

Coursework wiki

Introduction: Feedback

A generally agreed upon definition of assessment is evasive, and there have been few studies that systematically investigate the meaning of assessment feedback (Evans, 2013). For some, assessment is a measurement instrument (Clark, 2011), or a consequence of performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). For others, feedback is itself an intrinsic part of assessment (Angelo, 1995), and learning (Cramp, 2011) in which it is viewed as a supported sequential process as opposed to a series of unrelated events (Archer, 2010).

More recently, the term 'assessment feedback' has been employed as an umbrella term that captures the diversity of definitions and varieties of feedback referred to in the literature including the varied roles, types, meanings, and functions of feedback, alongside conceptual frameworks underpinning feedback principles. As such, the term 'assessment feedback' includes all feedback exchanges generated, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert, and drawing from a range of sources (Evans, 2013).

Lizzio & Wilson (2008) identify the goal of feedback as enabling the learner to bridge the gap between their actual level of performance and the desired learning goal. Importantly, other authors assert that it is only feedback if it alters this gap and has an impact on learning (Draper, 2009; William, 2011). Poulos & Mahony (2008) note that feedback may serve different functions depending on the learning environment, the learners' needs, the purpose of the task at hand, and the specific feedback paradigm employed.

A distinction is often made between cognitivist and socio-constructivist views of feedback, with contemporary emphasis currently placed on the socio-constructivist framework. The cognitivist perspective is associated with a directive telling approach where feedback is viewed as being corrective, with an expert providing information to the passive recipient (Evans, 2013). Within the socio-constructivist viewpoint, feedback is more facilitative in that it often provides comments and suggestions that enable students to make their own revisions and, through dialogue, assists students in gaining new understandings without necessarily dictating what those understandings will be (Archer, 2010). Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam (2011) develop this idea further and argue for a co-constructivist perspective that emphasises the dynamic nature of learning where the teacher also gains from the exchange with the learner through dialogue and participation in shared experiences.

Importantly, constructivist and cognitivist perspectives on feedback are not mutually exclusive. Evans (2013) notes that both should be seen as reinforcing, rather than as opposite ends of a continuum, when considering the precise nature and emphasis of feedback to support task, individual, and contextual needs. In considering the level of attunement of feedback to individual needs, the literature emphasises feedback as a corrective tool, whereas it is perhaps more beneficial to see it as a tool to challenge, where learners clearly understand very well and the feedback is an attempt to extend and refine their understandings. As such, conceptual approaches that aim to reduce the ambiguity of feedback by helping learners extrapolate the precise nature of the feedback they receive will be discussed. Furthermore, approaches that aim to facilitate a dialogical interaction between learner and teacher, as well as between learner peers, will be discussed. The issue of learner overdependence on teacher, and how this may hamper learner self-regulation will also be discussed. Additionally, the role of technology in approached to feedback will also be discussed.

[Go back to top](#)

Key Paper

Nicol, D (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602931003786559#.UzGe11F-lag>)

This paper encompasses a large portion of the issues with feedback in higher education, challenging the whole approach that feedback can be improved simply by focussing on the feedback message. It offers an alternative view of feedback, where it is conceptualised as a dialogical process, and provides solutions to how this can be achieved in practice, such as peer feedback and student's expressing their preferences for feedback.

[Go back to top](#)

Issues with Feedback

Ambiguity of feedback

What is the issue?

Price et al. (2010) note that despite considerable time and effort being invested in the production of assessment feedback on the part of academic staff, very little effort is made to examine the effectiveness of this feedback.

The authors further note that the student experience is undoubtedly impacted by constraints upon resources, bringing the importance of effective practices in higher education into sharp focus. Indeed, this is particularly the case for feedback on learner assessments. However, despite strong evidence of learners' desire for feedback (Hyland, 2000; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2001), the feedback process is considered limited in its effectiveness, because learners do not always read the feedback provided (Hounsell, 1987), and if they do, they do not always understand or use it (Gibbs & Simpson 2004; McCune, 2004). In the UK, the National Student Survey is revealing in that there is widespread student dissatisfaction with much of the feedback provided with many student responses citing the ambiguity of feedback as a major issue (NSS 2005–2009; (<http://www.unistats.com/>)/<http://www.unistats.com/>)).

