

Assessment Feedback: We can do better

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EDITORIAL

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the potential of assessment feedback to achieve significant gains in student attainment and learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Assessment feedback is taken here to include “information provided by any agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (Hattie and Timperley, 2007: 81). However, within higher education in the last 30 years relatively little attention has been given to student and lecturer perceptions of the value and usefulness of feedback (Poulos and Mahoney, 2008; Scott et al., 2011; Weaver, 2006). Disparities in student and staff perceptions of feedback are well reported (Carless, 2006), with Burke (2009) arguing for more explicit attention to be paid to how students use the feedback they have been given.

However, there is now a much stronger degree of consensus as to what constitutes effective feedback practice especially through the use of holistic feedback designs where assessment is considered as an integral aspect of teaching (Boud and Associates, 2010; Nicol, 2008; Scott et al., 2011). Key features of such designs as noted by Evans (2012) include:

- (i) Feedback as an ongoing and integral part of assessment (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004);
- (ii) Provision of explicit guidance to students (Gilbert et al., 2011);
- (iii) Importance of feedforward activities to enable students to improve their work (Boud and Lawson, 2011);
- (iv) Engagement of students in the feedback process (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006);
- (v) Provision of training for students and lecturers (Miller et al., 2010);
- (vi) Attention to the technicalities of feedback (e.g. timing, style and focus of feedback) (Nelson and Schunn 2009).

As Nicol (2008) acknowledges, not all elements of effective feedback practice, as outlined above, need be present to have a positive impact on student performance. However, even when such aspects of good practice are integrated into teaching not all students engage and/or benefit from such interventions. This has lead Evans in Scott et al. (2011) to consider the nature and interaction of contextual and individual variables impacting on student receptivity and ability to seek, use and act on feedback through the vehicle of the ‘*feedback landscape*’. The lack of work considering the role of individual differences in the feedback process is highlighted in the Scott et al. study. Specific gaps in the research literature include the role of cognitive styles in feedback (how individuals make sense of and process information), the emotional dimension of feedback, and the role of cultural and gender differences in feedback processes.

In this special issue of *Reflecting Education*, the impact of individual and contextual variables on the assessment feedback process is considered, with a focus on how feedback is scaffolded. Scaffolding in this context refers to how feedback can be developed to enable students to take greater responsibility for their learning and specifically their role(s) within the feedback process. The eight articles (representing contributions from countries including Hong Kong - China, Portugal, Belgium and Scotland) highlight some of the key debates within the assessment feedback literature and suggest ways forward in the development of aspects of feedback practice. Specifically, *Lei* and *Yung* focus on peer feedback and peer assessment considerations; *Duffy*, *Houston* and *Rimmer* look at self-feedback and the use of a specific self analysis tool to facilitate this; *Pedrosa-de-Jesus* and *Moreira* consider the importance of developing student questioning skills through the use of formative feedback within the context of an online discussion forum. In relation to individual differences and assessment feedback preferences, *Zhu* considers the interaction between students' metacognition skills and feedback preferences, *Donche*, *Vanthournout* and *Van Petegem* look at student learning patterns and feedback preferences, *Cools*, *De Stobbeleir*, *Bellens* and *Buyens* consider the role of cognitive styles on the feedback-seeking behaviour of individuals and *Geyskens*, *Donche* and *Van Petegem* focus on the overriding question of how feedback practice within Higher Education can be enhanced with specific reference to Royce Sadler's work (1989, 2010).

OVERVIEW OF PAPERS

Firstly, the papers of *Lei* and *Yung* highlight a number of concerns with peer feedback. *Lei* considers the potential impact of peer feedback on the writing performance of Chinese students. How students value peer feedback especially from a cultural context is often underplayed as is the variable ability of peers to give and receive feedback. *Lei* highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the cultural context and the need for sensitivity regarding this. The role of individual differences is evident in that, although all the students were given the same instructions by the same instructor, the nature of the feedback the students offered to each other was variable. One of the factors implicated in this is that of the relative ability of the students to provide good feedback. However, as *Lei* notes, the provision of good feedback did not mean that students necessarily acted upon this. The more useful feedback did not always lead to higher levels of writing improvement, nor were the largest improvements associated with how positively a student viewed feedback. What is significant is that there was a strong correlation between students' writing performance and the feedback the students offered, suggesting that the process of giving feedback may enhance individual understanding and performance and/or those most able to give good feedback were also the most able. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that more critical engagement *with* feedback by the students (rather than passive acceptance of feedback), was seen as more valuable in leading to enhanced writing performance.

