not stated.</p> <p>Format: (e.g. seminar) Lectures and seminars.</p>	<p>The motivation for the project drew from the perception that within the Education Studies team, there is a disconnect between learning and teaching strategies and approaches to feedback. Colleagues have developed collaborative and constructivist pedagogic approaches – favouring discussion, active student engagement and a conception of knowledge as tentative and contested. However, feedback is modelled entirely differently, around the concept of an expert ‘marker’ and a novice ‘marked’, not necessarily dialogic or collaborative. The aim was to look at the possibilities for these more democratic feedback options.</p> <p>Relevant literature: we made use of ideas from radical political philosophy to problematise taken-for-granted conceptions of democracy. Drawing on the work of Mouffe (2005) and Ranciere (1999; 2006), we employed an understanding of democracy as a</p>

Initiative outline

We conducted a small-scale practitioner action research project, in which we trialled a democratic assessment feedback model with students on the first and third years of our degree. During this period, a range of qualitative data was gathered from student and staff reflective commentaries and student-led focus groups. We employed a third year student as a researcher to arrange, facilitate and transcribe focus groups. She led an initial focus group to generate data reflecting students' views about current feedback practices and their attitudes towards more collaborative and democratic alternatives. Following this, we conducted a trial of the feedback intervention with first year students. One lecturer and two students discussed both students' essays – making reference to assessment criteria and grade descriptors. After reaching some consensus about the strengths and weaknesses of each essay, a mark was agreed. The students and lecturer who took part then wrote brief reflections about the process.

Drawing from this first trial, we then conducted a second intervention with third year students, this time involving two students and two lecturers. Discussing each student's work in turn, conversations centred on the quality of the work. To minimise the possibility of lecturers' views being given more weight, we followed a specific conversational pattern: the peer marker began and led the discussion, followed by the self marker, and then the two lecturers. At the end of these conversations a final mark was agreed - again following the

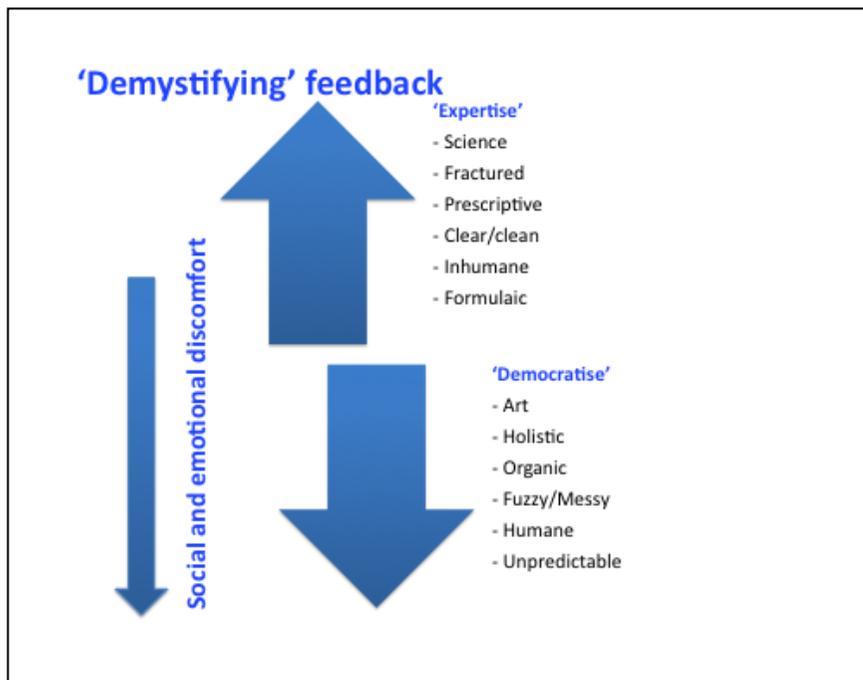
disruptive movement rather than a set of processes or institutions. On this view, democracy goes beyond the discussion of competing interests within a given framework, instead mounting a challenge to the very grounds of political debate. We also drew from the work of Freire (2007), who challenged traditional conceptions of 'teacher-as-expert', arguing in favour of teacher-as-student and student-as-teacher working together. Freire emphasised the importance of dialogue and democratic learning relations, whereby students and teachers critically engage with current practice and generate new knowledge together.

