

Academic Staff Perceptions of the Role and Utility of Written Feedback on Students' Written Work

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Abstract

This paper considers the results of qualitative research into teachers' perceptions of the role and efficacy of written feedback in disciplinary teaching, assessment and learning. The research was conducted in a higher education institution in the UK. Data excerpts from the research are presented and discussed. It is argued that the findings have implications for the role and capabilities of academic writing teachers in higher education generally and in the current European context in particular. The discussion also draws attention to the importance of empirical research into the effects of institutional and pedagogical practices to inform the work of academic writing teachers and writing programmes.

Feedback studies and current concerns in UK higher education

In this paper the theme of the Bochum conference is considered in a particular way. Teaching academic writing <across> the disciplines is associated with a conception of this activity as adjunctive whereas <in the disciplines> suggests a critical consideration of how the work of writing teachers relates to the formal and informal aspects of teaching and learning in the disciplines. Writing specialists are often required to demystify the language and communicative practices of disciplinary teaching but, in an adjunctive role, are not privy to certain aspects of pedagogical interactions that pervasively influence learning and academic literacy development. Written feedback by academic teaching staff on students' written work is one such area. Lecturers naturally endeavour to make their feedback to students as beneficial as possible. On the other hand

feedback, in the context of assessment in particular, is not only a matter of pedagogical interactions between students and their tutors but also the interface of students, tutors, the institution and national education policies which structure and regulate practices and procedures.

Feedback studies in higher education in the UK have, to date, largely fallen into the following categories: understandings and expectations of assessment criteria (e.g. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001, 2002); students' experience and perception of feedback (e.g. Hounsell, 1987); the language used in written feedback interactions (e.g. Lea and Street, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Ivanic and Clark, 2000). The focus in all three areas is on the student experience. The experience of higher education teaching staff is under-explored. In order to highlight some of the complexities surrounding the feedback process more fully, and the implications for

writing specialists, this paper focuses on data which reflect the perspective and experience of teachers as writers of feedback.

Institutional policy at the university where this research was conducted is quite specific on two quality issues: feedback should be (a) formative as well as evaluative and (b) timely (returned to students within a specified time frame). On the other hand, Hounsell (2003: 68) notes that there are «growing concerns that the provision of feedback on assignments is in decline, for a number of reasons». He enumerates the following: the semesterisation (into two blocks) of the teaching year; modularisation of courses to facilitate flexibility in curricula but with the condensation of taught components into semesters; the consequent end-loading of assessment; formal procedures around quality assurance (marking procedures and external adjudication); the impact of large class sizes and increased marking loads. There are two major consequences: teachers have less time to write comments on students' work and there are fewer opportunities for tutorial interactions between tutors and student writers. In these conditions it is difficult for feedback to work optimally. For one thing tutors are often sceptical students will read and value their comments because, in a high turnover and assessment focused system, students are increasingly perceived as instrumentally motivated – focused on marks rather than the educational value of written comments (Higgins, et al, *ibid*). Furthermore, assessment feedback in the written form may be the only feedback students receive and consequently they get little clear input from tutors on developing their academic writing and overall academic literacy (Catt and Gregory, 2006).

In the current climate of change and reform the institutional response has been to standardise and systematise the teaching and learning context by introducing quality assurance measures in the shape of structured feedback forms or <pro-formas> especially in large undergraduate (semesterised and modularised) taught courses. In order to demonstrate transparency and accountability, aspects of teaching and learning such as feedback practices have become subject to a techno-rationalism which emphasises linking learning and assessment to specifiable criteria and tangible outcomes (Orr, 2005). Feedback has, arguably, become socially decontextualised as both a teaching and learning process. Lillis (2006) describes this as the monologism of institutional practices where control and

predictability are emphasised over enquiry, contestation and negotiation.

A modernising agenda is also driving reforms affecting higher education policy and practice across Europe. The Bologna Process was set up to ensure greater comparability and convergence in higher education systems across European Union member states. A key objective to emerge, and one now regarded as central to establishing a <European higher education area>, is the promotion of transnational cooperation on quality assurance. It is also one of the more debated and controversial aims of the Bologna reforms because it focuses comparability on teaching practices and teaching systems.

