Getting the Message Across: the problem of communicating assessment feedback

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ABSTRACT Current literature provides useful insights into the role of assessment feedback in student learning, yet fails to recognise its complexity as a unique form of communication. This article outlines ideas emerging from ongoing research into the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. We argue that new models of communication are required to understand students' responses to the language of tutors' comments, and that issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships should be central to any understanding of assessment feedback as a communication process. Implications of adopting an alternative perspective for research and practice are identified and discussed.

What do students ‘do’ with feedback they receive from tutors? Should we accept the Times Higher Education Supplement’s summary of students’ motivations and aspirations (based on Kathryn Ecclestone’s research on assessment feedback at Sunderland University)?

‘Students are clearly more cynical about “getting through” with a minimum of effort, rather than aiming to become critically informed, indepen-
dent learners’. Ecclestone also noted that ‘some students threw away the feedback if they disliked the grade, while others seemed concerned only with the final result and did not collect their marked work.’ (Wojtas, 1998)

We have heard this argument from many academic staff over the last few years: students are indifferent to tutors’ feedback comments and care only about the grade. At best, they will read a response to their work only when it provides ‘correct answers’ for the exam.

However, is this really the case? How far can we generalise Ecclestone’s study? Have students become intrinsically more cynical or is this a response to their changing environment? In a different article, Ecclestone has warned that the trend towards more prescriptive formats of outcome-based assessment could endanger more open-ended student learning if taken too far (Ecclestone, 1999). We know that assessment is an important student ‘driver’—so have we created the situation that we now complain about?

Returning to the particular issue of assessment feedback, there is certainly research to suggest that even if students do read comments they do little with them (Ding, 1998). Our own investigations suggest that, at the very least, feedback does not realise its full potential to become an integral part of the learning process. Why is this?

Our argument is that we cannot answer this question until we pay more attention to feedback as a process of communication. Research and theory in communication suggests a number of important principles which affect the way feedback is received and interpreted. Unfortunately, these variables have not received much attention in the literature on assessment practices. For example, when we communicate with other people we base our behaviour on implicit models of the communication process and on our preconceptions of the other people involved (Hartley, 1999). How do these variables affect tutors in their actions and students in their reactions? Consider the following scenario.

**Professor Snape’s Perspective: students are ‘strategic consumers’**

Professor Snape is convinced that, in today’s competitive job market, the pressure is on students to obtain a ‘good degree’. Meeting assessment demands has become students’ raison d’être. They act like ‘consumers’, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark (Winter, 1993; Ecclestone, 1998) and adopt a ‘surface’ approach to learning.

As a result, Professor Snape produces feedback that simply outlines his judgements on the piece of work and also tends to highlight what ‘went wrong’ with it—why it did not achieve a higher grade. The Professor is aware that the comments are fairly short and succinct, but they do echo the sort of comments he remembers on his undergraduate essays.

**A Student Reaction: a learner’s tale**

We find one of the Professor’s students, just after receiving one of the essays and record the reaction:
I was pinning my hopes on a 2:1 grade for this one but I’ve only got a 2:2. I’m really disappointed, but I’m determined to use the feedback to improve my next essay. I’m anticipating more emotional turmoil—to either be hurt by stinging criticism, or encouraged by praise, reassurance and constructive guidance. But, not for the first time during my course, I’m simply left frustrated. ‘A satisfactory effort. More critical analysis of key issues would have helped.’ This is the sum of the feedback. The Professor obviously thinks that, for me, a 2:2 is satisfactory, but I don’t. I’m dismayed that this was no more than he expected from me. More critical analysis? I thought I had analysed the main issues thoroughly and been critical—maybe not. I thought I knew what critical analysis involved—maybe I do not know after all. I wanted the tutor to engage with what I had written, to provide a personal critique of my work, but his comments do not live up to the level of critical analysis that I expect him to employ.

The Need for ‘Better’ Feedback?

Our Professor has delivered ‘accurate’ and ‘appropriate’ feedback as he sees it, but has left the student feeling demoralised and angry. Should we be asking the Professor to provide more extensive comments? Would the process of communication be improved or are there more fundamental problems to address?

We are concerned that much current educational thinking characterises the process of assessment feedback (albeit implicitly) in terms of an over-simplified model of communication. Communication is seen as the linear transfer of information from the sender of a message (the tutor) to a recipient (the student) via a medium (usually written comments). This conception of the communication process reflects early models and theories of information originating in the 1940s (for example, see Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Although versions of this model are still widely propagated in ‘how to do it’ books on communication (such as Osborn & Motley, 1999), they are heavily criticised in the current academic literature on human communication (for example, see Craig, 1999). These models suggest that there is nothing ‘wrong’ with the communication process itself—what hinders the transfer of information are external interferences.

In the educational literature, this view is often reflected through an ‘outside-in’ focus on factors that hinder the assessment feedback process, as in the view which suggests that consumerism mediates students’ receptiveness to feedback. Other examples concentrate on the structure of the university or assessment system. Issues such as the timeliness of feedback, heavy tutor and student workloads and modularisation are implicated in disrupting the flow of information between tutor and student (Ding, 1998; Miller et al., 1998).

