What if feedback only counted when it changed the learner?

Steve Draper, Glasgow University

www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/fprompt0.html

Part A:
Setting the scene for my two talks:
Disbelieving common pious articles of faith

Prologue

I'm giving two talks here today. They are both about practical responses to where I/we are in our current practice.

But I want to say a bit first about the background: where I think we are in thinking about Assessment and Feedback (A&F) in HE.

Actually, most of this is to contradict various common assumptions.

1. Assessment is for 3rd parties, not to assist learning

The reason HE does assessment is to provide students with certificates for future employers. This has nothing whatsoever inherent to do with helping learning.

Pretending otherwise, failing to acknowledge the elephant in the room, is not helpful.

2. Feedback is not necessary for learning

What students and line managers and most academics mean by "feedback" is individual (typically written) comments by a tutor on a student's work.

There are many cases or phenomena which show that this is not necessary for learning ... even though it can sometimes be helpful.

You may choose to define "feedback" differently, but if you do then you are no longer speaking the same language as most people in HE; and it not longer has the same implications about resource allocation. You could put the answers to maths exercises on the web and support a billion learners: so feedback is not a problem then? Or it isn't feedback in the way we mean?

2a. Cases in point

No correlation between overall course satisfaction and feedback
My dept. gives NO feedback on its content modules; only on "skills" [CDC: core disciplinary criteria]
"Catalytic" effects suggest that others' interaction IS important, but is NOT feedback (diagnosis or remediation information). Draper 2009a
In RPC what learners most value is just seeing others' work Morrow 2006

Learning maths by doing the exercises and checking the answers in the back of the book.
Learning to program: mostly by trying things out. (but forums)
Getting better at anything with solo practice.
Students (with A grades) who say they never learned anything from feedback.
Sugata Mitra: no teachers, learners self-organise. Mitra URL
Chi 2008: learning from watching a video of a tutorial.

2b. So ...

Most learners, most of the time do not need a tutor to diagnose where they went wrong, nor to tell them how to get it right.

Either feedback isn't important; or it isn't mainly personal tutor comments that matter; or it is only important in a very few cases: so we should be identifying these, not manufacturing it in all cases.

When non-tutor feedback *is* important, it is often in self-generated activities: so we don't need teachers for setting goals either.

If assessment is important, it is not because of a connection with individual tutor comments.

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3. A&F is the most backward area in thinking about HE learning and teaching

In a lot of writing, and good practice, in L&T in HE, constructivism is quite widely accepted: the idea that good practice is something other than merely teachers telling students.

But in "feedback" everyone (students and staff) seems to think it means written monologues by staff telling students what they did wrong.

No discussion, no interaction with peers (privacy given priority), no facilitation by giving a clue rather than giving the answer, ...

In fact in HE, feedback just seems to mean judging and telling.

4. Self-regulation, not transmission, is the aim.

Thus in HE, "feedback" seems to mean judging and telling.

But when I look at actual students, and what they say they found useful in feedback, much of it is actually about self-regulation, not following written instructions.

E.g. Do they need to put more or less effort in?
Seeing how another student did the same task a different way.
Being prompted to consider an extra criterion (e.g. signal argument structure clearly)

(Promoting self-regulation was the REAP project's aspiration.)

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4b. An example: spelling correction

One way to glimpse how much mental work we imagine a good learner will do from a simple piece of feedback, consider what you would expect if you corrected their spelling of a word:
• Correct the current document (all occurrences of the word)
• Correct their internal spelling generator, so they would generate the right spelling henceforth
• Correct their internal bug detector, so they will notice wrong spellings in future, in both their own and others' documents.

This is 3 separate pieces of mental work for one simple fact.
Self-regulation includes managing all of this without direct instruction.
In fact often you don't have to tell a learner their error, just mention a fact and they will notice it is inconsistent with their knowledge.

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5. Which goal are students using feedback to adjust (regulate)?

Revising the current product (doing corrections)

Learning: improving future process and products (fprompt supports this)

Self-regulating effort (2-dim feedback would assist this)

Deciding what subjects (courses) to take in future / next.

Deciding the quality / validity of the marker

Deciding the quality / validity of the marking process (is it just random?)

(See Draper 2009b)

=> much of the time it is NOT content knowledge which students are improving in the light of feedback.

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Conclusion. Transition

What to do with the serious problems with conventional pieties about A&F?

For my talk here:

• Suspend the well-justified disbelief.

• Assume for a moment that I must produce tutor feedback.

• Ask how we can make written feedback produce learning (when so often, it clearly does not).

(In spite of the facts that feedback isn't necessary, it is often used for other goals than correcting knowledge, that we need to get them to create the behaviour changes (not dictate these), that the clamour for feedback is not backed up by evidence of learning.)

Part B:
What underlies students' relationship with feedback?

What is wrong with students' relationship to feedback?

The questions:

Why don't students use feedback?

