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Feedback conversations in a blended classroom

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Abstract

Providing and receiving feedback is a hot issue for some time now in Higher Education. Does it have to be this way? Is there anything we can do, and should do, to enhance the feedback experience of our students and make it more meaningful? Where do we start?

We work with academics and other professionals who support learning at the university and offer the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) which enables new academics and other professionals who support learning to develop their teaching skills further, explore innovative teaching methods and approaches but also create the environment in which they can start shaping their teaching philosophy and develop their academic identity.

Within the Engaging and Enhancing Student Learning (EESL) module of the PGCAP, we are using electronic portfolios for and of learning and to conduct asynchronous formative feedback conversations on work-in-progress and completed tasks. We encourage a continuous dialogue throughout the EESL to enable deeper and continuous engagement and

build-in opportunities for media-rich asynchronous feedback conversations between tutor and participant using digital technologies.

It has been noted that these feedback conversations have a positive and powerful effect and impact on engagement and learning. Through feedback conversations sensitive, meaningful and highly personalised feedback and feed forward is provided to our students which they find useful for their learning.

This paper consists of a reflective conversation between two academics and two academic developers who discuss the portfolio integrated feedback used during the EESL module, strategies, benefits and impact.

Keywords

Feedback conversations, formative feedback, academic development, e-portfolios

1. Introduction

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) is offered at the University of Salford to new academics and other professionals who support learning. It consists of the EESL module and four optional modules. There are two intakes per academic year.

Participants usually complete the EESL module before progressing to the optional modules. The Programme is accredited by the HEA and leads to Fellowship.

Participants are in-service academics and other professionals who support learning at the University of Salford and they are the ones providing feedback to students. We feel that it is important to give them the opportunity during the programme to develop the appropriate skill set and adapt innovative feedback techniques which they can apply in their own practice to enhance the student feedback experience. Feedback is absolutely crucial to improving student learning (Gibbs and Simpson 2004-5). However, feedback does not always work effectively and Lillis (2001) suggests the importance of feedback as a dialogue. Northedge (2003) also emphasises the importance of the tutor-student dialogue.

This paper uses this tutor-student dialogue to critically reflect on the feedback approach used during the EESL module. It is written in the style of a conversation between tutor and student

based on dialogues between two EESL module tutors and two participants both during and after the delivery and assessment of the module.

The dialogues during the module occurred using an e-portfolio tool and were captured in writing and digital voice.

2. Feedback as Learning

2.1 Scene setting

Participant: The matter of feedback has always been intriguing and even perplexing for me. On one side there are students requesting feedback and not being happy with the feedback they receive, for example Hounsell (2006) and Krause et.al. (2005). On the other side are students often not paying feedback much attention even it has been provided (Hounsell 2003). Another pressure is institutional guidance indicating that (the provision of) feedback on assessed work has to be provided to students in an appropriate and timely manner and in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment. I find it is a challenging task to provide sensible and developmental feedback which would encourage students to expand their learning. What gave you confidence to think that your feedback will help us to progress professionally?

Tutor: When confronted with the question for the first time, I wasn't sure where to start and how to explain myself, what I do and why. Then I started remembering the times I was sitting in the train going home after a day at work and listening to students talking to each other and on their mobiles. Many times they were talking about feedback they had received from their lecturers. Students sound upset, frustrated and hurt. Some don't seem to think that their lecturers care about them. Is this evidence of some kind of de-personalisation in our universities (Dillon 2007)? Is the massification of education to blame? The challenge is of course how can we personalise learning when we have to deal a large number of students? This is indeed a big challenge. But I strongly believe that we can do something about it and need to remember that little things can make a huge difference. I think we need to focus more on feedback as part of the learning process.

I would like to believe that academic developers, such as myself, can change (Elton 1995) this through modelling good feedback practice to our students who are teachers; teachers who

have their own students. We need to practise what we preach! Only if *our* students who are academics, come to the realisation of the power feedback has for and of learning and feel first-hand the benefits of sensitive, constructive and forward looking feedback and the unhelpfulness of overly-generalised, negative (Weaver 2006) and careless feedback they will start seeing feedback as something of value.

2.2 Summative v formative

Participant: I agree that the positive, constructive and forward looking feedback can be a powerful tool for facilitating students' learning. Personally, I endeavour to make feedback as developmental as possible mainly by indicating how a particular work can be advanced further by (1) annotating it with my comments, thoughts and suggestions, with the emphasis is on particular further readings and by (2) indicating how the higher academic level can be achieved.

