Developing student engagement with and reflection on feedback through the tutorial system

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Background

Specialist and Joint awards in the School of Education recruit 180-200 new full time students each year. Given the importance of the year 1 experience to student well being and success, we are constantly developing responses to the following questions:

1. What are the most effective ways to support students to level 1 success?
2. How can we best prepare students for progress within level 2 and 3 modules?
3. How can we ensure that points 1 and 2 above take place without significantly increasing the workload of colleagues?

Context

Answers to the above questions must be contextualised by the circumstances under which lecturers and students work and study together. As we know, post 1992 universities are engaged with a mass HE agenda controlled by centralised and institutional targets. For some years now, both FE and HE have had as their mantra: 'recruit and retain'. Within the widening participation agenda 'opportunities' for the 'non-traditional' student at post 1992 HEIs have expanded but how have HEIs responded? Read et al (2003) suggest that the 'new' university has not enabled 'non-traditional' students to fully 'belong' in the environment of academia. Their research also focuses on the changes in relationships between lecturers and students:

> Whilst students stated that some individual lecturers were especially friendly and approachable, a number pointed out that constraints on lecturers' time and availability and large student numbers led to a conception of 'distance' between lecturer and student

A glimpse of a few key statistics about Wolverhampton University students helps to focus these general comments about HEIs:

- From state-sector schools: 98.7%

- From working-class homes: 51.5%
- Wolverhampton is the only university in Britain where a majority of undergraduates come from the three poorest socio-economic groups

These issues not only make any interventions at level 1 more crucial and significant to student well-being but more challenging and complex too.

The Tutorial System

One of our responses to the questions in the 'background' section above has been to look more closely at how the tutorial system works for level 1 students. The role of personal tutors in HE has been described as an 'anchor' (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993 *in* Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006) playing a crucial role at level 1 to support transition into student life and academic demands (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006). The tutorial system can also help to develop students' relationships with academic staff, which can be an important part of their integration into academic life (Tinto 2002 in Wilcox *et al.*, 2005), particularly for students who may not feel they 'belong'. Working class students' experiences in HE are important in this discourse (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006 and Quinn, 2005) as are issues around belonging and ethnicity within universities:

> White students are often not faced with the consideration of their own ethnicity in a cultural environment where to be white merely means to be a student (Read *et al.*, 2003).

Written Feedback

The tutorial system has a role to play but, as the comments above suggest, there are many strands to the types of support it might provide. We decided to look at how the tutorial system might help support students' use of written feedback responding to summative assignments. We looked at this area for the following reasons:

1. Growing student numbers and larger teaching group sizes has meant less time for personal support. However, it is still this interface between students and lecturers that 'an adaptive response to the diversity that students bring with them can be most meaningfully expressed' (Smith, 2007).
2. The moment students read feedback is an important formalised moment of contact with the school and the university and can modify student identity and self-esteem. How can we make the most of it this moment?
3. Many students don't collect assignments - more than 20% (Winter and Dye, 2004) They get grades electronically and don't see/care about written feedback.
4. Other students collect assignments but don't note patterns in feedback.
5. A dominant discourse amongst the team (and anecdotally the university) is that student study skills are generally regarded as 'inadequate' and that students are not regarded as effective 'independent learners'. But what are 'independent learners'? Are they an ethnocentric, masculinist ideal unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or the need for support? The

'robo' student in opposition to the 'dependent' student associated with weakness and immaturity? (Leathwood, 2001).

6. Feedback comes in a variety of formats and types. How do level 1 students make sense of it? (Duncan, Prowse, Wakeman and Harrison, 2004; Millar, 2005).

Tutor Group Intervention and Potential Benefits

In 2006 we decided to take the following action:

1. Keep level 1 tutor groups about 10-15 students smaller than level 2 and level 3.
2. Students would be asked to look at the summative feedback they have from semester 1 (usually 3 assignments) and completed a draft action plan which involves some degree of self assessment.
3. The level 1 tutor will meet each student 1:1 to discuss and possibly amend the plan and help guide student action.
4. The summative therefore becomes a formative to support assignments in semester 2.
5. The aim was to help students use written feedback to improve future grades but also to introduce an element of dialogue into the summative process (Askew and Lodge, 2000). Conducting these meetings informally and sensitively could also help improve student lecturer relationships and understandings.

