The Role of Feedback to Enhance Students' Learning

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Introduction:

There is a substantial body of research in HE contexts that reflects the importance of feedback in student learning (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Crisp, 2007; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Murphy & Cornell, 2010). Feedback has been recognized as a crucial approach in helping learners develop their ability to monitor, estimate and regulate their own learning as independent learners (Ferguson, 2011). As emphasised by Eraut (2006), feedback has the potential to influence students' future practices and improvements in learning:

When students enter higher education . . . the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense of professional identity, is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback. (p. 118)

Feedback has been demonstrated to have a critical impact on student learning. However, feedback is only useful if students read, reflect and act on the provided comments. Thus, to foster student learning and improvement, Stefani (1998) argued that feedback must be given in a supportive and constructive way. Valuable feedback, which help students to learn, should be constructive and should facilitate the identification of both strengths and areas for development within a work.

Definition of Key Terms

According to Ramaprasad (1983), the general purpose of feedback is to provide "information about the gap between the actual level and the

reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (p. 4). Thus, feedback is information about the level of correspondence (i.e. the gap) between the expected level of quality of a student's submitted work and the required level of understanding (i.e. assessment criteria). In other words, feedback provides information to help close this gap. To distinguish between real feedback and mere information, Ramaprasad (1983) argued that feedback that is either not intended or used to make an alteration is information that has no purpose and is, therefore, redundant (p. 8).

In addition, according to Cowan (2003), feedforward is information that is provided concurrently with feedback; feedforward helps students enhance their knowledge and improve their understanding. This can be reflected through improved academic performance on future assessment activities (summative or formative) and other learning activities.

Formative Assessment

In the past decade, a large body of literature on educational assessment has been published (Murphy & Cornell, 2010). Assessment has been acknowledged as the most instrumental element in student learning (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011). Recent decades have seen significant developments in the field of educational assessment. New approaches to the assessment of student learning achievement have been accompanied by the increasing prominence of educational assessment as a policy issue. In particular, there has been a growth in modes of assessment that promote, as well as measure, standards and quality. These developments have profound importance not just to individual learners and their families, but also to nations as a whole. It gives a systematic way to inform students, teachers, parents, policy makers, and the public about student performance (Weiss, Michael, Knapp, and Gail, 2001).

While assessment is an essential component of students' learning experiences, feedback is a fundamental component of assessment (Angelo, 1995). According to Black and Wiliam (1998), assessment generally refers to "all those activities undertaken by teachers … that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs". Black and Wiliam (2006) indicated that students are the primary users of the information gleaned from formative assessments. In other words, learners are the ultimate users of elicited feedback, which they use to improve their gains and learning in a formative assessment context.

Although there is a strong overlap between formative assessment and feedback, tests that are given in class and other exercises assigned as written work are also integral means of promoting feedback. Black and Wiliam (1998) implied that feedback, when provided through frequent short tests, can offer supportive guidance that leads to further learning and gains. They also indicated that high-stakes summative tests are not used to give feedback about learning. It is a widely held belief that feedback is a valuable tool that enables students to improve and develop (Yorke, 2003). Feedback is considered one of the main interventions by which students can improve their own learning. Thus, feedback is one of the most critical influences in the educational context. Hattie and Timperley (2007) provided evidence that feedback plays a crucial role in student learning and gains. Rowntree (1987) stated that "Feedback, or knowledge of results, is the lifeblood of learning" (p. 24).

In sum, feedback has been seen as a critical approach that tends to help students develop systems as independent learners. Despite the claims about the power of feedback to improve learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), a number of concerns regarding the perceived lack of impact of feedback on practice has been raised within HE context (Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008). In addition, according to (Orrell, 2006), lack of progress in feedback

practices improvement is noted. Nonetheless, evidence of significant feedback progress is becoming a dominant aspect of the educational field (Brown, 2010).

Feedback and Educational Theory of Constructivism

Many studies of feedback appear to be based on constructivist theories. According to Shepard (2000), constructivism views knowledge from the learner's perspective as knowledge constructed through the interpretation of one's own experiences in the outer world, with a focus on increasing learning awareness, self-monitoring and active sense making. The implications for such types of assessments were explained by Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2005), who described the social aspects of learning as follows:

A social constructivist view of learning (Bruner, 1986) argues that knowledge is shaped and evolves through increasing participation within different communities of practice. Acquiring knowledge and understanding of assessment processes, criteria and standards needs the same kind of active engagement and participation as learning about anything else.