Another ‘outside-in’ example would be the advice which tutors might use to evaluate their feedback (especially if Subject Review looms). Consider the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) guidelines on assessment and feedback, as outlined in their code of practice for assessing students (QAA, 2000). This advises HE institutions to consider:
• the timeliness of feedback;
• specifying the nature and extent of feedback;
• relating feedback to published assessment criteria;
• how the language of assessment and study should normally be the same.

These concerns, while obviously important and sensible, do reflect a preoccupation with structural problems, and also suggest that the feedback process is relatively straightforward once the procedural issues are sorted out. We do not want to argue that these guidelines are ‘wrong’, but that we also need to understand assessment feedback and its effectiveness from a different perspective.

The student’s view we offered earlier—which reflects both informal conversations with students and our current research—suggests the salient factors in the feedback process are related to issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse. The student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some ‘return’ on that investment. Tutors assume a perceived position of authority within a power relationship based on their experience and the institutional context. The feedback comments convey a message based on an implicit understanding of particular academic terms, which in turn reflect a much more complex academic discourse, which in turn may be only partially understood by students. This suggests that the actors in our educational drama are likely to conceptualise feedback in qualitatively different ways—simply tidying up the language will have little impact.

So we suggest that the process of feedback as communication is inherently problematic. The ‘internal’ dynamics of feedback as communication must be foregrounded in any attempt to further our understanding of assessment feedback. Internal features of feedback should be considered prior to those identified as external and these external factors cannot be considered prior to internal features. For example, it is impossible to fully understand how consumerism (and students’ motivations) or modularisation mediate the utility of assessment feedback without first understanding how particular social relationships shape the feedback process. In other words, it is impossible to investigate how an outside influence impacts upon a process if the internal dynamics of that process are not understood—that is, if the true nature of the process remains hidden (or simply assumed).

Uncovering the True Nature of the Process

There are other recent examples of educational researchers investigating fundamental processes which may have been taken for granted for too long. One example is the ‘academic literacies’ or ‘academic practices’ approach to writing and learning (as in Baynham, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000). Here, we see writing and learning explored at the level of epistemology and identities. Institutions and disciplines are analysed as sites of and constituted in, discourse and power, with an emphasis on how disciplinary knowledge is constituted, reproduced, manipulated, resisted, transformed and learned. Learning contexts are seen as complex—particularly against a background of new and emerging discipline areas and student switching between subjects (Lea & Street, 2000).
The focus of this approach also helps to suggest why assessment feedback as communication is particularly complex. Giving and receiving feedback occurs within these complex contexts, and so is mediated by power relationships and the nature of the predominant discourse within each setting.

While feedback shares a number of common features with other forms of communication, and while all conversation is linked to issues of power and discourse, the feedback process is particularly problematic because of the particular nature of the power relationship. The tutor occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student. This is therefore bound up with issues of power and, as Layder (1997) would suggest, inextricably with emotion. For example, the tutor’s expert position confers their ‘judgements’ with an elevated status, which enhances the power of these judgements to invoke feelings such as pride and shame within students.

Our everyday communication usually ‘works’ because it is based on shared understandings. Both parties have access to appropriate discourses which enable them to construct and reconstruct meaning from implicit messages. However, as Hounsell (1997) and McCune (1999) have suggested, HE students may struggle to access the particular discourses underpinning tutors’ comments. Moreover, if competing discourses are associated with different disciplines and tutors, then students face increasing problems as they move between these disciplines (especially in the light of modularisation and new, emerging discipline areas).

Implications for Research and Practice?

We do not want researchers to ignore factors such as consumerism or structural problems re the feedback process. However, we do suggest a different starting point, from issues of power, identity, emotion, discourse and subjectivity. By looking at feedback as an essentially problematic form of communication involving particular social relationships, we may begin to understand how external conditions interplay, mediate (and are mediated by) patterns of power, authority, emotion and identity, and how students’ abilities to access appropriate discourses are shaped.

The importance of using an ‘inside-out’, rather than ‘outside-in’ approach assumes greater importance when we consider the implications for practice. Instead of asking if the student will take notice of feedback or whether it relates explicitly enough to assessment criteria, or whether the quantity is sufficient, we should be asking how the tutor comes to construct the feedback, how the student understands the feedback (how they make sense of it), and how they make sense of assessment and the learning context in general.

This suggests that tutors must question their own assumptions about knowledge, concepts, rules and conventions. As Ronald Barnett (1990) suggests, there are clearly differences in tacit understandings between and also within particular disciplines. This suggests the need for more open discussion, collaboration, and negotiation between tutors (and between disciplines), to reflect on, question, make explicit and share competing understandings.
Nor can tutors assume that students will understand a list of assessment criteria. Feedback may need to be more dialogical and ongoing. Discussion, clarification and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them, and develop their understandings of academic terms and appropriate practices before or as they begin to write. Perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to ‘feeding forward’ into a piece of work, rather than simply ‘feeding back’.

REFERENCES


