

2013

The assessment of feedback: A learning development process

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/12172>

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme Guidance on writing the final report

Please read this guidance prior to producing the final report for your Teaching Fellowship Project.

The final report should consist of a brief (1-2 pages) summary of the project and findings, together with a number of more detailed appendices (possibly in the form of conference papers or articles for publication). The summary will be transferred directly onto the Pedagogic Research and Development Database (see www.pedres.net) Please follow the format below as closely as possible to enable this transfer of information.

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Title of project: The assessment of feedback: A learning development process

Type of project (e.g. Survey/ Case Study/ Action Research/ Development): Focus Groups / In-depth Interviews

You may also include appropriate evidence in your appendices, e.g.

Information/letter on ethics approval

Information/progress on conditions (If your initial TFAS application was 'approved with conditions', please provide evidence that these conditions have been met in at least one of the reports.)

Please provide some information about the project, in the format below: (1-2 pages)

Aims of project

The aim of the project is to explore student perceptions of the feedback process within the School of Tourism and Hospitality (SoTH) at Plymouth University. The purpose is to be responsive to the requirements of students, as individuals, and understand *their* needs. But at the same time, the project aims to enhance academic practice, as 'how students experience and make sense of learning activities and academic practices' (Hilsdon 2010:2) will be better understood, and can be better prepared for. Therefore, the nexus between feedback and Learning Development is explored.

Background to project (or context)

The rationale for this project was borne from the proposition that feedback is a major focus of student concern in Britain (Hounsell 2007) and that it has become a topical issue 'given the publicised findings of the National Student Survey' (Bailey 2009:1). The process of providing feedback is 'bread and butter to teaching and learning' (Boud 2000:155). However, literature infers that good feedback can get lost in translation between the teacher and student (Rodgers 2006). Therefore, as a lecturer, directed by the QAA general principles (Rust 2002) to provide appropriate feedback (principle 12), it is crucial to develop an understanding about student practice. Once understood, the knowledge can then enrich learning materials, and ensure that feedback is communicated in the most effective way for students to digest.

Methods used

The study developed an inductive, qualitative approach towards data collection. This approach allowed for knowledge to be drawn from the research process, rather than inferred findings from the start. Such logic and rationale was based upon the aim to explore student perceptions of the feedback process within the SoTH. As a result, two stages of data collection were completed for this investigation; focus groups and in-depth interviews.

After an initial pilot focus group with postgraduate tourism students, two focus groups with 2nd and final year tourism students were completed, acting as a fact-finding stage of data collection (Veal 1992). This opportunity allowed students to raise their concerns with the feedback process, and acknowledge *if* academic literacy skills were required. Once the data were analysed, 16 in-depth interviews were completed with 1st, 2nd and final year tourism students, to explore in more detail the specific ways in which students digest feedback from within SoTH. To be clear, 'tourism students' in this instance only includes current students undertaking a BSc (hons) Tourism Management, BSc (hons) Business and Tourism, or a BSc (hons) International Tourism Management degree at Plymouth University. Furthermore, these 'tourism students' include both Home (from within the UK) and International students (all other students who are not permanent UK residents) which represents the diversified student population found at Plymouth University.

Results

From the analysis of the qualitative data, it is evident that current tourism students from within SoTH have mixed perceptions of the feedback process, but on the whole they remain largely positive about the practices that underpin the process.

From the project it is asserted that student concern about the feedback process is personal and relates to the individual's own learning style. The individual learning style and personality traits then bear influence on the areas of student concern, and are reflective of the main issues identified from within the literature. Therefore, the impact of

feedback on student LD remains somewhat limited, as each individual is affected in different ways. Some students digest the feedback effectively (from an academic perspective), and learn from the process, whereas others do not value the feedback that has been provided for them.

Further to these individual impacts, some understanding about the collective student practice has also been drawn from the study. This is important to infer, as with such knowledge, learning materials can be enriched, and feedback can be communicated in a more effective way for students to digest. A key message is communication. *Consistent communication* is vital between lecturers and students to enhance feedback, as it was found that student dissatisfaction with feedback was a side-effect of initial misinterpretation of the assessment criteria, rather than the content of comments provided. As a result, SoTH level guidelines (for best practice) have been presented in a bid to improve both LD and teaching practice and to improve the consistency of the messages communicated to students. These guidelines act as a series of practical implementations (a series of suggestions) that lecturers could take on board to enhance the process from a student perspective. Delivering such a consistent message could also have the potential to enhance and develop a 'relationship' between the academic and student. Building a relationship may also enable the student to effectively digest their feedback, through rapport and support. However, caution is required.

Firstly caution is required as LD is a process, and recommendations for literacy skills needs to be embedded and developed differently for each year group. This should range from LD being taught in the 1st year, to being inherent in students as they move into their final year at University. Caution is also required, as the recommendations are formed from a student perspective; not an academics. Therefore the recommendations do not provide an overall balanced approach towards giving and digesting feedback. Thirdly, each module content, assessment type, teaching style, and student learning style differs, shifts and changes over time. Therefore, the LD process needs to be dynamic and interactive, and responsive to student needs. Finally, caution is required as the suggestions have not yet been tested. Future research still needs to be undertaken to discover a balanced approach to providing and digesting feedback. To find such balance, future research should take account of academic and student perceptions, and the tools at each institutes disposal. This may then offer all parties guidance. More specifically, it will be responsive to the requirements of students, as individuals, whilst improving academic practice, as *how* students experience and learn at University can be better understood, and better prepared for.

Associated publications (these should relate to the project, and give full reference)

Abstract accepted for the ATHE conference (December 2013) – see Appendix

Other publications are being prepared for publication

Keywords (one or more if possible – see 'pedres' database for examples): Learning development; student; feedback; communication

Please forward the final report to teachandlearn@plymouth.ac.uk