

Conceptualising feedback – mapping the student experience as a first stage of feedback development

Interim Report – September 2011 – Dr Simona Scarparo & Dr Louise Gracia

There is much focus on the issue of ‘feedback’ within the higher education sector, particularly in recent times (see for example, Hounsell, 2003; HEA, 2004; Nicol *et al*, 2006; Riordan & Loacker, 2009, Carless *et al*, 2011). This has been stimulated partly by wider and ongoing sector changes (e.g. increasing participation rates and changing fee structures) which have created a massified and commodified market in higher education. Such changes have arguably encouraged a shift in the conception of students as critical consumers of a higher education product (Higgins *et al*, 2002; Singh, 2002).

As part of this ‘consumerist’ view, students are encouraged to focus on and formally rate (e.g. through the National Student Survey) the quality of central aspects of the educational service they receive (Modell, 2005). Students hence evaluate and measure the performance, of their institutions across a number of core areas. One of these performance measurement areas is ‘Assessment and Feedback’. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this project to consider the wisdom and desirability, or otherwise, of sector changes and the positioning of students as critical customers, what is of relevance here is the impact the latter has on students’ conception and subsequent evaluations of the phenomenon called ‘feedback’ within their institutions. Indeed using students’ evaluations to shape feedback policy is not without its critics, for example, Price *et al* (2010) identify reliance on students’ evaluations of feedback as problematic since students ‘lack sufficient pedagogic literacy to go beyond mere judgement of feedback ‘service’’ (2010: 288). This strand of research highlights the importance of participants sharing understandings of the purposes of feedback, which resonates with a wider need to consider feedback from the student perspective identified within the literature (see Higgins *et al* 2001; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). It is this student conception and more specifically their understandings of the purposes of feedback that this project seeks to investigate.

Our project was introduced to all members of SSLC in March 2011, and an open invitation extended to all student representatives to take part in the research process. The aims of the project are to use students’ experiences to (i) explore students’ conception of feedback objectives and (ii) based on these findings make appropriate recommendations that seek to improve feedback practice. (This interim report focuses on the first of these aims). Seven student SSLC representatives came forward to take part in the research. Each was invited to ‘recruit’ a further student, from outside of the SSLC, to participate in the study – in order to broaden the mix of participants. In this way 13 students were identified to take part in the research and an in-depth, unstructured focus-group discussion was subsequently undertaken with these student participants.

Within the focus group we sought to understand through their experiences, how students conceptualise feedback and hence come to identify the purposes of feedback. In advance of the focus-group session, students were invited to reflect on their feedback experiences received whilst at WBS and to bring to mind instances of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feedback practice which might be helpful to draw out issues within

our discussions. In addition, we sought to construct the focus-group as a relaxed and interactive encounter that encouraged dialogue – so chairs were set out in an informal circle; all tables and other room furniture were removed (as potential barriers to openness); and refreshments were made freely available within the room throughout the session. Throughout the course of the focus-group discussions students were actively encouraged to be as open and honest as they could with us so as to collect their personalised and candid feedback accounts. In order to assist here we explained that the identities of all participants would remain confidential and that all disclosures would be anonymous and only used by the researchers for the purposes of this project. The focus group session lasted for 3 hours and 45 minutes and was split into two halves with a short rest break in the middle. The entire discussions were video-recorded (by the researchers). This generated an abundance of rich or ‘thick’ data.

During the first stage of data analysis we familiarised ourselves with the data by viewing and reviewing the recordings several times. This allowed us to immerse ourselves within the data and by repeatedly listening to the students’ narrative accounts to identify a first set of emergent themes/issues from their experiences. Further transcription of the entire dataset is currently being arranged so that a second stage of interrogation of the data, through coded analysis can be completed.

Preliminary findings

We have undertaken the first stage of mapping our initial analysis of students’ feedback conceptions emerging from the focus group data. We identified a number of different features or dimensions from within students’ experiential feedback accounts (see Appendix 1). Grouping their comments within (and at times across) these dimensions enabled us to begin to build up insights into aspects of students’ conception of feedback which includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Uses: ‘Achieve higher grades’; ‘Get better at assessment’; ‘Improve my performance’. This suggests an instrumental framing of feedback as a device to improve grades – in contrast to positioning it as a deeper developmental opportunity for enhancing learning and personal development. In addition, students also described using feedback as a means of ‘understanding why I have lost marks’, describing using it as a bargaining tool to negotiate improved marks, by holding tutors accountable for marks not awarded during assessments and seeking detailed rationales and explanations of this.
- Forms: ‘Written feedback on coursework assessment’; ‘A few sentences about my essay’. This perhaps suggests a limited recognition of what constitutes feedback - e.g. principally as written assessment feedback from tutors.
- Gaps: ‘It’s very hard to get more information or detail about your feedback’; ‘Tutors don’t seem to have time to sit and go through their comments with me.’; ‘We get no feedback on our examination performance at all’. Here students express difficulty in engaging tutors in discussions, or establishing a dialogue around, particular feedback incidences – feedback presents as a one-way flow of information. In addition, the near absence of any

personalised examination feedback frustrates students especially since this is the principal mechanism for assessing learning.

