The impact of First Feedback Face-to-face (FFF) on first year students' meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards assessment feedback.

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Abstract

Student engagement with assessment feedback is regarded as essential to learning and teaching practice at university, but feedback that is presented to students in written-only form often fails to engage students or support their learning. One of the main problems with assessment feedback that is transmitted to students in written form is that students do not fully grasp the learning purpose of the feedback process. This paper presents findings on students’ perceptions of feedback and how those perceptions were impacted through participation in the FFF strategy in the course COR109 Communication and Thought at the University of the Sunshine Coast. This strategy offers a 10 minute individual consultation for every student with their tutor to discuss feedback related to their first major piece of assessment, thereby changing the feedback process from a linear to transactional process.

Background

A collaborative assessment feedback practice can contribute significantly to building the essential relationship between tutor-course of study and student that is required for a successful first-year experience. Success of first-year students at university depends on their sense of connectedness, based on the quality of their relationships with peers, staff and their feelings of identification or affiliation with their School, Faculty, Department or University (Nelson & Kift, 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). An integral aspect of student connection to university life and teachers is through their engagement with assessment feedback.

Assessment feedback is viewed as the learning part of assessment, and students identify assessment as the driver for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud, 2010; Kift & Moody, 2009). Timely and effective feedback on major pieces of assessment is essential for the active improvement in student learning and for the transition and integration of first-year students within higher education (Sadler, 2010). Black and Wiliam, (1998) identified high quality feedback as the single most important strategy to improve student learning, and Fleming claims that feedback “remains the most significant event in the lives of students and academics” (1999, p. 83). Yet feedback that is presented in only written form can fail to fully support student learning (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Nicol, 2010). Rodway-Dyer, Knight and Dunne, (2011) cite National Student Survey results to show consistently that “feedback is an area in which students are often least satisfied, irrespective of institution or discipline” (2011, p. 217). Furthermore, if the first year of university has a significant impact on a student’s complete university experience (McInnis & James, 1995), then innovative feedback strategies to support first year student engagement and learning in higher education are important to explore. The First Feedback Face-to-face (FFF) strategy is designed to engage first year students in active learning in order to foster both student engagement and academic achievement.
In particular, FFF is a two-way feedback strategy that aims to support a collaborative dialogue on feedback between student and tutor based on the principles of constructivist learning. The strategy is informed by research that face-to-face tutor-student dialogic feedback encourages active learning, student connectivity, relationship building and the development of student engagement (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; Cramp, 2011; Nicol, 2010). The FFF research project therefore intends to explore the advantages of a collaborative, dialogic face-to-face feedback. This paper specifically seeks to explore students’ perceptions of the meaning and purpose of feedback and their associated emotions related to their face-to-face feedback experience. This exploration of a first year assessment feedback strategy also seeks to fill the gap in understanding the first year experience of assessment feedback identified by Cramp, (2011) and Burke, (2009).

**Context**

Most assessment feedback in Higher Education is provided through written in-text comments or a summary of comments transmitted from the tutor to the student (Bailey & Garner, 2010). This form of feedback is problematic as it represents a ‘transmission’ model of feedback from teacher to student that is in conflict with constructivist principles of teaching and learning (Sadler, 2010). Moreover, monologic feedback, rather than feedback through dialogue, denies an opportunity for students to fully understand their feedback or for students to build relationships with tutors or faculty (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010). Written feedback as the only source of assessment feedback can be unhelpful to students as written comments do not always match assessment criteria and can be vague or general, and there is a recognised imbalance between specific positive-supportive and constructive-critical feedback (Weaver, 2006). These factors contribute to the lack of understanding of written feedback by the learner and a general dissatisfaction with the feedback process (Rodway-Dyer, Knight & Dunne, 2011). Further, many university students who do not engage with or understand written assessment feedback, fail to ask for tutor clarification (AUSSE, 2010; Bailey & Garner, 2010; Potter & Lynch, 2008). The Australian Survey of Student Engagement report (AUSSE) indicates that only 19.9 per cent of first year students “discussed grades with teaching staff” (2010, pp. 22–23). These findings are reinforced by Potter and Lynch, (2008) who identified that students were generally reluctant to seek clarity on feedback from tutors. In short, student learning is not always supported by feedback when it is communicated in written form only.