Employing these ideas, we aimed to explore the possibility that this kind of democratic practice might be facilitated within the specific context of assessment and feedback in higher education. Research into assessment and feedback in higher education has identified the need for students to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes high quality work, which accurately reflects staff perceptions (Sadler, 1989; Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). In our research, we were interested instead in the possibility of students working together to challenge the very framework within which students' work is assessed.

above pattern. As with the first year trial, students and lecturers wrote brief reflections and a final focus group was facilitated to gather students' views.

Implementation advice (including resources)

A number of themes emerged from data analysis, which are presented in the sections below. We framed our findings in terms of a continuum – extending from 'expert' to 'democratic' feedback models. We would argue that current models are almost exclusively located on the 'expert' side of this continuum. By emphasising the humane, messy and 'artistic' characteristics of the feedback process, we developed an intervention located on the 'democratic' side (see figure 1): Expert-democratic feedback continuum.



The themes illustrate two key aspects of the research findings - firstly the nature of the students' experiences of the project (in particular the social and emotional discomfort involved) and secondly, the characteristics of effective democratic feedback.

1. Social and emotional discomfort

The research demonstrated that moving towards more democratic feedback practice – involving a less formulaic, prescriptive and fractured approach – resulted in social and emotional discomfort. Students found it difficult to evaluate a peer's work in a face-to-face situation because of the feelings this provoked. Students also found it difficult to *receive* negative feedback in this manner because of the social and emotional dynamics involved. In addition, they identified a number of emotional dispositions and attitudes necessary to participate in this kind of work.

For the students then, engaging in democratic feedback strategies was an emotionally demanding process that required them to respond to social situations that they often found uncomfortable.

2. Characteristics of effective democratic feedback

Student reflections on the project also highlight a number of characteristics of effective democratic feedback. These are detailed below with reference to the data:

Participation

Students found that the strategies employed in the project offered them the chance to genuinely participate in the assessment process, commenting on how they were required to actively 'get involved' by verbally defending their views.

Plurality

Students also felt that the process exposed them to a variety of views and viewed this in positive terms. They commented on the chance to hear a range of opinions, regarding this as a fairer way of assessing their work. Some even felt that this plurality lent a greater degree of validity to the final marks.

Transparency

Students felt their participation in the research had given them greater insight into the assessment process, clarifying what was required of them and enabling them to improve their work.

Moreover, for some students, the project revealed for the often contingent and even subjective nature of marking criteria.

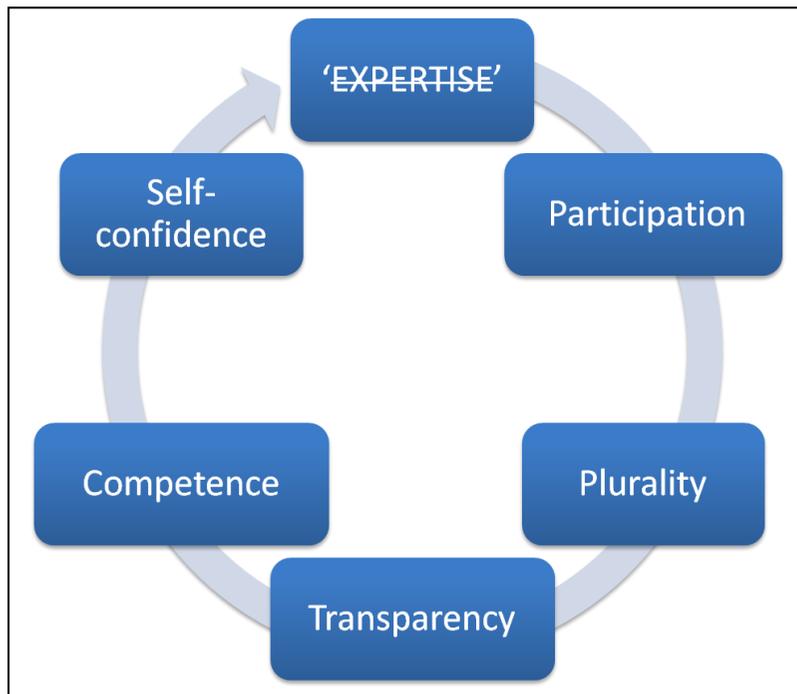
Competence

Students expressed the view that taking part in the process had improved their ability to assess the quality of their own work.