Draper (2009) (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2008.00930.x/full>) notes that the assumption in teaching communities that feedback on a learner's work serves the primary purpose of improving performance in that particular task may be flawed. As opposed to blindly accepting the notion that feedback is a communication to the learner of some technical issue of factual knowledge or of a required improvement in a certain skill, the author argues for the requirement of a substantial rethinking of the purpose of providing feedback.

Another pervasive notion in education, often stressed in guidelines on feedback provision, is that feedback should leave learners feeling positive about their work (Draper, 2009). However, Dweck (1999) claims that practices in education with this aim may in fact be damaging because learners tend to consider feedback to be information regarding their innate ability, with praise for their work reinforcing this tacit assumption. Conversely then, when a learner receives negative feedback, they interpret this as a reflection of their unchangeable stupidity (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Draper (2009) also notes the potentially damaging effect of praising effort whilst avoiding a concise discussion of the learner's accomplishment in the assessment; unintentionally conveying the message to the learner that they are blameless, as well as powerless in their capacity for improvement. Furthermore, educational guidelines and principles stressing the need for providing both positive and negative feedback are dangerous when they do not specify that both types of feedback should refer to the same aspect of the learners work.

Building on Butler's (1987) (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/edu/79/4/474/>) two-way distinction between types of feedback (task-involving and ego-involving), Draper (2009) develops this idea to argue that there are more than two central kinds of feedback and, crucially, feedback events (e.g. a grade awarded for a piece of coursework) are ambiguous regarding what type of feedback they actually constitute. The author adopts a perspective that learners attempt to self-regulate the value of variables (of various types) through the comparison of feedback and desired goals, thus acting to reduce the difference: each of these is a self-regulatory loop of receiving information and taking corrective action. Distinctively, Draper (2009) argues that learners do not have only one but multiple concurrent goals that require regulation, and additionally, that the majority of feedback events (I got a 'B' grade when I wanted an 'A') are inherently ambiguous between several interpretations, all of which are rational possibilities that are true of some cases:

1. Technical knowledge/method: learner did not use the best information or method for the task, but is capable of improving it for a better result next time
2. Effort: learner did not leave enough time to do task well
3. Method of learning about the task: learner should have ascertained the real meaning of assessment criteria before completing task
4. Ability, trait, aptitude: feedback informs learner about relatively unchangeable traits
5. Random: learner perceives their efforts as appropriate and adequate for success, but the process is not deterministic
6. Wrong judgement: learner was right, teacher was wrong

Therefore, Draper (2009) argues that there is not a single variable being regulated by feedback, but many. However, the literature has a paucity of information that refers to the multitude of concurrent feedback loops. For feedback to have any purpose, it must cause the learner to do something differently. As such, for the above mentioned feedback interpretations there are corresponding self-regulatory actions for learners to engage in:

1. Isolate and permanently adopt appropriate modifications to knowledge and skill for future assessment
2. Allocate appropriate time and effort to the task
3. Test out new study methods; find more appropriate information regarding true task criteria
4. Change course
5. Persist
6. Get a multitude of opinions

Thus, there is a multi-faceted ambiguity of interpretation for learners regarding feedback events. To summarise the argument of Draper (2009), there is a major problem in the usual analyses of feedback to learners in overlooking:

(i) the basic ambiguity of typical feedback events as to which of many regulatory loops should be selected for corrective action

(<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602930903541015#.UzAedfmzLTo>) main concern is that “telling” students about the quality of their work through teacher feedback may result in students being unprepared for life after university. This will create problems when they are expected to produce high-quality work on their own and have not developed high-level evaluative skills.

Orsmond and Merry (2009) (<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/rap/docs/orsmond09.pdf>) also challenge the idea that all students react to teacher feedback in the same way. Many students depend on teacher feedback and are unable to make their own appraisals of the work they have produced. Increasing teacher feedback may therefore increase the student’s dependency on the teacher. Relying on detailed teacher feedback is not a productive strategy for the development of complex learning in a complex world.

Solution: Developing students self-regulation

Orsmond and Merry (2009) suggest that to use feedback, students need to move away from teacher regulation and engage in acts of self-regulation instead. Students need to pay attention to the feedback, internalise it and use it to help them make changes to their work. This involves internal acts of comparison and assessment. Otherwise there is a danger that students get trapped in a dependency relationship.