Tutor: Yes what you indicate in your own practices is using feedback to help students improve and develop. We can refer to this as formative. We often use this distinction between summative assessment and formative assessment in higher education. I think this is worth discussing because it can cause confusion when we add in the role of feedback linked to assessment. We usually think of summative assessment as contributing to a student's grade and usually happening at the end of a module. We might call this assessment *of* learning. Whereas, formative assessment is to help student learning and could be called assessment *for* learning (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). However, Hounsell (2007) is slightly critical of the 'shop-worn' distinction between formative and summative assessment and prefers Knight's (2002) 'high stakes' and 'low stakes' assessment. We can also introduce Earl's (2003) concept of assessment *as* learning which then allows us to link feedback as a process to support learning; feedback as learning.

All of the work you received feedback on during the module formed part of your final assessed e-portfolio, therefore it was 'high stakes' but not summative in the traditional sense. However, the feedback was ongoing in order to help you learn and to improve the quality of your e-portfolio. Only limited feedback was given after the submission of the portfolio as this would not help in the development of the portfolio but could be used to measure progress made in light of earlier feedback. One of the issues with feedback on summative work is that whilst students may try to attend to it they could not act on it as they had moved on to

different topics and the feedback was not useful for future assignments. (Glover and Brown 2006)

3. Quality and Quantity

3.1 Dialogue

Participant: I know that feedback needs to be aimed at helping students learn. On the other hand, looking back at the time spent on composing feedback I sometimes recall the line from the Academic Handbook (University of Salford 2010) that feedback should not increase the burden of assessment for staff. It seems that dealing with feedback in such a manner has always been quite a time consuming process for me.

I was amazed when I received my first and then subsequent feedback during my PGCAP study. First, it was personalised, i.e. my tutor was writing to me (not just providing some standardised sentences similar to the grade descriptors). Second, I received feedback comments on literally every thought in my work. Third, the volume of feedback was quite substantial, not just a few lines. Altogether, it was very encouraging and it felt like it was rather as a discussion on the subject matter not coursework.

Tutor: I have to admit that I get carried away sometimes with the work learners produce and my feedback becomes extensive, too extensive. I am trying to deal with this currently and hope to develop a strategy to condense my message. It is important not to overload students with feedback (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). A few key points at the appropriate time can have real positive benefits for learning and performance.

Feedback should be seen as the vehicle for learning, as something that is seamlessly built into the teaching practice and the learning process rather than as something that only happens after students submit their assignments. It shouldn't be a burden for staff.

Good feedback practice encourages teacher and peer dialogue about learning (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). We need to recognise that feedback is a partnership between academics and their students. For feedback to influence student learning, it needs to be dialogic in nature (Lillis 2001, Northedge 2003)

The key for me is to be sensitive (Irons 2008), to show that we care and recognise the strength in each student's performance. What is important is to find a way to boost their confidence that they can do it and show them that we believe in their abilities and that they can attain more if they invest more time and energy in their learning. We can only achieve this if we and our students recognise and experience learning as a partnership and an opportunity to learn with and from each other. When we start recognising that our students are not empty vessels that they all add something unique and enriching to and that we can learn a lot from them, we will have opened our eyes and minds transform feedback and feed forward into a two-way process or a conversation through which we can all benefit.

I see feedback as an opportunity to learn. After all, teaching is learning. I don't like giving away answers because I feel this reduces the opportunities for students to think and engage. Many times there is not just one correct answer. I like to think that I trigger thinking through questioning using the Socratic approach.

3.2 Time and timing

Participant: Yes, it felt exactly as an interesting conversation from which I could get a better insight into the subject matter. Would you provide the same level of thoughtfulness (i.e. being constructive) of your feedback if you had 100+ pieces of work to mark to the deadline?