Self-confidence

Finally, students commented on how the process had given them increased self-confidence, not only to take part in the assessment process more actively but also – and perhaps more importantly – to challenge and contest a given viewpoint.

Interrelated characteristics of democratic feedback.



These characteristics were also interrelated. For example, the greater confidence the students expressed in challenging others' views was partly based on their increased sense of competence, which in turn resulted from the transparency the process afforded, and from the opportunity to participate in discussions that included a plurality of views. Taking part in the project therefore involved a process of experiencing and becoming more confident with democratic practice. This process also facilitated a challenge to traditional notions of expertise, which often characterise assessment and feedback. Through their engagement in more democratic practice, students were led to question the view of assessment as a water-tight process and the view of lecturers as experts with the authority to assess students' work. This process is illustrated in figure 2 to the left.

Benefits for teaching and learning

The research illustrates some of the benefits of democratic feedback and also highlights the challenges to be negotiated when undertaking this kind of work. Most significantly, effective democratic feedback can challenge taken-for-granted assessment relations and authorities. Indeed, the project involved challenging traditional notions of expertise, throwing open the question of what constitutes a good piece of work and who has the authority to decide. Rather than trying to instil in students an understanding of what constitutes a good piece of work, our project engaged students and lecturers together in renegotiation of the very framework on which such judgements are based. Through this challenge to expertise - and particularly through the transparency it affords - democratic feedback can also demystify the assessment process, laying bare the fragility of marking criteria and the tentative and contested way in which work is often assessed.

Engaging in this kind of activity can be an important educational experience for students in the broadest sense. Building on Arendt's concept of political existence, Biesta (2006; 2010) has proposed that one of the tasks of democratic education is to provide opportunities for genuinely democratic action by cultivating spaces of plurality and freedom in the educational sphere. Conducting assessment in a more collaborative and open way - where students and staff work together as equals in an honest negotiation of power - may be one way of creating such spaces within higher education. This can allow us to harness the contemporary characteristics of higher education in a positive way, making important developments in pedagogy, while also contributing to a broader, democratic education that is of value to students both in their academic lives and beyond.

This kind of democratic educational experience is clearly not always a comfortable or easy one. One of the reasons such work can be considered a valuable - in educational terms - is precisely because it takes students out of their comfort zone, challenging existing perceptions and often provoking uncomfortable feelings. This socially and emotionally difficult experience is also a significant challenge to be negotiated when implementing democratic feedback. Indeed, the research demonstrates the need for sensitivity to, and careful negotiation of, the emotional dynamics involved when implementing more open, collaborative and collective feedback strategies. While there may be no specific formula for negotiating such dynamics, it is clear that this affective dimension of democratic feedback requires careful attention. If we are to offer students radical but educationally worthwhile experiences that are unsettling and disruptive, then we must also be prepared to support them in the way they respond to and learn from these situations.

Troubleshooting tips

It is evident that the approach to feedback that we developed in this project has limited applicability. It took a considerable amount of time to complete the feedback and, as a number of participants commented, some students are more equipped than others to participate in an activity like this. Nevertheless, the research has demonstrated the advantages of implementing feedback models located on the democratic side of the continuum. Our intention is to consider and develop more practicable forms of feedback relations based on participation, transparency, plurality, competence and self-confidence.

It is worth noting a couple of paradoxes that became apparent during analysis of our data. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between expertise as a *role* and as a *quality*. The expert role consists of traditional expectations associated with the title 'lecturer' or 'Dr'. Expert qualities are the academic and inter-relational skills, knowledge and understanding that make a person perform their job effectively. We found indications of a contraction between role and quality: that the more lecturers' underplay their expert role, the more they learn about effective and positive learning, teaching, assessment and feedback. Secondly, we identified a counter-enlightenment paradox. Our research suggests that 'scientific' feedback approaches (built on notions of objectivity, assessment formula and prescription) have the effect of mysticising the process. And the impact of this is students who feel disconnected from and confused by feedback process.