In order for students to use feedback to become self-regulated learners they firstly need to convert teacher feedback into action for improvement. They must also relate the feedback to what they have produced and understand how to use it effectively in future work.

Orsmond and Merry (2013)

(<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602938.2012.697868#.UzAfRvmzLTo>) believe it is incredibly important that guidance to students regarding their use of feedback needs to be designed with respect to encouraging the development of students’ self-assessment practices. For example, high achieving students were found to welcome tutor feedback and were very active in its use. They were seen to automatically undertake a number of tasks including carrying out assessment, clarification for high-quality learning and peer discussion. These students felt they could improve and progress, if needed, without any feedback and only a grade. This suggests that they have developed their own sustainable model for feedback use. This involves the effective use of self-assessment. Non-high achieving students also welcome feedback but due to their modest capacities for self-assessment, were strongly externally regulated by this feedback. These students have developed a practice of learning through “chasing what the tutor wants” and though they were making attempts at self-assessing but were not developing strategies for moving forward. Changing the perception of tutor feedback in non-high achieving students could have a major impact on their learning. This cannot be done through tutors writing more detailed feedback, or even in tutors and students discussing feedback that has been given (Orsmond and Merry, 2009). This highlights the differences in how students use feedback and how it can affect their work.

Sadler (2009) proposes that students should be provided with appraisal experiences similar to those of teachers. Peer appraisal and feedback are suggested as the main strategy for developing student’s evaluative skills. Students will need more opportunities to evaluate and provide feedback on each other’s assignments and it is also important that explanations for these evaluative judgments are given. This will have to be carefully constructed but by using this, students over time will have a better understanding of what constitutes quality to a similar level as teachers.

Go back to top

Feedback has become a monologue

What is the issue?

Recently, a key paper written by David Nicol (2010) (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602931003786559#.UzAf_PmzLTo) highlighted that a central issue with feedback (of a written nature in particular) is what he describes as an impoverished dialogue - the feedback system has become a monologue.

Nicol (2010) highlights that in the past, written feedback formed only one aspect - it was complemented by one to one discussions, and redrafting of work. However, due to increased student numbers and a lack of staff time, it is now the central channel through which teachers communicate with students in HE.

Much research views feedback simply as an 'input' process - a transmission of information from teacher to student. From this point of view, the key issues with feedback, such as a lack of understanding or application, would be solved by changing the way, or the time, that teachers provide feedback. Conversely, the central focus of Nicol's (2010) paper is to question this conceptualization of feedback, and consider a more active role of the student in the process.

A key theory when considering Nicol's ideas is the 'conversational framework' designed by Laurillard (2002), in which she defined four characteristics that underpin an effective learning dialogue - learning dialogue should be adaptive (based on student's needs), discursive (a two way communication), interactive (linked to actions relating to goals), and reflective (should encourage reflection). Whilst this framework was initially designed with all teacher and student learning interactions in mind, Nicol uses it to discuss how to improve feedback specifically, which he proposes must be on-going and cyclical in order to be effective.

Solution: Making feedback more dialogical

Nicol provides solutions based on three key points; establishing the context for feedback, adapting the feedback to meet needs, and continuing the dialogue.

Firstly, in order to be more of a dialogue, Nicol (2010) proposes that feedback needs to take place in a shared context of understanding, so as it is interpreted in the intended way. One proposed solution here is to ensure students understand the context of the assessment task beforehand, for example, by discussing and rephrasing requirements or identifying criteria themselves. Furthermore, feedback must then reinforce how the work relates to these goals. For example, Nicol (2010) suggests that feedback should include a summary of the submitted work, so as the student sees how their work was perceived in relation to the task goals. Ferris (1997) found that when students received summaries, they made more substantial revisions. This meets the discursive aspect of the Laurillard framework, applied here to feedback

Secondly, in order to make teacher feedback more dialogical, Nicol suggests it needs to be more adaptive (based on student's needs). One way of doing this would be to have students express preferences for the kinds of feedback they would like when they hand in an assignment, which helps to identify the specific areas students are looking for assistance with. Hopefully, this would then result in students engaging more with feedback, as they know it directly relates to their needs. Bloxham and Campbell (2010) found that first year university students experienced positive learning benefits using this approach.