Research Methods – Evaluating the Intervention

We piloted this intervention with three tutor groups in February 2006, then followed it up with full implementation across all tutor groups in February 2007 as a CELT funded Learning and Teaching (L&T) Project. In 2006 we gathered the responses of the three tutor responses to the development very informally. This helped to develop our approach for the following year. In 2007 we wanted to find out how students felt about the intervention. Therefore, twenty students were selected randomly from level 1, and nine agreed to be interviewed. There is no claim here of a representative sample but there have been some interesting findings.

The semi-structured interviews of this opportunity sample were carried out by the same person at the end of February 2007. They consisted of questions that briefly focussed on previous experiences of feedback and personal preferences about the types of feedback available. The interviews then moved on to look in some detail at how effective the intervention had been in supporting a clearer understanding of skills development. A summary of the interpretation of this data appears later in this article. First, it is important to look at the review of literature. Although the

intervention above sounds straightforward, principles and theoretical issues underpinning the intervention are complex and fascinating.

Feedback in HE is a relatively unresearched area (Carless 2006, Mutch 2003), particularly at level 1. For example, the HEA review of level 1 research (2006) does not refer to feedback at all. However, there are major studies in compulsory education (for example Black and Wiliam, 1998).

In order to summarise the relevant issues raised by the review of literature in this area, the key point headings below are followed by a series of questions and comments that will be used to underpin the interpretation of our data.

Conversations and literacies – some questions

1. How do we 'understand' student writing? Do we see it as student deficit? Academic socialisation? Academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998, Lillis, 2001)?
2. What model of feedback do we endorse? Receptive transmission, constructivist or Co-constructivist (Askew and Lodge, 2000)?
3. How do we assess the quality of the feedback on the assignments themselves? Is it standardised on a proforma? Hand written? Decipherable? What do students prefer? Do we know?
4. What about feedback as 'conversation' and collaboration (Carless, Lillis, 2001)? Is this what we are moving toward?
5. What is feedback trying to achieve? Explaining the grade in terms of strengths and weaknesses? Evaluating the match between the students' assignment and the 'ideal' answer? Correcting and editing? Dialogue? Advice for the next assignment? Advice on rewriting the same assignment again (Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000)?

Power, emotion, relationships and communication – some comments

1. Students are not simply receptacles for transmitted information but active makers and mediators of meaning (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1986, 1990).
2. Staff/student interaction: feedback operates in complex social contexts and power relationships (Rust *et al.*, 2005) and feedback is shaped by the nature of those relationships between staff and students (Higgins *et al.*, 2001).
3. Lecturers forget the extent to which students experience them as powerful (Boud, 1995).
4. HE currently uses an over-simplified model of communication (Higgins *et al.*, 2001).

5. Social and personal identity are bound up with ways of meaning making in student writing and in lecturer feedback (Lillis, 2001).
6. Feedback – threat to self-esteem/self worth or opportunity to learn (Mutch 2003)?   Discourse/power/emotion (Carless, 2006).
7. In any activity, students may be balancing three goals: completion of task set, effective learning and social-relationship goals. When these conflict, students tend to prioritise social-relationship goals. Many will limit disclosure to protect feelings/reputation (Cowie, 2005).
8. Seeking help is sometimes interpreted as evidence of 'low ability' (Blumenfield, 1992).
9. Feedback as 'protective care' (Pryor and Torrance 1996 – primary school research but still relevant to HE) or supporting learning?
10. Some feedback may be based more on raising self esteem than on improving learning (Kluger and DeNisis, 1996).
11. The culture of schooling for the student and university for the lecturer may have enshrined a didactic dominant model to teaching and learning. 'Social and educational context will shape and control what is possible' (Stobart, 2006).

How do students interpret feedback?

1. Quality guidelines in School handbooks try to control how lecturers feedback but we cannot easily control how students 'interpret' feedback. What is clear academic discourse to lecturers may not be clear to students – especially at L1. Social practice (Carless, 2006; Mutch, 2003; Millar, 2005)
2. Feedback comes in a variety of formats and types. How do level 1 students make sense of it (Ivanic, *et al.,* 2000; Hounsell, 2004)?
3. Level 1 students in particular don't always understand feedback and the academic discourse required of them (Holmes and Smith, 2003; McCune, 2004).
4. Females place more reliance on feedback than males (Adams *et al.,* 2000) but there is little other evidence to support this

Motivation to progress

1. Mastery vs. Performance: how are students motivated (Ames and Archer 1988)?
2. Motivation (Dweck, 1986). Students differ in the ways they attribute their successes and failures to different causes. Internal/external and stable/unstable.