The theoretical basis for the research

The theory underpinning the research draws from two approaches in learning and teaching research. Phenomenographic research (Marton, et al, 1997) explores how the objects and processes of learning are conceptualised and how this influences intentions in teaching and learning. Although originally developed to research student learning in higher education, it is also a tool for researching conceptions of higher education teaching. It works by moving from open and subjective accounts to categories of understanding. An aim is to determine how teaching and learning environments can be (re)designed and to facilitate conceptual and perceptual change. A second influence has been the <academic literacies approach> (Lea and Street, 2000; Lea and Stierer, 2000) which regards student learning and literacy development as social practice and foregrounds the situated and contextualised nature of pedagogical interactions. Contextual factors and higher education practices are integral, rather than incidental, to research in an academic literacies approach.

The research method

The research approach was qualitative and consisted of semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of academic teaching staff. There was an emphasis on open and exploratory talk which is a characteristic of qualitative research. The interview schedule comprised the following questions for academic staff respondents:

- What is the purpose of written feedback?
- What do you hope to achieve in providing written feedback?
- What do you think you achieve?

- What do you think students do with it?
- Why is feedback sometimes ignored by students?

The aim was to try to understand how academic staff conceptualise written feedback and to get them to reflect on, and explore their perceptions of the efficacy of their practices. An advantage of asking the questions in a consecutive way was to allow respondents to explore their ideas more reflectively and with more depth

The research data

What follows is a presentation and brief discussion of some of the data obtained. In general academic staff expressed clear opinions in response to the first question. There was a common emphasis in responses on the formative and developmental role of feedback as the following excerpt exemplifies:

It is learning; a learning tool. It is about the growth of individual skills and knowledge. But it is also about communication; about shaping expectations and about a reflection on the quality of what has been submitted (Applied Sciences)

It was also widely accepted that, in the context of assessment, performance is important in motivating students; an awareness that <feed-forward> is equally as important, and necessary as feedback:

To try to encourage students by pointing out what is good about their work. Also, to show them why they didn't get a higher mark and for that to be something they can apply to later pieces of work. (Social Sciences)

Feedback/forward is considered necessary in cases in which a student's work is deficient in some way:

Unless the student has got a very good mark I want to show them how to get a better mark the next time round (Nursing)

An affective role was evident in the data, epitomised in the following:

It is for instruction and motivation. Students realise attention is being paid to them (Business School)

The examples are not surprising in what they reflect. Tutors variously conceptualise written feedback as formative, instructional, motivational and instrumental with an acknowledgement that, in assessment contexts,

the latter acts as feed-forward; pointing out what went wrong and how students can get a better mark next time.

The following excerpt, on the other hand, introduces other factors of significance in the feedback process:

Another person may well look at it, of course, a colleague and it may well go to an external. I always think <somebody else may read these comments>. The other reason is to justify the mark. If students come back to you it has to be all there. So you are doing it [feedback] for a number of reasons (Humanities)

Here we see elements of a hidden (from students, at least) agenda. Students may not be fully aware of the mixed reasons tutors provide written feedback. In the excerpt the influence of externally imposed standards is mentioned. Teachers are writing for more than one reader; feedback is not exclusively for the student. There is also an acknowledgement that, taken together, marks and feedback constitute a record in the event of a student appeal.

In the two-semester academic year formal assessment often occurs in the later stages of a semester and feedback on written work may not reach students until after a module has finished and they are engaged in another module in the subsequent semester. This impinges on what teachers feel they can achieve:

I can't measure that. I may see a student in semester one but not in semester two. I can't really measure it unless I see students on a long-term basis (Humanities)

Some teachers put their confidence in formal procedures and the application of marking criteria. Standard forms have been designed and developed in some curriculum areas to facilitate faster marking and the timely return of work to students. The following excerpt suggests that this becomes formulaic:

A lot of this feedback is cut and pasted so students get a standardised format. Once they have learnt to read one response sheet they are able to read all others fluently. The language of the grade descriptor is used more and more... We mix and match from the marking criteria (Education)

The question of what students do with written feedback elicited a lot of uncertainty. Teachers

typically gave impressionistic accounts or made largely unsubstantiated claims. In some instances this was related to impressions gained through tutorial time with student writers. Responses, as in the example above, provided detail on the heterogeneity of both divisional and individual tutor practices in spite of ostensibly formal guidelines and procedures.