Collaborative, written feedback in conjunction with a tutor-student dialogue can engage students in constructing meaning from assessment feedback. Learning is constructed by the student who has to be actively engaged in the learning process for deep learning to occur (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Specifically, collaborative tutor-student feedback can support engaged and active learning to enhance first year student academic achievement (Sadler, 2010). For feedback to be meaningful to the student, it must be actively deconstructed and understood in order to be reconstructed in relation to the student’s own experience (Sadler, 2010). Collaborative feedback, or feedback as dialogue, is supported by Bloxham and Campbell, (2010); Cramp (2011); Nicol (2010) and Price et al. (2010), as it invites the student to discuss their assessments, thereby deconstructing and reconstructing feedback with their tutor. The AUSSE (2010) identifies that active learning opportunities support first year engagement. Further, it recommends that tutors should be available and approachable to provide effective feedback, to clarify student misunderstandings, and to respond to students’ needs for personal interaction, support, encouragement and guidance. A second key recommendation within the AUSSE is that students should be able to speak with teachers about grades and assessment to
achieve positive learning outcomes. Students’ emotions associated with receiving feedback are a key element of the student feedback experience. According to Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, (2008) becoming a student is an intrinsically emotional process. In particular, feedback can become a threat to self-esteem, create negative feelings and confuse students, lower motivation and thus impact on the receptiveness of feedback (Varlander, 2008; Wingate, 2010). For this reason Poulos and Mahony, (2008) recommend that tutors provide emotional support when providing feedback. The FFF strategy adheres to both the recommendations in the AUSSE, (2010) and presented by Poulos and Mahony, (2008) in order to actively support first year learning through assessment feedback.

Research Focus

The assessment feedback evaluated through this research consisted of a collaborative, 10-minute face-to-face dialogue between each student and their tutor within one large first-year course. The feedback was focused upon students’ first major assessment task, an essay worth 25 per cent submitted in teaching week-seven (in a thirteen teaching-week semester). In the week-eight tutorial, information on the nature, purpose and potential emotional reactions to assessment feedback were discussed with students. In teaching week-nine, students received written feedback on the graded assessment, together with a reflection sheet to prepare them for engaging with the written feedback in preparation for a face-to-face feedback session. The students participated in face-to-face feedback during week-10 tutorial time. In addition, all tutors involved in the strategy were introduced to the theoretical rationale and engaged in a professional development workshop several weeks prior to marking student work. As a result, general guidelines for consultation procedures were formulated and tutors were encouraged to ask students whether they understood their feedback. Students were also given an opportunity for further explanation and discussion. To evaluate the impact of the face-to-face feedback intervention, the study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do students’ perceive the meaning of feedback (before and after FFF)?
- RQ2. How do students’ perceive the purpose of feedback (before and after FFF)?
- RQ3. What emotions do students’ associate with face-to-face feedback?

Research methodology and methods

An interpretivist framework (Walter, 2006) informed this research. The study used an explanatory mixed method design with two phases: survey research and qualitative phenomenological research that included conversation-discourse analysis (Creswell, 2003; Punch, 2009). This strategy allowed for research triangulation (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2003). The survey explored the meanings that students attributed to the different aspects of assessment feedback (Walter, 2006; De Vaus, 2002) whereas the qualitative phase of this research examined how students were impacted by the addition of the face-to-face dialogue to the traditional written-only feedback (van Krieken et al., 2010).

The population consisted of students enrolled in Communication and Thought (COR109) in semester two, 2012 (n = 750) at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). COR109 is a large foundational course specifically designed for first-year students.