Continuing on the theme of peer feedback, *Yung* focuses on peer assessment (peer marking) rather than peer feedback and in his own words acknowledges that using this in a summative way did not facilitate student learning. A key question is how summative peer assessment can feedforward to support student learning in subsequent learning tasks. While *Yung* highlights that the accuracy of students' marking in the peer assessment exercise can be supported with training and the use of rubrics, a fundamental issue for students is their perception of the ability of their peers to assess them accurately. The role of the lecturer within the peer assessment feedback process is critical in providing opportunities for explicit discussion of

beliefs about the peer marking process, in developing understanding of criteria, and in supporting student agency and involvement in the process; whether this is sufficient to address student concerns about the ability of peers to assess them is debateable. To support the peer assessment feedback process, the gate keeping role of the lecturer is important (e.g. encouraging student engagement, supporting students to manage the emotional dimension of feedback, ensuring sufficient time for debriefing and addressing student misconceptions). Therefore, it could be argued that the facilitator role requires a very high degree of vigilance throughout the feedback process. Furthermore, *Yung* notes that students were not comfortable in giving critical feedback to their peers and that anonymity of work was essential in order to promote student peer assessment practice within the Chinese context. Whether certain cultural and emotional barriers in the assessment of peers can be addressed within the relatively short time of a specific module for students to be able to fully engage and be comfortable with the feedback process is questionable. To address this, *Nicol* (2008) argues that in order to promote student agency, peer assessment should be used for formative purposes rather than summative ones. Therefore, of fundamental importance is the decision about the compulsory or optional nature of peer assessment as part of assessment design. Such a decision should be informed by the requirements of the context in relation to specific intended learning outcomes and should be sensitive to the individual and cultural context including consideration of how adequately students and lecturers have been prepared to engage in such activities in a meaningful and competent manner. Relevant to this debate is the extent to which peer assessment feedback is seen as authentic and valuable in supporting learning now and in the future. An additional issue is the extent to which individuals feel able to adequately provide feedback to their peers and engage with the feedback received from peers. From a student agency perspective, it could be argued that engagement in peer assessment feedback should be optional. Alternatively, it could be argued that peer assessment feedback is an essential element of 'feeding up' whereby the ability to assess self and others is needed beyond education and, therefore, students should be able to master these skills into the workplace as a core component of their learning experience. Linked to this is the importance of training students in how to give feedback effectively (*Handley, Price and Millar, 2008*). However, within the literature, far less attention has been placed on how students should seek out, respond to and act on feedback from peers and other sources.

Moving on from peer feedback, *Duffy, Houston and Rimmer* focus on the role of self feedback in affecting positive change in the study behaviours of students. Closely linked to this is the notion of sustainable feedback whereby the student is able to utilise feedback to take forward into lifelong learning as well as being able to cope with the immediate demands of assessment (*Boud, 2000; Carless et al., 2011; Hounsell, 2007*). The relative importance of a focus on immediate and/or future assessment requirements is debated. Enhancing student self-regulation is an important aspect of sustainable assessment debates. It is often simplistically implied that this means less lecturer support. However, the scaffolding aspect of feedback requires a change in the type of support and nature of the relationship between feedback giver and receiver, with the student taking greater responsibility for managing the feedback process. The importance of attuning such scaffolding to individual needs is highlighted in this special issue.