Lastly, Nicol (2010) suggests that in order for feedback to become more dialogical, it needs to be an on-going and discursive process. Thus, students shouldn't just receive feedback once, after assignments - instead, feedback should be on-going during and after assignment production. In order to overcome this issue, Nicol (2010) suggests that Higher Education systems need to take advantage of other sources of dialogue, in particular, peers. This will be further discussed as a key method, but Nicol suggests that peer

critiquing, collaborative assignment production and exposing students to others dialogues would all assist in providing students a more active role in the feedback process and extend the dialogical nature of feedback.

Go back to top

Methods for delivering feedback

Using technology

What does this method involve?

A range of technology can be used to allow students to receive feedback on their work and help them engage with this feedback. For example, feedback can be published online and audio feedback can be provided.

Why might it be useful?

In recent years, many researchers have begun exploring how technology might be used to support effective and efficient feedback practices. A main area examined within the use of technology and feedback is feedback that is published online. By publishing feedback online it can change the way the feedback is produced. Typed comments on the students' original piece of work allow the students to see very clearly what areas need attention. This enables students to view their strengths and weaknesses in a structured and cohesive way. It also offers a level of flexibility to students so they can read it at a time that suits them and when they are able concentrate more deeply on the comments. As the feedback is stored online, this allows students to access it again wherever and whenever they wish. Another benefit of publishing feedback online is that time is saved during administrative processes. Furthermore, the growing use of audio feedback means tutors can provide more detailed feedback than written methods. It is important that this feedback relates back to the student's original work, otherwise it might seem unhelpful and appear separate.

Peer assessment and peer-feedback activities are increasingly making use of technology. Students are suggested to be better equipped to engage with published assessment criteria when they have to provide feedback on their peers' work (often anonymously). This also helps them improve their own work as a result of giving feedback.

What does the research say?

Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin and Thorpe (2011) (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ962652.pdf>) review literature that considers technological interventions that tutors may use to encourage students to engage with feedback. It is suggested that technology might actually enhance student engagement with feedback processes such as production, publication, delivery and students making use of feedback through technology. Changing the process by which feedback is made available to students can enhance student engagement with feedback. In addition, technology has been found to help with the development of self-regulation.

What might be any potential barriers and how can this be overcome?

There are a large number of studies investigating the use of technology and student learning and assessment along with research on effective feedback practices. However, there is limited research on the use of technology in supporting and enhancing feedback processes and practices. This is an area in need of further research and will allow a better understanding of the benefits of using technology in the production, delivery and student engagement with feedback.

Go back to top

Peer critiquing

What does this method involve?

Peer feedback can take many forms. For example, it might involve students giving one another feedback on drafts or essay plans, providing comments on a finished piece of work in order to sit alongside tutor's feedback, or it may be that students discuss with one another what a tutor's feedback on their work might mean and how it can be acted upon.

Why might it be useful?

The issues discussed, and the papers and theories that try to address these, suggest that peer review might be useful for several reasons, such as leading to increased student engagement and reflection, reducing teacher dependency and providing students with a range of perspectives.

What does the research say?

The research presented here is focuses on peers providing critical feedback, as opposed to awarding a grade.

Falchikov (1995) (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1355800950320212#.UzAfjfmzLTo>) has conducted several studies into the effects of peer feedback. In one such study, 13 undergraduate psychology students participated in providing short oral presentations, which were watched and critiqued by the rest of the group. Peers completed a structured assessment form (e.g. it contained a section on 'structure', 'delivery', etc). After receiving feedback, participants also evaluated how useful they found the procedure. Whilst some highlighted that they found the process difficult (e.g. problems with their analytical skills, as in they found it hard to judge the key strengths and weaknesses of speakers), there was an overall positive attitude toward the process, with participants appreciating the range of perspectives and comments.