Summary of findings from student interviews

The summary of findings from the nine interviews is divided into nine sub-headings that developed out of the interview data. These were not preconceived headings that structured the interview questions but came out of the issues students raised in response to much more open questions.

Feedback experience before university

1. *"We used to receive more verbal feedback at school."*
2. *"Paid more attention to feedback at college because we could do assignments again to improve grades."*
3. Varied in depth from one 'A' level subject to another. *"Sometimes you just got your grade."*
4. *"Still got written feedback from previous course – used it carefully."*
5. *"Quite similar to university in terms of how to improve writing skills."*

Current feedback practice

1. *"There is always someone to talk to at university but not always as obvious who that person should be."*
2. Students do not always manage to get the individual feedback. Students cannot always get to the hand back/feedback session.
3. Once the assignment has been marked, it is in the past. *"As long as the grade is OK then I don't bother about feedback. If the grade isn't OK then I do."*
4. Grades not counting toward degree affects interest in feedback at level 1.

General outcomes of the intervention

1. Seven out of the 9 students interviewed were very positive about the benefits of the intervention.
2. Negative responses: *"didn't tell me anything I didn't already know"* and *"understood all the feedback before the interview."*
3. *"Action plan from the meeting right by my work now."*

Interpretation of feedback

1. *"Written feedback is difficult to understand – much clearer when the personal tutor reads it out loud and showed how what looked liked different comments may actually mean similar things."*
2. *"Helpful to look at assignments all together – reading feedback at different times meant that patterns weren't clear."*

Skills development

1. Opportunity to clarify some issues like: referencing, plagiarism, importance of wider reading, looking for journal articles, difference between description and analysis.
2. *"Started to visiting the Learning Centre more."*
3. Taking up 1:1 support in Learning Centres.

Constructing 'academic'

1. The intervention was important if you come from a vocational course because *"university is a different way of learning."*
2. *"Helped to get used to 'academic' learning."*

Identity

1. Some issues clarified on a 1:1 basis with tutor in confidence – *"I was worried because I didn't want anyone to know that I didn't know."*
2. *"Helped me to feel I belonged."*

Blended Learning

1. Opportunity for more visual learning: tutor created diagrams and thought patterns for students.

Comments about how we could improve feedback

1. Travelling in to pick up assignments individually is a waste of time - need to think about a better way of doing this
2. Need more timer for personal feedback – *"collecting assignments should be more like a tutorial."*
3. Useful to see other students' feedback so you know you are not alone
4. Marginal comments are more important that the summary comments – need to pinpoint issues but...
5. *"...don't like the way some lecturers 'put scrawl over the work I had taken time and care over."*
6. For summary feedback comments, typed is better than hand written
7. 'Tick charts' on feedback proformas are useful and easy to understand
8. *"Don't like confusing feedback where you get a satisfactory grade, but only negative comments."*
9. *"Need comments about where/how to improve."*
10. *"Just want to know what I did wrong' but if my grades were poorer I might be more sensitive about this."*
11. Feedback that is too standardised (stock phrases from learning outcomes) is not personal enough but....
12. ....wide variation in length and detail is confusing.

Conclusions

Seven out of the nine interviewees were passionate about their study and understood the significance of feedback to academic improvement and personal well-being. They agreed that written feedback was a key moment in their level 1 experience.

It was also clear from their responses and from the literature review that feedback is a complex exchange not just involving an academic discourse but also issues of identity, self-esteem and power and that these issues need to be central to any intervention. It is clear therefore that we need to know much more about student reactions to feedback and to the different types of feedback we use. We also need to continue to look carefully at how students use feedback so we can fine tune future interventions.

Future Developments

The intervention will continue as a CELT funded L&T Project in the academic year 2007/8. Data collection will take place again in a similar way after the intervention in late February 2008. On this occasion we hope to interview 20 students and add this data to data from 2007. We also hope to collect data from tutors involved in the intervention and from students during 'Welcome Week' about their previous experiences of written feedback in their last educational experience. This further round of data collection will then form the basis of an article submission to a peer reviewed journal.

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