Self-feedback is seen as an essential element of sustainable feedback practice and for students to make progress they need to be able to accurately gauge the gap between their current level of performance and a desired level of performance as referred to in the *Geyskens, Donche, and Van Petegem* article. In order to achieve this, they need to know what constitutes good performance and how to bridge the gap between current and desired performance (*Sadler,*

1989). Therefore, a key goal of instruction must be in supporting students to develop this self-regulatory ability in order to manage their own learning now and in the future. However, Archer (2010) questions the ability of individuals to accurately self-monitor their performance as part of self-assessment. In the *Duffy, Houston and Rimmer* article, two thirds of the students found the use of SAMI (a tool to assist students in managing their study approaches) useful, however, a third did not. This highlights the interaction of individual and contextual variables and the varied ability of students to self-regulate (Alkahrer and Dolan, 2011). One of the key issues is the extent to which one needs to try to 'catch' those who choose not to engage and whether non-engagement is an indicator of poor self-regulation and/or a conscious decision by able regulators who do not need or see the value of certain types of instruction/support. The reality is that this pool of 'non engagers' is likely to include those with varied self-regulatory capacity. Scaffolding support for such individuals is not without difficulty. A better understanding of individual learning patterns in order to offer appropriate scaffolding in lecturer student feedback support is one way forward that is offered by *Donche, Vanthournout and Van Petegem* in their discussion of constructive friction (where feedback takes account of student levels of self-regulation) and destructive friction (where feedback is too strictly directed). In providing appropriate levels of feedback support to students, an awareness of how students use and access networks of support within the academic community as well as outside of it is important. In the *Duffy et al.* study, students were found to mainly rely on family and partners for feedback. This finding was also evident in the *Scott et al. (2011)* study highlighting the role of lecturers in facilitating the integration of students into academic communities of practice. Careful design of learning environments with explicit instruction regarding potential networks of support which importantly address issues of trust in the giving and receiving of feedback from self and others is needed (*Carless et al., 2011*).

The importance of the design of learning environments to maximise the impact of assessment feedback is raised in the *Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Moreira and Geyskens et al.* articles where the concept of constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes and assessment is highlighted as important in ensuring student engagement with online discussion activity. *Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Moreira* focus on the development of student questioning skills through the use of effective feedback interactions within the context of an online discussion forum. Teacher presence is seen as an essential element in the relative success of the feedback exchange between student and lecturer is that of teacher presence. The scaffolding role of the lecturer in providing appropriate and timely feedback and in guiding discussions is seen as critical and raises questions regarding the sustainability of such practice given the potential volume and timing of student online postings. The skill of the lecturer in providing focused feedback is an essential element of this. As identified in other studies using e-learning vehicles, the relative success of such interventions depends on the extent to which learning and teaching activities are based on sound theoretical positions. In the *Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Moreira* study, there was a strong commitment to encouraging a deep approach to learning. To ensure successful implementation of such an approach, this would require all those involved in the feedback process to have a shared understanding of, and commitment to, specific teaching and assessment approaches. The extent to which students understood the value and purpose of the online questioning and feedback intervention could be questioned, with 20% of students choosing not to engage in the online activity. The authors note that the online activity became part of summative assessment to ensure buy in from the students and this is one way of encouraging engagement with such activities. The degree to which students found the involvement in the online discussion valuable highlights the importance of providing authentic learning experiences. Important considerations include the degree to

which individual differences are accommodated and how within learning environments, and related to this, how student agency is promoted within the assessment feedback process. It needs to be clarified with students as to why engagement in a specific assessment and feedback activity is valuable. Again, we cannot make assumptions about the relative ability of those choosing not to engage, however, we can explore with students their reasons for non-engagement with potentially valuable networks of support.