- Meaning: 'There's no way of connecting together your feedback...by the time you get it, it's too late to do anything with it...sometimes I feel like there's not much point in reading it.' Students describe a disconnect between incidences of feedback. Feedback practice is experienced as a series of unconnected events, with no obvious means of attaching these to an overall developmental plan running through their learning.
- Quality and Quantity: 'One or two sentences is not enough'; 'Sometimes it is weeks later before we get any feedback'; 'The feedback I got didn't appear to relate to my assignment...it wasn't about what I had written'. A desire for more assessment feedback from tutors in terms of both quality and quantity was strongly evident. Much of the feedback current received was perceived to lack detail and relevance, as well as being tardy in many instances.
- Nature: 'Some tutors provide excellent feedback, and others provide very poor feedback'. A lack of consistency in relation to the provision of feedback was also highlighted.
- Translation: Some students expressed the struggle they had of extracting meaning from their feedback...'my feedback didn't seem relevant to me...it didn't help me to understand what I need to do to get a better mark next time.' Additionally students engaged in little discussion about any reflection they might undertake in relation to feedback received, or any feed forward activity. Although one student did describe analysing it at the time to 'better understand what I got right and what I got wrong', there was no mention of returning to earlier feedback to reflect on it, or of keeping a feedback diary or record, or developing actions to improve identified weaknesses etc.
- Framing feedback: Students identified that they had not been exposed to much, if any, guidance on how to use feedback to improve their learning. Neither were they included or consulted in discussions about feedback practice.
- Gaps: There was no mention or discussion amongst students of the role or use of peer or self generated feedback. Most did not recognise feedback validity beyond their tutors.
- Framing understanding: Feedback is commonly experienced as a backward-looking, after the event critique that focuses too much on the detail of the current assessment, in a way that did not provide students with information about how to improve their learning more generally in the future.