What is the real goal of feedback?

What is the real issue behind students' use of feedback?

The symptoms:

They don't pick up written feedback

They say they don't get feedback

They say it's not applicable to any future work they'll do

They look at the mark not the comments

They won't do any formative work unless there's a mark/credit

Possible analysis

A. For many students, it is as if they have absolutely no concept that feedback is part of their learning.
    Either they have never had any feedback that helped them, or they didn't notice it was helping them; and no-one actually talks to them about its role in learning and in university courses.

B. When their work is ready to return, it has wholly gone from their minds.

• Consequently if they read the comments, it won't be helpful since the context has gone and anyway they aren't thinking about it: it is unrelated to their current work and deadlines.

• Looking at the mark is done to decide whether there is any emergency requiring action: if not, then no further attention need be paid to the comments.

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The measure of feedback value

Feedback is of no use whatever unless it changes some student action.

The criterion of teaching success here is: whether and what action the learner takes as a result.

How fast the feedback is returned has no value in itself.

All the advice about the content and style of feedback has no value in itself.

We have to focus on what the student is going to do with it.

(See also Draper, 2009:   "What are learners actually regulating when given feedback?")

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New mottos:
What would it be like to embrace these?

There is no point in giving feedback to a learner unless the learner acts on it: does something concrete and differently because of it.

What would our teaching be like if it only counted as feedback when the learner changed their behaviour as a result?

(How would we check on this? How would we tutors self-regulate our behaviour?)

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Some things I've tried in my own feedback practice

(I have a year 3 (of 4) tutorial group of 5-6 students each semester.)

I organise Reciprocal peer critiquing (RPC), which they value, and which also sets up a good peer atmosphere for discussion.

But my own feedback seemed less successful, even though I:

• Provide the feedback in typed form (they say this is important)

• Provide both positive and negative comments

• Suggest specific changes that could have been made.

• Promote elective feedback
    (the learner says what issues they want feedback on)

• Give them all the feedback for each of them (peer sharing).

• Require them to pick up the feedback from me, and read it on the spot.

• Promote discussion of feedback with myself.

• Promote discussion of feedback with peers.

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Nevertheless ... failure

Yet disappointingly, not a lot of discussion happened.

I had failed to get good discussion about returned feedback to happen, and wanted it to.

Learners (my tutees anyway) seemed just not to be thinking about the feedback, even though they turned up to meetings and read the feedback. Their memory of their original work had faded from both their memory and their to-do list, and reading even extensive feedback was not enough to make them think about it actively.

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Then success:
Prompted student processing of feedback

As before, then after they have read the feedback, sitting round in a group in my office, I asked them each to fill a prompt sheet:

1. You were keen to know what mark I had given you.
    a. Why is that important to you?
    b. What will you do differently because of the mark? (or what would you have done differently if the mark had been a lot different?)
2. If you had to re-edit this essay, then how would you apply my feedback to do this, if at all?
3. How will you apply my feedback to writing your next essay?
4. How will you apply my feedback to critiquing other students' essays in future?
5. Re-phrase (each of) my comments on your essay in your own words: what do they mean, what did they apply to what future actions do they imply?
6. Is the feedback I wrote at all useful to you personally, as far as you can tell now?

Evidence from 2 trials

Almost all said they valued the oral discussion around the feedback process as greatly as the personal written feedback.
One commented that it made her actually process the feedback, implying that normally she wouldn't have done so.

Before I started using the prompt sheets, even very good students would say after receiving my feedback things like: that's interesting but I don't think it will be relevant to my next assignment which will be marked by someone else.
Now, they don't say that, and have little trouble filling in on the sheet things they will do differently in the light of the feedback.

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So:

The job of providing written feedback isn't done with the writing: we have to do something to get learners to process it.

They showed no sign of resenting the time to do this; and one student, who couldn't make the group time, filled it in at home before coming in to see me.

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N.B. however for essay feedback: they really have to re-read their own essay as well as the comments: perhaps 30-60 mins work for a 4,000 word piece. (When have we timetabled this?)

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Thus to summarise, there are 2 jobs to do in making feedback actually useful: ....

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Making <u>comments</u> useful to students

As I have just been showing, I have had a bit of success with the simple prompt exercise I asked them to do as soon as they've read my feedback:
"Prompted student processing of feedback"

— basically asking them what they found useful, how they would re-write their essay if they had to, what lesson if any they would apply to the next essay they write.

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Making <u>marks</u> useful to students

For a different kind of feedback, marks from a quiz, a different kind of prompting seems effective.

For comprehension, increasing amounts of evidence suggests that explanations are not what students mainly need: once motivated, they'll find them themselves. Instead, they need to know what it is they don't yet understand. I.e. not comments, but "marks".

However what makes a mark into a signal which the student believes tells them that more work understanding this topic is needed?

My second talk on "2-dim" feedback will elaborate on this ....

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