In considering individual differences, *Zhu* considers whether feedback should be matched to individual learning styles, referring in this context to a student's relative level of metacognition. *Zhu* specifically considers the relationship between a student's metacognition level and feedback preferences. She notes the potential benefits of online feedback for feedback giver and receiver. However, this depends on how the teacher and student perceive the value of this medium for effective feedback exchanges and the context in which such feedback is given. It is noted in this study that 25-35% of students either did not comment or did not find the feedback useful. With this in mind, *Zhu* notes the importance of the nature and content of the wording of feedback, highlighting student preference (regardless of metacognitive level) for motivational, explicit and elaborative feedback as well as the greater preference of students with lower levels of metacognition for constructive and elaborated comments. This study is important in its consideration of the precise nature of feedback offered and potential emotional impact on students. It also raises questions concerning the extent to which feedback should be tailored to individual student needs and on what basis. In terms of good practice, the need for a strong link between the teacher comments and the nature and requirements of the student's assignment are noted. However, the role of the student in the online feedback situation needs greater consideration. The notion of lecturer scaffolding of feedback support is highlighted in ensuring that feedback matched the student's metacognitive level. It is important that such variables are considered in relation to other individual learning difference and contextual variables in order to more accurately assess the dynamics of the assessment feedback process.

In addressing this area, *Donche, Vanthournout and Van Petegem*, using a shortened version of the Vermunt's Inventory of Learning Patterns consider the relationship between student learning patterns, self efficacy and feedback preferences. The emphasis of this article is on whether students felt the needed to change their learning patterns and if so, what feedback was required to support them in this endeavour. *Donche et al.* did find evidence of relationships between students' willingness to change how they regulated their learning, self-efficacy and self-regulation variables. They highlight the need to take into account the degree of self-regulation students have already acquired. The notion of 'feedback scaffolding' is important in considering a continuum of feedback support that *should* evolve in line with the changing needs of the student as part of sustainable feedback (O'Donovan et al., 2004). From the lecturer perspective, the importance of providing appropriate feedback to match the stage of student development is vital. The role of the student in seeking out and using appropriate feedback networks and self-managing feedback as part of the scaffolding process is also essential.

There is an assumption that it is those with lower self-regulation capacity that are most at risk. However, this ignores the fact that even those students demonstrating higher levels of self regulation and deeper approaches to studying may come unstuck in unfamiliar learning situations where previously successful approaches to learning may not be relevant. It could be argued that high levels of student satisfaction with performance allied to previous success in learning coupled with a reluctance to change present issues for those high self-regulators

when faced with new learning and assessment contexts. Alternatively, high efficacious and regulated learners may not present with problems at all. The issue in this context is how feedback can be enhanced for this group taking account of the notion of constructive friction. In contrast, at the other end of the scale, regarding low efficacious and relatively poor self-regulators, it is important to consider how best to provide explicit guidance to students so that they can also help themselves.

In supporting students to help themselves, the development and honing of feedback seeking behaviour is important as identified by *Cools, De Stobbeir, Bellens and Buyens* in their consideration of the role of cognitive styles on people's feedback seeking behaviours. It could be argued that effective feedback seeking behaviours (strategic seeking of feedback; noticing; filtering; assimilation and adaptation of feedback) are important dimensions of self-regulation. *Cools et al.* highlight the fact that students will pick up and value certain forms of feedback differently, as noted in other studies in this special issue. Whether this matters in relation to performance outcomes requires further examination. From a learning perspective the value of alerting all students to the different forms of feedback and their relative value in specific contexts is important as noted by *Duffy et al.* when considering student access to, and use of feedback networks. *Cools et al.* highlight the role of cognitive styles in affecting feedback seeking behaviours and also indirectly highlight how the design of learning environments may encourage performance versus learning goal orientations which impact on the ways in which individuals seek feedback and what feedback they seek. A potential training issue is identified in relation to the fact that older workers and those with longer tenure exhibited less use of feedback seeking behaviours. Whether this is seen as problematic or not would be interesting to explore. From a higher education perspective it would be pertinent to consider how a student's use of feedback seeking behaviours changes over time and how the design of learning environments, including assessment, impacts on feedback seeking behaviours. In addition, a focus on individual learning differences, such as cognitive styles, can inform general principles of assessment feedback design. Furthermore, the relationship between the design of learning environments and the facilitation of the development of appropriate feedback seeking behaviours requires further investigation.

