Feedback is a perennial issue for teachers and students alike. This paper argues that constraints in resourcing and student dissatisfaction with assessment feedback mean that turning our attention to the effectiveness of feedback practices has never been so important.

Margaret Price, Karen Handley, Jill Millar & Berry O'Donovan (2010): Feedback: all that effort, but what is the effect?, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35:3, 277-289

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Abstract

Constraints in resourcing and student dissatisfaction with assessment feedback mean that the effectiveness of our feedback practices has never been so important. Drawing on findings from a three-year study focused on student engagement with feedback, this paper reveals the limited extent to which effectiveness can be accurately measured and challenges many of the assumptions and beliefs about effectiveness of feedback practices. Difficulties relating to multiple purposes of feedback, its temporal nature and the capabilities of evaluators reveal that measuring effectiveness is fraught with difficulty. The paper argues that the learner is in the best position to judge the effectiveness of feedback, but may not always recognise the benefits it provides. Therefore, the pedagogic literacy of students is key to evaluation of feedback and feedback processes.

Keywords

feedback; evaluation; feedback effectiveness; pedagogic literacy

Introduction

Price and her colleagues introduce the topic with a number of feedback paradoxes. Students thirst for feedback but are disinclined to read it or use it. Students may be best positioned to judge feedback quality or effectiveness but may not always recognise the benefits it provides. The authors argue that the evaluation of feedback quality is fraught with difficulties and that simplistic approaches can only provide proxy measures and a partial picture of effectiveness.

Purpose, measurement and engagement

‘Feedback’ is a term frequently used by both staff and students. However, ‘feedback’ can fill different purposes for different groups - categories include correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking and longitudinal development (feed-forward). Evaluating feedback quality requires consideration of the purpose of feedback, who is making the evaluative judgement and the extent to which staff and students agree on feedback purpose. Issues identified include:

- The evaluation of feedback intended to develop understanding and eliminate future errors is a complex task requiring investigation of the impact of feedback on future learning.
- Feedback quality is related to ‘impact’ as well as ‘delivery’ – feedback along the lines of ‘Your style should be more academic’ will be effective only when the student understands what this means and is willing and able to respond appropriately.
• Students also choose to act on feedback based on factors including (1) the extent to which they agree with it (2) their trust in the feedback provider (3) their engagement with the assessment task (4) the feedback’s emotional impact.

• Input measures such as the quantity or frequency of feedback or subjective judgements are proxies for feedback effectiveness, but real effectiveness is determined by impact, the evaluation of which is the more challenging task.

Study of engagement with feedback

The paper then describes a study undertaken in three UK business schools to investigate student and staff perspectives of feedback effectiveness and to identify pertinent factors. Data collection included semistructured interviews with students and staff, the development of seven case studies, questionnaires, and a series of initiatives undertaken in partner schools to further investigate issues raised through initial findings.

The study found:

• negative student views of feedback related to illegible writing, overly negative tone, vagueness and ambiguity – “It just says ‘presentation.’”

• difficulty in student adjustment to feedback approaches that are less directive than those experienced at school

• the need to supplement feedback through student-staff dialogue and examples of good work

• student frustration with feedback considered irrelevant because of its timing, and lack of clarity or immediate application

• limited staff attempts to measure feedback impact

• staff focus on quantity (and therefore quality) of feedback rather than impact as an indicator of feedback quality

• few formal mechanisms to clarify feedback expectations (e.g. requirements for students to show how feedback had been applied)

• student resilience and continued commitment to existing feedback systems which allowed staff assumptions about feedback effectiveness to remain unchallenged

• high levels of confusion about the purpose of feedback among and between staff and students (e.g. students application timescales shorter than those of staff)

• student perceptions influenced by feedback received (e.g. the nature of feedback can cause a shift of expectation from developmental to justification of grade assigned)

• opportunities for feed-forwarded limited by modularised program structures and large variation in assessment tasks and tutor preferences

• resource constraints (time spent on individual student feedback) and ‘efficiencies’ (over reliance on tick-box feedback sheets) limited feedback effectiveness

• student hunger for productive staff-student relationships and dialogue to reduce the frustration and disengagement resulting from diagnosis of problems or errors (e.g. “Be more analytical”, “Clarify aims and objectives”) rather than the acquisition of the skill required to do so.

Discussion and conclusions

Despite the large and diverse issues identified through this study, there was a high level of agreement between staff and students on what made feedback effective as both groups placed a high value on feedback that could be applied to subsequent work and both considered productive relationships the heart of effective feedback processes.

The evaluation of feedback effectiveness poses numerous challenges and often relies more on faith than scientific investigation. While it is often difficult for staff to gather evidence of feedback
impact, especially when this occurs in future courses, students are frequently invited to make judgements through institutional satisfaction surveys. Such judgements may be influenced by students’ conceptualisations of feedback and their understanding of teaching and learning concepts and processes. The evaluation of feedback by external observers can also be problematic when feedback is treated as a product rather than a process. The authors conclude that irrelevant, crude or simplistic measures of feedback effectiveness contribute little to policy and resourcing decision-making. Instead they argue for evaluation processes reliant on the capacity of staff and students to make trustworthy and informed judgements and for enhancing engagement in this process through a renewed focus on the relational dimensions of feedback.

References

The paper lists 25 references to key publications that should be useful to anyone wishing to read more on the topic of feedback.

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