

Chapter 1

Feedback, Feedforward, or Dialogue?

Defining a Model for Self- Regulated Learning

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ABSTRACT

Better feedback is commonly demanded by students and institutions as a way of improving student satisfaction, encouraging more scholarly approaches to assessment, and building students' capacity for self-regulated learning. Student responses to surveys are very clear on what they think makes good feedback: it is prompt, regular, specific, and accurate (e.g. Bols & Wicklow, 2013). Institutional efforts therefore typically try to improve feedback by improving in these four areas. However, Price (2013) has questioned if the customer is always right. This chapter looks at the main models of feedback from the research literature and etymology, in particular how these relate to concepts of self-regulated learning and sustainable assessment (Boud & Molloy, 2013). It is argued that dialogic feedback and feedforward are wrongly currently conceptualised in a purely positive way, which serves to limit effective critique of these models. The chapter ends by describing principles of any type of feedback, providing a working definition which is more compatible with self-regulated learning.

INTRODUCTION

From its origins as a straightforward method of error detection and correction, feedback is now recognised as playing a crucial and increasingly nuanced role in learning in higher education. However, there remains great variety in how feedback is experienced to the extent that “when we refer to feedback, we need to be aware that it means different things to different people” (Carless, 2015, p. 192). Whilst it seems contradictory, students both have a seemingly insatiable appetite for feedback and a nonchalance towards it: for example, some tutors complain that students often fail to even collect their written feedback (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Carless, 2006), while considerable written comments by tutors, even if read,

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can still be poorly used by students (Dysthe, 2011). It is therefore “not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p. 20). This means that engaging students with feedback does not just require giving good feedback, but challenging students to have a different understanding of feedback which challenges an often passive conceptualisation from secondary education (Sambell et al., 2012).

One of the key barriers to changing students’ conceptualisation of feedback is students’ increasingly strategic approaches to assessment (Entwistle, 2000; Marton et al., 1984). If feedback is seen as only helping to improve grades in a few particular assessment tasks, it follows that students have little incentive to collect feedback on an assignment that has already been graded. A student’s understanding of the purpose of assessment will therefore also influence their understanding of feedback. If an assessment is seen as a learning opportunity with long term value, it is more likely that feedback will be seen as flowing back to improving a student’s general understanding as well as flowing forwards into helping the student perform the assessed task. However, assessment can also be seen as to measure learning or ensure accountability (Stobart, 2008), with multiple intended functions typically forcing compromises in the design of any assessed task (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). One of the first challenges in engaging students in their feedback is therefore convincing them that feedback supports an assessment which is truly formative in its intention, that is assessment which primarily seeks to improve teaching and learning (Wiliam, 2011).

In addition to needing to know the intent of an assessment, students also need to be confident that they will be fairly evaluated. The perception that assessment is a game which needs to be played emphasises the value of learning those “rules of the game” (Carless, 2006, p. 230), where feedback becomes part of the game as it is mined for clues or the student tries to please their tutor by how they respond to feedback. Becker et al. (1968, p. 95) first wrote of this as students seeing value in “getting next to” their tutor if they were otherwise unable to get the grade they felt they deserved, concluding that if students “can do the job, they do it, putting their major efforts into academic work. If they cannot, they try to influence their grade in some other way”.

Other explanations for students strategically diverting their effort away from learning have focused on social class, making strategic behaviour a limited choice rather than a rational choice. In the US, Horowitz (1988) saw it as a result of increased competitiveness by first-generation university students who aligned themselves with faculty and demonstrated their determination to work hard as a way to set themselves apart from a lazy, well-networked upper class who wanted to have fun before the pressure of real life. In the UK, Stuart et al. (2012) explained it more as related to taste or even a product of social capital (Bourdieu, 1990), that hard work and strategically maximising grades came to be a dominant paradigm, often at the expense of valuable extra-curricular learning. Whatever the reason, if students see themselves as competing for grades, and particularly if their competitors are thought of as leveraging strategic advantages, the fairness of assessment will be doubted. Consequently, feedback cannot be taken at face value because it is bound up in the ‘game’ of assessment where rewards can not only be gained by actions other than learning, but learning also fails to guarantee those some rewards.

Understanding how students see feedback therefore requires understanding how feedback has changed in meaning through its adoption by the academic literature, but also more generally by how current understanding of feedback fits in with the complementary literature on student approaches to learning. This chapter outlines the major changes in how feedback has been used as a term, including adaptations such as feedforward, feedback for learning, and formative feedback. Discussing these changes offers insight into how the way that feedback is understood in the academic literature has started to branch

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