Tutor: Yes, the level of thoughtfulness to 10, 30 or 100 students would be the same. My feedback would still be personalised, sensitive and constructive. The language it is written makes a difference (Irons 2008). I strongly believe that. It is so easy, to become too academic when we provide feedback and forget about the real purpose of feedback, which is to communicate a message that will encourage further learning. We need to colour our words and fill them with emotion, making the message personal! The same, of course applies when we provide digital feedback – audio, video, animated or are using images to compliment or replace written feedback. How we say things is equally important to what we say, if not even more important, and we seem to forget that, unfortunately. We need to be more careful about how we say things and remember that showing empathy when we communicate is vital. We can do that in one sentence and we can do it with a whole paragraph. The quality and the approach should be maintained, the quantity will be less. But remember, less can be more!

Participant: Can you please clarify your view on feedback? To my observations feedback is often seen as one-off event or as a closure of some kind?

Yes what is assumed here is feedback at the end of a module, summative feedback. If we shift our feedback from summative to an ongoing process then we do not need to provide much feedback or any feedback at the end (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). Our workload, in terms of feedback, gets spread over a longer time. In comparing my own marking of a traditional essay with marking this portfolio, I have found the final marking of the portfolio takes much less time (even though the portfolio is longer in terms of word count). I do not need to provide much detailed feedback because feedback has already been given and acted upon in contrast to the essay where I feel obliged to give more feedback because in most cases no draft work was submitted. Feedback shouldn't be a closure but a new opening and a beginning.

3.3 Self and peer feedback

Participant: I would love to incorporate all your suggestions about improving the quality and richness of feedback. My only concern is time. I am not sure that the current workload model of the university recognises the demanding nature of the personalised and creative feedback. If I strive to improve my feedback to students continuously I might find myself doing all that in my spare time, this may not be acceptable for all tutors in the university.

Tutor: We need to re-think our feedback process, what it involves, how we provide feedback and who provides it or could provide feedback in addition to or instead of us?

We can turn individual tasks into group tasks to reduce the amount of feedback we give. We can provide general feedback in lectures highlighting common strengths and weaknesses in student work. McCreery (2005) reported how we can modify tutorial sessions to incorporate feedback and assessment tasks that build in a progressive manner to a final large essay. The approach we have taken on the PGCAP is similar to the 'patchwork text' approach (Scoggins and Winter 1999) where different but related tasks are linked together as a whole and opportunities are provided for feedback and revision.

Feedback should be a shared responsibility between students and tutor. Remember that the tutor is not the only one who has to provide feedback and sometimes it might be appropriate to ask our students about what specifically they would like feedback on. Students need to play an active role in the feedback process if higher-quality learning is to be achieved (Hounsell 2007). We can build-in opportunities for self-assessment and peer-feedback. Tan (2007) notes that self-assessment ensures that formative feedback is not tutor dominated and

that it is a genuine dialogue. By being involved in their own assessment, students will be better able to perceive the gaps in their understanding or skills and be able to take action to close those gaps (Sadler 1989).

Peer feedback can also be used to involve students in the feedback process. From a pragmatic viewpoint, peer feedback offers the opportunity for student to get feedback that might not otherwise have been practical to give ourselves (Hounsell 2007). Falchikov (2001) reports on peer tutoring whereby peers provide feedback on an ongoing basis to improve the quality of written work. Mallett (2004) describes a process where students eventually mark each other's work. If we share the feedback responsibility with our students, and engage them actively in the process, we will see them engaging more with feedback and our time spent on providing feedback will be reduced.

I was hoping that the feedback you received from me would have an impact on your own practice as well as on your learning. When we see the value of feedback and start reflecting on our own feedback practice we can introduce changes that do have the power to improve student learning without an unnecessary burden falling on us the tutor.

4. Motivation

Participant: When I received the formative feedback on my work I felt encouraged and at the same time obliged to continue my exploration into the subject. Is summative feedback as motivating?

Tutor: Summative feedback does not have the same purpose. We provide summative feedback to acknowledge what has been learnt and to what extent. It is not as powerful as formative feedback (Black and Wiliam 1998) nor is it as useful for students. It just comes too late to act upon (Glover and Brown 2006)! Many times students don't even come to collect their work. Have you experienced this perhaps? How does this make you feel when you realise that not all your students actually read the feedback you provided. It took you hours to put together! What does this tell us about summative feedback? Maybe feedback feels like a burden because some students don't seem to engage with it. This goes back to my previous point about involving students in the process of assessment and feedback. By involving students in the feedback process, we can engage them more as well as stretch and challenge the more able students.

5. The role of the e-portfolio in feedback

Participant: We have talked about the reasoning behind the style of feedback adopted on the module. What was the rationale for choosing an e-portfolio?

