CETL Briefing Papers: First Year Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Feedback

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Aims of the Initiative

This is a research programme that investigates feedback from a first year students' perspective. It specifically looks at what the students' perceptions of feedback are, what 'engaging' with feedback mean to students and what factors promote or prevent students engaging with feedback.

Description of the Initiative

This initiative is a research programme which promotes qualitative methodologies to generate an understanding of feedback from the perspective of a first year undergraduate student. It utilises data collected through one to one interview with first year Humanities and Social Science undergraduate students and follow up questionnaires.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

As this is a research programme, the outcomes of this research will be presented within this section. This research has identified a number of key findings. These are outlined below:

In relation to students' perception of feedback, students:
- are dissatisfied with feedback but place a high value on the feedback that they receive.
- report that feedback is used differently in the first year to other year. When first year undergraduates first come to university, feedback is use as a sign to whether they should be undertaking degree level studies and whether they are they capable of this level of education. Therefore they perceive the function of feedback to be different from the general understanding.

When engaging with feedback, students
- feel that feedback is dialogic, but recognise that the chance to have dialogue with their tutors is limited. Student valued opportunity to discuss work and for verbal feedback.
- felt more confident with coursework when they received formative feedback on drafts.
- want feedback to be transferable and more general. Content specific feedback is not helpful for future studies. Students also wanted examples of good practice.
- want a stronger link between the grades they and feedback. They often reported that engagement with feedback does not lead to improvements in their grades. They want more feedback on how to improve their grades
- preferred word processed feedback, this reduces the incidents of not being able to read the handwritten feedback provided.
- felt that team teaching led to inconsistent messages about assignment requirements. Students want the person who takes their seminars to mark their work, to provide a consistent message of what is wanted of them. This is specifically important for large teaching.

When considering factors that promote or hinder students' engagements with feedback, students:

- entry qualification impacts on their expectations of feedback the feedback they receive
    - Mature students, specifically those who have entered University through Access are used to receiving a lot of supportive feedback. They do not find this when they come to University. This leads to dissatisfaction with the quality and amount of feedback that they receive.
    - A Level student are used to less feedback and have had inconsistency in feedback between subjects. This leads to A'Level students to not be dependent on feedback.
    - For those who have no recent educational experience, feedback is a new concept. These do not understand how feedback might be useful and how to engage with it.
- report that negative feedback hinders them from wanting to engage. This arises as it impacts on their self esteem and as a result they struggled to move forward with the feedback given.
- value one to one feedback, but perceive that lecturers are very busy.
    - Mature and confident students feel confident to seek time for feedback with lecturers.
    - Younger students they can approach lecturers at the end of lesson to discuss feedback. However recognise there is only limited time for feedback.
    - Younger students less likely to seek verbal feedback even thought they wanted it.
    - If students received negative feedback they were less likely to engage in discussions about their work as they felt it would further damage their self esteem.

Therefore, there are a number of important messages:

- There is a mismatch between what academic staff perceive feedback to be and what students want feedback in their first year to provide. Therefore a collaborative picture needs to be developed that incorporates both student and staff vision of what feedback is and what engagement in feedback entails. This will provide a shared culture of expectations.
- There are Issue about approachability of staff in relation to gaining time for one to one feedback. Therefore, time needs to be built into a module so that this can occur.
- Feedback needs to be reconceptualised so that students get what they want from it. This will lead to them becoming more confident and have a clearer understanding of feedback in second and third years. As well as a better understanding of what peer and self assessment entails.
- Process is an independent process contrasted with what was wanted which was a more supportive model.

Policy Implications

- Curriculum Design.
    - The quality of feedback is important. Feedback should be word processed, provide transferable comments and provide examples required in the first year. There also needs to be a better link between grades given and grades that student could expect if they engaged with the feedback given.
    - A culture of engagement with feedback needs to be generated. Providing an understanding of feedback and what it means needs to be integrated

into course design integral to a course to help students understand how to use the feedback. Examples of good pieces of work are very important to students understanding.

- Assessment redesign needs to be considered. Time is required to give verbal feedback. This needs to be factored in to modules during design. Students also require consistent feedback experiences across all modules. A greater focus on feedback that engages students is required. This includes providing feedback on draft feedbacks on drafts that feed into final assessment. It also includes one to one feedback sessions that students are expected to attend and prepare for. The latter of these will help address identified power imbalances that prevent less confident students accessing verbal feedback.

- Staff Development and Training
  - is require in giving effective feedback. This should focus on providing feedback as confirmation of students' ability and to confirm their potential to complete a degree. Feedback should also be more explicit. Students need more detailed feedback about what they are doing it right. Feedback should highlight the positive aspects of their work. Lecturers should also attempt to use the language of students so that they understand their feedback. This is particularly important in the first semester. Academic language and terminology needs to be integrated slowly over the year.

- Organisation and Sector
  - Time allocation for affective feedback is essential. Students often feel they can not approach staff for feedback because staff appear to be busy. It is important to consider how pressure on staff can be alleviated to provide effective feedback. The reasons why staff give feedback to meet the needs of external auditors rather than formative feedback also needs to be tackled.

Expert Contacts and Links

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