The researchers used paper-based surveys and two focus groups to elicit data. An information pack, including a consent form, was provided to all prospective participants and participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Survey data were collected using a pre and post feedback design. One week before the first assessment task was due, a student facilitator
(explicitly: not one of the teaching staff in COR109) administered the pre-survey during tutorial time. One week after engaging in the face-to-face feedback, student facilitators administered the post-survey during tutorials. For both surveys, facilitators collected the completed forms and deposited them at student administration along with signed facilitators’ slips. Tutors were absent when the surveys were conducted. A semi-structured guide of open-ended questions was used for the focus groups (Hydén & Bülow, 2001). The focus group was facilitated by an experienced research assistant, explicitly not connected with COR109. The focus group proceedings were recorded and transcribed before analysis.

Data were collected from three questions from the surveys. The first question, relevant to RQ1, asked students “What does feedback mean to you?” Four options were presented to students:

1. The communication of results
2. The identification of omissions, or mistakes in processes or content within an assessment submission
3. The acknowledgement of the inclusion of relevant content and processes within an assessment submission
4. The identification of what could be done to improve the submission

For this question, $n = 319$ student selected one of these options pre-test, and $n = 264$ students selected one of these option post-test.

The second question, relevant to RQ2, asked students “What do you believe is the purpose of feedback on assessment?” Five options were presented to students:

1. To receive results-grade
2. To show what was not done correctly
3. To explain what needs to be improved
4. To acknowledge or praise what has been done correctly.
5. To understand how improvement can be achieved

For this question, $n = 298$ students selected one of these options pre-test, and $n = 250$ students selected one of these options post-test.

The third question, relevant to RQ3, asked students “How do you feel just before receiving assessment feedback?” Five options were presented to students:

1. Very anxious
2. A little anxious
3. Neutral
4. Positive
5. Excited

For this question, $n = 399$ students selected one option pre-test, and $n = 327$ students selected one of these options post-test.

All responses were analysed using chi-square tests using SPSS version 19.

**Findings**
Pre-surveys were returned by 414 students (55 per cent response rate from overall class) and post-surveys by 342 students (45.6 per cent response rate from overall class). Not all students answered every question.

The responses to Question 1 (Figure 1, left panel) showed some evidence (chi-square = 8.3, df = 3, \(P = 0.04\)) that the students had a different understanding of the meaning of feedback in assessment after the semester is completed. The largest relative changes occurred with Response 2 (“Identify mistakes”) which increased from 17 per cent in the pre-survey to 25 per cent in the post-survey, and Response 4 (“How to improve”) which decreased from 67 per cent to 57 per cent.

The response to Question 2 (Figure 1, centre panel) showed strong evidence (chi-square = 18.0, df = 3, \(P = 0.001\)) that students have a different understanding of the purpose of feedback in assessment after the semester is completed. The largest relative changes were an increase in Response 2 (“Show errors”) from 2 per cent in the pre-survey to 8 per cent in the post-survey and Response 5 (“How to improve”) from 65 per cent in the pre-survey to 55 per cent in the post-survey.

The response to Question 3 (Figure 1, right panel) showed very strong evidence (chi-square = 227, df = 4, \(P = 0.000\)) that students report feeling differently just before receiving assessments in the pre-survey and post-survey. Specifically, the combined “anxious” and “very anxious” responses decreased from a combined 70 per cent to 24 per cent. In contrast, the “positive” responses increased from 10 per cent to 18 per cent. “Neutral” responses increased from 16 per cent to 56 per cent.

**Figure 1:** Responses to Question 1 (“What does feedback mean to you?”), to Question 2 (“What do you believe is the purpose of feedback on assessment?”) and to Question 3 (“How do you feel just before receiving assessment feedback?”).