Geyskens, Donche and Van Petegem's overview article on enhancing effective feedback within higher education highlights some of the complexities inherent in the giving and receiving of feedback. Referring to Sadler's work, the authors highlight the importance of the provision of explicit and clear guidance to students on what constitutes a good piece of work and on how to achieve this by taking into account individual learning differences. The complexity arises in relation to the relative roles of students and lecturers within the process. Key questions include: (i) how can students play a larger role in the development of assessment criteria and (ii) to what extent is the work they are asked to do authentic and relevant to their future perceived roles; sustainability issues are implicated in this (Boud, 2000, Hounsell, 2007). The emphasis on providing explicit feedback to address the gap between current student performance and an 'expected level' of performance highlights a fundamental issue concerning how students and lecturers interpret what the expected level should be; this impacts on how feedback is given and applied in that even if students are clear about the requirements of assessment, the level they wish to aspire to will depend on a whole host of factors including what they perceive as achievable and realistic and fundamentally, the value they attach to the assessment.

Scaffolding of support has featured highly in this special issue. It needs reemphasizing that it is important to consider that this is not just about the amount of support, but the type and

balance of different types of feedback. There is also a danger that feedback becomes so cloaked in terminology and ‘criteria compliance speak’ that students may cease to have access to the feedback. It is not possible or desirable to isolate the different types of feedback that Hattie and Timperley (2007) outline when working with students. The consummate skill of the feedback giver is in their integration of the different types of feedback and ability to notice how best to offer this feedback and to encourage participation from the feedback recipient. Furthermore, it could be argued that it is not just the speed in the return of feedback per se that is important, it is that feedback should enable sufficient time for a student to be able to take on board and make amendments to work prior to final submission. What a student does with feedback is fundamental to the quality of their learning, and the key issue here is how students are supported to engage in, and to take a greater role within this complex process from the outset. This leads to further debates about the purposes and nature of formative assignments and whether it is appropriate and or sustainable for lecturers to be giving feedback on complete drafts; ownership of work within this process is a concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the articles in this special issue highlight a number of important considerations in the design of assessment feedback:

1. Acknowledging and addressing the specific cultural and discipline specific context(s) in the design of assessment feedback practice.
2. Developing integrated assessment feedback designs that clearly map how all elements of assessment and feedback fit together in order for formative feedback to feed into summative and for summative feedback to feed into formative within and across modules. Students need to be clear about how all elements of assessment fit together.
3. Promoting shared understandings amongst students and lecturers of the value and purposes of assessment and the relevance of tools designed to promote learning.
4. Training students in how to give and engage *with* rather than passively receive feedback. In order to do this it is also important to reconcile students’ assertions about feedback and their actual practice from the outset.
5. Early diagnosis of student self-regulation capacity is essential through the use of a range of methods (short and sharply focused early assessments; discussions of students’ previous learning and feedback histories as well as the judicious use of tools to assess individual learning differences).
6. Accurate diagnosis of the level at which feedback needs to be given and the importance of appropriately scaffolding feedback experiences for individual students over time to promote sustainable feedback practice. The role of the student in managing their involvement within this process is of paramount importance especially in relation to the development of self-assessment and diagnosis skills.
7. Providing ongoing learning opportunities for lecturers to share how they design peer feedback opportunities along with a consideration of how learning environment design can promote development of the feedback seeking behaviours of students.
8. Ensuring students are aware of the various feedback networks available and know how to gain entry and to engage with these.
9. Ensuring the integrity and authenticity of assessment feedback design in order to maximise student buy in.

10. Ensuring careful use of peer feedback opportunities that are sensitive to the individual needs of students including the cultural context of the learners. Greater emphasis should be placed on peer feedback compared to peer assessment, with peer feedback being used as an integral part of peer and self-assessment.

In attending to the ten areas identified above to develop and enhance assessment feedback practice, an exploration of individual differences especially in relation to student and lecturer conceptions of effective feedback is essential as is clarifying the respective and evolving roles of student and lecturer within the feedback process. The need for greater student agency within assessment feedback design and the need for greater coherence of feedback practice within and across programmes present considerable challenges for those responsible for the design and delivery of assessment feedback whose agency in the process is also of fundamental importance.

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