A number of the answers focused on the student: there are <good> or <better> students on the one hand, and <poor> or <weak> ones on the other; the former group thrives and benefits, the latter fails to take any notice and makes limited progress. The adjectives <good>, <weak>, <able>, <less able> abounded in the teacher data. The following excerpts exemplify this reasoning:

There is no such thing as the average student. Some are motivated and conscientious and make changes. Others don't really care and are satisfied with less (Social Sciences)

The less able ones don't benefit very much. They are getting the same sorts of comments because they have the same sorts of problems. The more able students use it more and can show that they have (Applied Sciences)

The following excerpt suggests two things: firstly, when feedback is perceived as ineffectual it is rooted in the way the process operates and how it is understood by both writer and reader; secondly, it implies that a tacit value system governs what teachers are willing to communicate to students:

Some students simply don't understand the role of feedback. They don't see it as particularly valuable and don't really understand what we are doing or trying to tell them. We are telling them what they are not doing well and what they should be doing but we are not really telling them how to do it (Business School)

The final question – why do some students ignore feedback – elicited mainly opinion and guesswork. Respondents often prefaced their answers with hedges such as <that's a good question>, <hard to say> or <that's a difficult question to answer>. One respondent simply exclaimed «This mystifies me!» and another with thirty years lecturing experience said, «I don't know. It's a puzzle for me and extremely worrying». The following excerpt encapsulates several perceived problems from the teacher perspective:

I think in some cases it is because they haven't understood it and in others it is because they don't link comments up to the work to see how it could have been done differently. In some cases I also think that some assignments are done so much at the last minute that they don't have time to refer back to previous work. I'm guessing. I'm forced to conclude that in many cases students are only really interested in marks (Social Sciences)

One problem is a perceived comprehension gap; feedback is not self-evidently obvious to students. Written feedback comments which are not clearly referenced (e.g. do not appear on returned scripts but only on forms) appear disembodied; students cannot understand them and how feedback comments <link> to specific elements of their written work. In addition, students are perceived as being mainly instrumentally motivated and primarily concerned with marks. The following excerpt indicates that written feedback is based on tacit knowledge and the assumption of shared understandings:

They may read it and not understand it. The challenge for us is trying to make it as easy as possible to understand. People outside education don't use words the way we do (Nursing)

However, the system itself is called into question evoking the concerns around the efficacy of feedback and institutional practices emerging in feedback research described earlier:

Because they can't read and understand it; nor understand how to map it onto another piece of work. The pressure in the university system encourages teachers to be brief and vague. As one module finishes the next one kicks in. It's a quick turn around culture (Social Work)

This in turn has a deleterious effect on how feedback is perceived and responded to, particularly by certain groups of students and draws attention to the way in which written feedback is framed and presented if students are to respond positively and recognise its benefits:

Some students do not understand it; some are overwhelmed by it. They lack self-confidence. We know that some students, particularly mature ones and those returning to education come

with negative emotional connotations (Applied Sciences)

Discussion of the data and the implications for teaching academic writing <across> and <in> the disciplines

The data indicate that the conceptions teachers hold about the role and utility of feedback are often at odds with their knowledge of what students do with it. This can be attributed to aspects of the system rather than the intentions of teachers themselves. The concerns raised by feedback research outlined in the second section of this paper are substantiated in this research. The data reveal that the purposes of written feedback are almost always mixed: a way of helping students through feedback comments and feed-forward advice on how to improve their work but also conformity with institutional requirements, procedures and priorities. Teachers experience a conflict between their conceptions of the purpose of feedback, their intentions and the requirements of the system: a state of affairs that reinforces stereotypical assumptions about the motivations and behaviour of students. As a result teachers may become indifferent to the quality of feedback they provide other than to support students with their performance in assessments and to comply with institutional policy and rules.

The research findings draw into focus factors which this researcher believes are significant for teachers of academic writing whatever the local or national contexts of their work. Firstly, learning and academic literacy development in the disciplines is contextualised and situated and more a matter of social practices than institutionally sanctioned processes and outcomes. The latter obscure this reality rather than highlight it so that as writing specialist we may be, or may be becoming, more marginal to disciplinary practices than we realise (in spite of writing <across> the disciplines initiatives and dedicated writing centres). Secondly, it is important to understand and identify with the experience and perspective of teachers in the changing context of higher education. This is less well attended to in research than the <student experience>. Thirdly, the findings endorse the importance of research as an integral part of the work and contribution of writing teachers. Research is central to a genuinely practical understanding of teaching <in> the disciplines as opposed to a more adjunctive conception of the role of writing specialists <across> the disciplines. In the

rapidly emerging brave new world of European higher education, in particular, questions need to be asked about the role and capabilities of academic writing teachers and teaching, for example:

- What is the purpose and remit of academic writing teaching?
- How is it perceived by others in higher education?
- Who decides what it is?
- What are the possibilities and how might it change?

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