Tutor: Today we have the technology that can be used to facilitate conversations (Jarche 2010). E-portfolios especially can be really effective tools for that (Irons, 2008) However, technology itself is not the answer to cure everything but it has the potential to enable and extend feedback opportunities. We used an e-portfolio system on the core module to connect and conduct asynchronous informal and continuous conversations (Donnelly 2003) about your work and trigger deeper engagement with the feedback (Irons 2008; Butcher 2010) and for participants who engaged with this it worked really well. The e-portfolio provides a great opportunity to connect tutors and students and create asynchronous conversations (Kear 2011) and I am really pleased that you did submit drafts and engaged in the feedback conversations. How did you feel about the ongoing electronic feedback dialogue?

Participant: I found it very useful. It gave me the opportunity to make almost 'instant' changes to my work. As soon as you see the feedback, you can begin to think about the aspects you need to do to improve your piece of work.

This is mainly because it was easy to ask for, easy to access and it was current. This matches what Stefani, Mason and Pegler (2007) note as some of the benefits of e-portfolios; flexibility of access and immediacy of feedback. I could then focus on the task that I had in hand and plan my changes around that formative feedback rather than just taking on board summative feedback at the end of the assessment process. This was all quicker than trying to make an appointment or waiting until the next scheduled face to face session. Feedback was offered in an informal but constructive manner, it was refreshing to be able to get this vital insight on my progress during the assessment process.

Tutor: Yes, my experience of using technology synchronously and asynchronously is that it is useful in the feedback dialogue as it creates an opportunity to move the dialogue and the conversation forward (Laurillard 2002) quickly without needing to wait.

Participant: Also one of the tasks you asked us to do was use the e-portfolio to provide peer feedback. E-portfolios can support different approaches to peer assessment and feedback (Stefani, Mason and Pegler 2007). Getting feedback from peers was useful. However, it was

probably more useful for me to give feedback so I was more engaged with the assessment tasks and the assessment criteria (Bloxham and Boyd 2007).

I felt using the e-portfolio encouraged me to use different media tools for delivering my assignment e.g. I used audio for the first time. Was this an intended outcome?

Tutor: Yes, the e-portfolio allows you to produce your own work in different formats, whether that is text based, audio, video or images. Robson (2005) argues that we should give students a choice of ways of completing their assessment. I think this is more inclusive and allows students to demonstrate their understanding in a way that suits their strengths. This also works for the feedback process. I was able to give you feedback in text and audio format. One of the interesting aspects for me was that I found I could listen to work you had produced as audio whilst starting to write my feedback on it at the same time. At the end I found it useful for e-marking as I had access to the work whether I was marking at home or in the office and I could instantly see the feedback written by my co-marker. It is also possible to use technology to create automated feedback at the end and so reduce our workload further.

6. Final words

Tutor: All I can do is make you think and I am really pleased that it worked. Thank you for your stimulating questions. I hope the answers give you an insight into my thinking and explain why I do things the way I think they should be done.

Participant: Thank you for your revealing comments about your way of offering feedback. It would be a life changing time if feedback was re-thought in higher education as something we say, write or impart in any other way 'to increase the appetite for more learning'! On the other hand, I understand that even now nothing prevents me from re-shaping my feedback practice to be more personalised, detailed, and encouraging. I am going to explore how I could engage my students more actively in the feedback process and share the responsibility with them. Despite quite diverse students' goals, I tend to believe that thoughtful and attentive feedback can assist in learning even to the most 'surface' learning students.

7. Conclusions

The technology-enabled feedback conversations provided the opportunity to the module team and the participants to transform feedback into a shared responsibility and a process that can be carried out in partnership to maximise ownership, engagement and learning.

Not all participants take advantage of the opportunity to engage in such fruitful feedback conversations. It has been noted that some prefer to 'fill' their portfolios just before submission, making it impossible to engage in formative feedback conversations with these participants. Our challenge is to engage the un-engaged. How can we make them see what they are missing?

Using and extending opportunities for feedback conversation among participants to engage further in learning, take responsibility and practise learning from each other.

The module team will continue exploring and experimenting with innovative feedback approaches, including audio, visual, video and animation for formative and summative feedback and also identify further opportunities for self-evaluation and peer feedback throughout for additional two-way conversations about learning.

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