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Focus group findings

Eight students who had participated in the FFF strategy joined a focus group and discussed their understanding of the meaning and purpose of feedback and their emotional experience of the FFF process. The main themes to emerge from the focus group centred on the meaning of assessment feedback, the purpose and value of assessment feedback and emotions experienced during the FFF strategy.

Meaning:

In relation to student perceptions of meaning of feedback, the focus group participants generally confirmed that they held a tacit understanding of the meaning of feedback. The following responses were typical of this response: “I guess it would be a good guide as to my current knowledge of the topic, where I need to improve and obviously a guide as to where I am headed for the overall result for that particular course”, and “I suppose for me personally, it would be really an indication of how what I'm doing is in line with what is expected, so… really just a confirmation of if I'm on the right track or going in the wrong direction I guess”.

Purpose:

Focus group responses pertaining to the purpose of feedback suggested that for some students the purpose and value of feedback were intertwined. Several students indicated they rated the role of feedback to their learning, highly. Students that communicated this explicitly stated: “I'd have it as very important—feedback of any kind, we're talking? Yeah, probably for me it would be one of the most important things, maybe 8 or 9… Knowing that what you are doing is right is what is important to me”, and “Feedback is probably the most valuable. A mark doesn't tell you how well you have done… If I get 75 per cent I want to know why I didn't get the extra, like where I needed to improve, that's part of the feedback”.

Emotions:

The focus group discussed a range of emotional responses regarding assessment feedback including emotions experienced before receiving written feedback or engaging in face-to-face feedback; these will be referred to as preparatory emotions. Several students expressed negative preparatory emotions, such as “feeling defensive and not wanting to hear feedback” and a common response was feeling “nervous”. As one student communicated: “Of course you are anxious. You want it but you are scared because everybody is scared about the mistakes they have made”. Preparatory emotions expressed by students were often in contrast to the emotions associated with the experience of face-to-face feedback. In relation to dialogic feedback, students said that they felt “relaxed” and “hopeful”. This development from negative towards more neutral or positive emotions is echoed in the survey findings presented above.

Discussion

Explanatory model: its benefit.

“The First-Year Experience” has become the focus of many educational researchers (Nelson & Kift 2005; Krause, 2001; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Wilson 2009) with a view to improve and enrich the experiences of students beginning their studies at universities around Australia. The FFF strategy was informed by literature that suggested that there are

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many benefits to dialogic feedback (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010); however, research about feedback dialogue in the first-year experience for assessment feedback is limited to engagement (Burke, 2009; Cramp, 2011). The FFF strategy also builds on constructivist frameworks of teaching and learning in higher education (AUSSE, 2010; Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). Most “interventions” developed to support student engagement in the first year of university are designed as “just in time” or as a result of an identification of poor performance or “engagement”. These strategies can be considered part of a deficit model of support—and by extension support ‘the deficient’. Rather, the FFF is predicated upon the belief that all first year ‘transition’ of engagement should be supported and scaffolded by making explicit what is needed to be successful at university (AUSSE, 2010; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Lawrence, 2005). In this context, COR109, therefore, was an appropriate and rich research resource of data.

The explanatory mixed methods design allowed researchers to not only investigate and quantitatively assess the meanings students attached to feedback, but also to enquire into the emotional impact of FFF on them. In this way, the initial quantitative survey data were augmented and built upon by the qualitative data from the focus group (Creswell, 2003; Punch, 2009). Of interest was the relatively high proportion of students returning their surveys (55.2 per cent the pre-survey; 45.6 per cent for the post-survey), even though the survey was entirely voluntary. The high return rate is likely to have occurred due to the surveys being administered in tutorial time. This means that a large cross-section of the course has been surveyed, albeit not a randomly selected cross-section.