More recently, Mulder, Eglar and Brady (2005)

(<http://openjournals.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/IISME/article/view/6427/7072>) conducted a study which aimed to further the benefits of peer review using new technology in order to allow more timely, instant, ongoing feedback to be provided, combining two of the key methods. In this study, 60 third year undergraduate students (participating in the authors course, experimental animal behaviour) used a newly developed online peer critiquing system throughout the year. This allowed them to submit drafts of their scientific reports, which would then be anonymously reviewed by two other students and a supervisor, based on a series of structured and unstructured questions. They could then incorporate this feedback before submitting further drafts, and eventually, their finalised report. The researchers found positive

before submitting further drafts, and eventually, their finalised report. The researchers found positive learning benefits using several measures of success. Firstly, as part of the student survey, ratings of the level of helpfulness of the feedback provided on the course increased from the previous year (2.8 to 4.2 out of 5). Secondly, written course evaluations also suggested enthusiasm, with students indicating they would like the system to be more widely adopted. Thirdly, the actual mean grades of students increased, compared to those who had taken the course the previous year and had not had access to the peer review system, (76% to 79.1%).

Researchers have suggested several reasons for the positive learning benefits seen when peer review is regularly used. Firstly, it could be said that the wide number of perspectives provided allow for increased scaffolding opportunities (Liu et al., 2006). As the perspectives might differ, this involves the student having to actively engage with the feedback, and learn how to decide which pointers matter most to them or will be applied in future. This can lead to reduced dependency on the teacher. Furthermore, producing feedback is more cognitively demanding, and so the construction of feedback for others students work serves to heighten the level of engagement, analysis, reflection and involvement with the feedback process (Nicol, 2010). Research has also highlighted that students actually often find the prompts provided by other students more helpful than those by the lecturer (e.g. Falchikov, 2005), perhaps because students comments are more direct about the issues that affect them, and less ambiguous.

What might be any potential barriers to introducing this method & how can these be overcome?

There are several issues to address when considering the implementation of feedback systems based heavily on peer review in higher education. Firstly, it has been noted that students may be hesitant to rely fully on peers comments, and generally value teacher feedback more, as they are viewed as more of an expert (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Furthermore, students might perceive their own expertise as being insufficient to provide feedback (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). These limitations could be overcome by linking peer and teacher feedback early on (for example, the teacher sets a structure for peer feedback based around their own criteria, or the teacher reinforces comments; Bloxham & West, 2004).

Another consideration is the effect that such a system might have on academic workload. Whilst overall it should shift the pressure of providing feedback from the teacher as a single source onto a wider range of sources, it might take a lot of time and effort to introduce. Overall, Nicol (2010) suggests that it would involve a reallocation of teacher time, but it is important to investigate this further.

[Go back to top](#)

Conclusion

A substantial body of research in higher education contexts has considered feedback and its importance in student learning (Evans, 2013). Ferguson (2011) comments that feedback is a crucial way to facilitate students' development as independent learners who are able to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning.

Despite evidence that supports the usefulness of feedback in the promotion of student learning, Lew, Alwis, & Schmidt (2010) comment that it is also evident that feedback alone is not sufficient to improve outcomes. Indeed, Hunt & Tierney (2006) assert that enhancing the quality of feedback to learners must be considered against the context of contemporary massification and consumerisation of higher education with rocketing student numbers and a more diverse body of learners than ever before. Within a higher education context, there are concerns about the perceived lack of impact of feedback on practice (Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008), despite claims about the efficacy of feedback in producing positive learning effects (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Orrell (2006) asserts that evidence of improvement in feedback practices is lacking, Shute (2008) comments that it is conflicting and inconsistent. Nonetheless, Maringe (2010) notes progress in the sense that learner feedback is becoming a central part of higher education's learning strategies. Nicol (2010) identifies a new culture within higher education with evidence of peer assessment being employed to encourage self-regulatory practice with learners.

Furthermore, although there is evidence that learner-centred approaches to learning have produced shifts in conceptions of teaching and learning; Maringe (2010) notes that until recently, feedback approaches were focused exclusively on basic transmission perspectives, defined by narrow conceptions regarding the purpose of feedback. Draper's (2009) framework stresses the requirement, and benefits, of clearly defining what feedback is referring to.

Learner and teacher dissatisfaction with feedback is well reported (Evans, 2013). From the learner viewpoint, most complaints focus on the technicalities of feedback, including content and lack of clarity about requirements (Huxham, 2007), and from the teacher perspective, the issues revolve around students not making use of or acting on feedback; leading to a feedback gap from both perspectives. The techniques of peer feedback, the innovative use of technology and more emphasis on dialogical interaction between learner and teacher all seek to overcome these apparent gaps.

[Go back to top](#)

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