The nature of feedback, from a constructivist view of learning, has been described by Askew (2000) as having a 'to and fro' nature (p. 10), similar to that of ping-pong. In recent years, constructivist views of learning have focused on feedback research, with an emphasis on self-regulated learning (Rust et al., 2005). This modification has been explained as a paradigm shift, since the focus has moved from teaching to learning; however, practices of assessment and feedback in HE are particularly slow to change (Elwood & Klenowski, 2010).

Building on the work of Ramaprasad (1983) and Sadler (1989), the purpose of feedback is to be conscious of the potential gap between the actual performance and what is considered to be successful practice in the literature (Evans, 2013). Significantly, however, only feedback that alters this gap has a great influence on the process of learning. Greater prominence is placed on the constructivist framework than the cognitivist one, since the latter is mainly associated with a directive

telling approach that considers feedback to be corrective process and learners to be passive recipients (Evans, 2013).

Within the constructivist paradigm, feedback is considered a facilitative element, which involves the provision of suggested commentaries to assist learners in developing their own modifications. In addition, through feedback, students are able to increase their own understandings through dialogue (Archer, 2010). According to (Evans, 2013b):

Developing this further, a co-constructivist perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of learning, in which the lecturer also learns from the student through dialogue and participation in shared experiences (Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011). In such situations, interactions among participants in learning communities lead to shared understandings as part of the development of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002), with the student taking increasing responsibility for seeking out and acting on feedback. The complexity of networks can be challenging for students and lecturers seeking to give, take and adapt feedback from one learning community to the next.

Feedback Studies in Higher Education

Within HE, a focus on assessment is a key element of student success in universities; however, assessment can be affected by learners' responses to the feedback they receive on their prepared work. The concept of providing feedback to students with the objectives of promoting learning and outcomes has been widely explored. The significant function that feedback plays in improving the processes of teaching and learning has been widely acknowledged and well documented. It is clear that the major focus of universities is on developing ways of giving and receiving feedback on learners' performance and encouraging learners' constructive use of feedback (User, 2011).

Eraut (2006) highlighted the potential effect of feedback on future practices, as well as the improvement of learners' identities, as follows:

When students enter higher education . . . the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense of professional identity, is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback. (p. 118)

In HE, the giving of feedback in different departments or faculties must follow university policy. Tutors should be kept up to date with any developments in the processes of teaching and assessment policy. This policy of assessment and feedback has been formulated according to the guidelines set by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

The QAA sets criteria for UK universities and colleges and gives guidelines on suitable practice (QAA, 2008). In this study, Precept 9 is particularly relevant:

Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment. … good practice to provide students with sufficient, constructive and timely feedback on their work in respect of all types of assessment. (QAA, 2006, p. 20)

Universities in the UK are expected to follow these guidelines, and the QAA undertakes reviews and audits to determine the extent to which each institution is in compliance (QAA, 2006, p. 2).

Within HE, the provision of feedback to students is essential for promoting learning and improving the quality of subsequent pieces of work prepared by the student. Higgins et al. (2002) indicated that, when students pay tuition fees for their studies, they expect to receive feedback as something they have paid for, regardless of whether they plan to engage with the feedback once they have received it. Hence, feedback that is provided to students must be prompt and helpful in clarifying different points.

Furthermore, the process of giving and receiving feedback should be seen as a set of integrated demands, rather than a series of separate demands. Bailey and Garner (2010) argued that:

Far more is involved in feedback than interactions between any givenstudent and tutor. Feedback is an interface between teachers' pedagogical goals; students' learning needs; and institutional and governmental education policies, which structure and regulate practices and procedures. In the current climate of change and reform in higher education, the response of many institutions has been to standardise and systematise teaching and learning through increasing measures of quality assurance.

The provision of feedback is a major challenge facing tutors. In addition to the issues of providing timely and quality feedback to students, there are many associated aspects that serve as barriers to the provision of feedback. For example, inevitable increases in class sizes and marking loads should be taken into account. Yorke (2002) argued that communications among tutors and students will decrease as educators have less time to write comments on students' work.

Conclusion

In the higher education sector, there have been indications that there are a number of issues with the provision of feedback to students, as well as low levels of student satisfaction with the provided feedback. The foregoing discussion reviewed some of the major contributions on formative assessment and feedback and student reaction of the feedback provided in HE. This body of extant literature is not consistent with regard to the importance of feedback in how we judge HE; instead, it shows that there is variation.

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