Q1. Meaning of feedback has not changed greatly

These findings confirm that the meaning of feedback is generally tacitly understood. This supports findings in the literature that most people hold a tacit, yet under-defined and vague understanding of the definition and meaning of assessment feedback. Wiggins, (2012) endorses this view stating even very experienced academics such as John Hattie ‘struggled to understand the concept’ (2008, p. 173, cited in Wiggins, 2012). Moreover, that defining feedback is often avoided, but can be associated with ‘comments made after the fact, including advice, praise and evaluation (Wiggins, 2012, p. 10). Much of the innovation of the FFF lies in its attempt to put into practice dialogic feedback that has been much discussed and advocated, but as yet not fully employed and researched. Bloxham and Campbell, (2010); Cramp, (2011); Nicol, (2010) and Sadler, (2010) all discuss the merits of creating student-tutor dialogic feedback. Yet apart from limited research by Bloxham and Campbell, (2010) and Cramp, (2011), data on its efficacy appears sparse.

Q2. There have been some relatively small changes in how students perceive the purpose of feedback.

Even though only small changes in students’ perceptions of the purpose of feedback are evident in the quantitative data, the qualitative data from the focus group suggest that students regard feedback as the most important part of assessment. The findings from FFF research confirm, in order to increase students’ perceptions towards the value and purpose of feedback for learning, there needs to be greater guidance about how students can understand and interpret academic feedback (Weaver, 2006).

Q3. There have been relatively large reductions in the levels of negative emotions and increase in the levels of positive emotions reported by students.

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The survey findings have contributed favourably to changes in students’ perceptions of the emotional responses towards receiving assessment feedback. Quantitative data demonstrates a reduction in the negative preparatory emotional responses such as “anxiousness” towards assessment feedback, with a move towards emotional responses such as “neutral” and “positive”. These findings are also supported by the qualitative data responses from the focus groups that suggest that if students learn more about the purpose and value of feedback within the process of receiving assessment feedback, then possibly this prepares students to feel and become less negative and more neutral towards receiving assessment feedback.

**Limitations and recommendations**

This paper focused on evaluating a ten-minute “dialogic feedback” consultation, the end point of an interactive model of teaching that provides a humanised building block in the relationship students develop with their university. This is proposed as a three phase strategy in that FFF introduces students to the concept of feedback and its function in higher education; alerts them to the range of possible responses individuals may experience upon receiving feedback; fosters and develops the student-tutor relationship; and, in so doing, accustoms them to the consultative process. This strategy, therefore, promotes feedback oriented dialogue and engagement between tutors and students. To identify areas for further development, some limitations of this study are noted below.

The impact of the FFF strategy only affects one piece of assessment in a single course in one year. This is a large first year course engaging a broad cross section of students; however, the analysis of data restricts the possibility of making more general claims. Also, students may have previous experiences of feedback prior to tertiary education and through participation in other university courses which is not accounted for within this study. Additionally, tutors’ perceptions of the strategy are not yet measured. Finally, as the evaluation instrument seeks to determine the impact of the strategy within the same year of its employment, there is no data pertaining to the long-term impact of the FFF strategy. Consequently, this study generates additional questions such as: How can the strategy be integrated at program and institutional level? What is the long term impact of the strategy? What are the perceptions students bring to tertiary education? What is the impact of the strategy on the tutors’ perception of assessment and feedback? Finally, a longitudinal study would provide more comprehensive and ongoing data pertaining to the FFF strategy.

**Conclusion**

This paper presents findings on students’ perceptions of feedback and how those perceptions were impacted through participation in the FFF strategy. The FFF strategy is a scaffolded introduction to feedback designed for first year students. It finalises with a 10 minute individual consultation for every student with their tutor to discuss feedback related to their first major piece of assessment. The strategy therefore changes feedback from a linear transmission to a transactional process. This scaffolding and exploration is arguably a powerful guide for the examination of the nature and role of assessment and very important to optimizing the subsequent face to face encounter which is brief due to practical reasons. Student engagement with assessment feedback is regarded as an essential learning and teaching practice at university, and face-to-face feedback has the potential to better engage students and support their learning by clarifying the meaning and purpose of feedback while reducing some of the negative emotions associated with the feedback process.
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