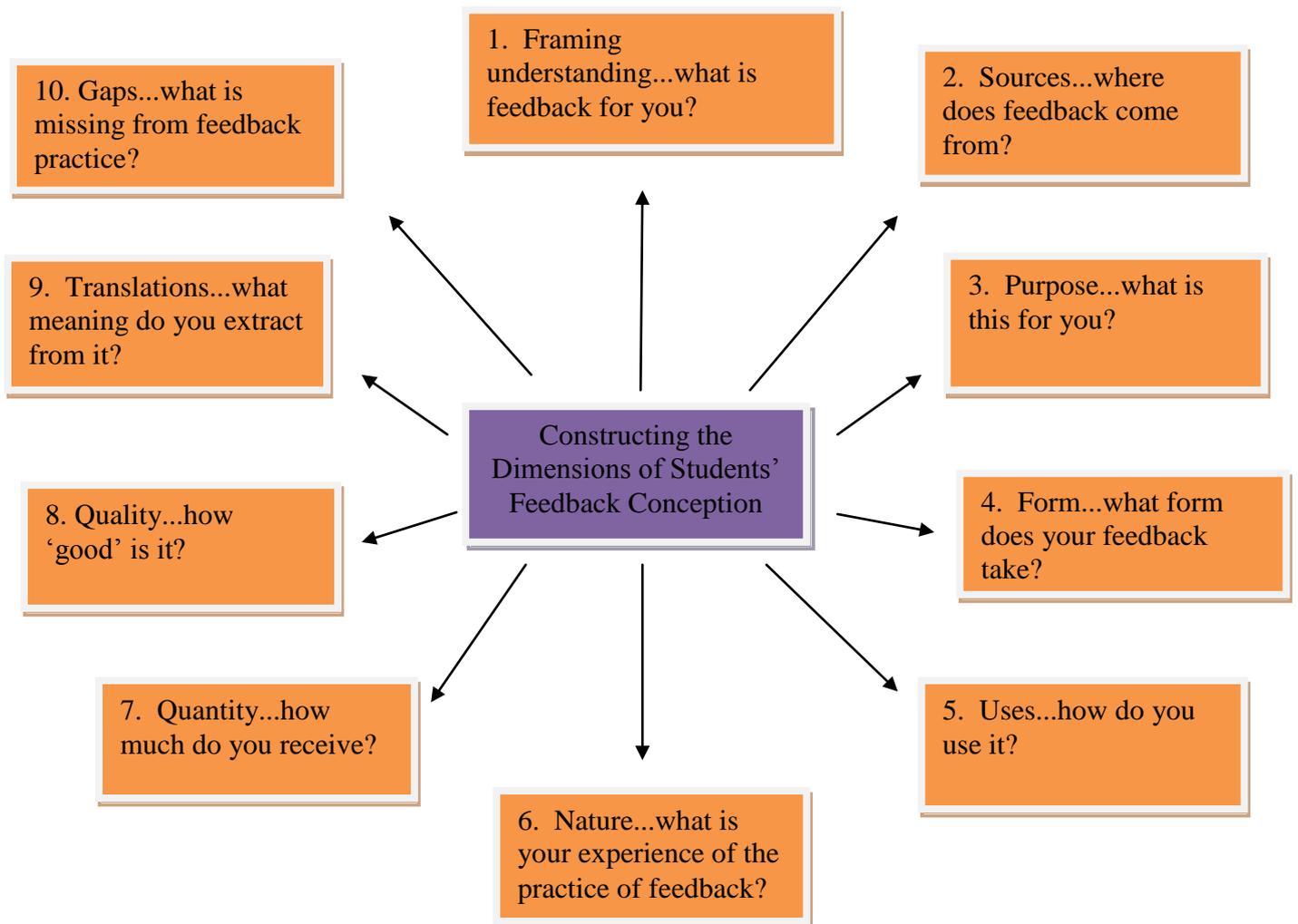
Although students raised many direct criticisms (which need addressing) about the feedback they receive at the 'micro' level of practice, what was also clear from our discussions was that, at the 'macro' level they fundamentally frame feedback not only as an issue of assessment (as opposed to learning), but also one that begins and ends with tutors' written commentary, largely on assignment cover sheets, rather than actively recognising it as coming from multiple sources, in a range of formats and a range of participants including the self. They did not readily identify a range of informal and generalised commentary, guidance, description or explanation that tutors are providing daily in seminars, lectures, via my.wbs etc. as 'feedback'. In this way, students' conception of 'feedback' and their relationship with it (in terms of what they do with it, how they use it, where they seek it from, their responsibility within it

etc.) appeared restricted. This perhaps reflects the wider pervasive significance and influence of assessment within the student experience. For students, there is probably no more central aspect to their learning than that of assessment and with increasing modularisation higher education has become congested with assessment hurdles which litter its landscape. Within this context feedback is positioned as a means of directing students in their navigation of the assessment landscape. This is problematic on two fronts. Firstly, as the presence of assessment (both formative and summative) has become more pervasive, so too it seems, has the strength of the association between assessment and feedback to the detriment of the link between feedback and learning. Arguably, feedback's principal purpose is as learning development mechanism rather than an assessment commentary. Reducing it to the latter risks undermining its influence. Indeed Royce Sadler (2010) cautions that despite providing detailed feedback 'for many students, feedback seems to have little or no learning impact' (2010: 535). Secondly, as pressure mounts from student consumers for more detailed and explicit feedback from tutors, the risk of tutors directing (in contrast to facilitating) students' learning increases. Using feedback in this way also moves against the central ethos of higher education in terms of creating a deep and engaged learning experience for students. This view is reflected in the work of Royce Sadler (2010) who suggests that 'the fundamental problem lies less with the quality of feedback than with the assumption that telling, even detailed telling, is the most appropriate route to improvement in complex learning' (2010: 548).

Our initial understanding of feedback hints at the opportunity of decoupling and hence opening-up the relationship between assessment and feedback so as to more broadly frame the purposes of feedback in terms of engaging students in a deep learning process – a means of learning improvement. This is not just a question of tutors providing more detailed feedback in smaller timeframes, but requires perhaps a more fundamental repositioning of feedback as a facet of learning rather than simply as one of assessment – which is a subset of the wider learning field. This might require careful consideration of the challenge of creating a more active feedback culture where students are encouraged and supported in recognising, synthesising, making sense of and acting on all the different strands of feedback they currently receive.

The second stage of the analysis (which is ongoing) will enable us to further unpack the student data enabling us to add depth to our findings and allow us to identify potential practice recommendations emerging from our analysis.

Appendix 1: First Stage Analysis: Students' Conception of Feedback



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