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THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF STUDENT-TO-TEACHER FEEDBACK

Student-to-teacher feedback: Good for us, good for them

Providing student-to-teacher feedback throughout module delivery increases student engagement and empowers students as co-creators of knowledge. Embedding multi-systemic, real-time feedback into HE culture not only enhances opportunity for professional development but may also improve student engagement, with implications for attainment and retention.

The student experience of Student-to-Teacher feedback

Student feedback is a cornerstone of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2012) policy on teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE). The aims of this policy are to provide feedback on their courses, contribute to the development of learning and teaching, to participate in university decision-making, and to represent the students' views at an institutional level. These aims have the potential to maximise the benefits of feedback to the reflective learning environment of teaching professionals within the HE setting, though application currently does not reflect this. We understand the benefits of feedback overall, and research examines the benefits for students in receiving feedback. As such, much of the research focuses on the more traditional and unidirectional teacher to student feedback.

This article aims instead to examine the effects of student to teacher feedback as part of an innovative approach to education. There exists some evidence to suggest that providing feedback to teachers empowers students as co-creators of knowledge, thus increasing engagement and student attainment (Kandiko Howson, 2015). Specifically, this study examines the students' experiences of engaging in student-to-teacher feedback throughout the duration of a module based on a small-scale pilot study from one third year optional module in psychology. Student feedback throughout the module may benefit both teaching and learning, and specific recommendations for scaling this process to be institutionally embedded are explored, with implications for student engagement and retention.

Benefits of feedback

High quality, effective feedback satisfies several requirements: it must be timely (i.e., the earlier the better), individually tailored to the recipient, manageable, developmentally appropriate, and instrumental in developing strengths and consolidating learning, while also respecting power dynamics within provider and receiver roles (Race, 2001). Bellon, Bellon, and Blank (1991) demonstrate that feedback not only helps students better understand material studied and provides clear guidance on how to improve their learning, but it is the strongest predictor for achievement among all teaching behaviours measured, controlling for grade, socioeconomic status, race and school setting. In addition to improving work, receiving feedback has been shown to improve student confidence, self-awareness, enthusiasm for learning and engagement in the learning process (Yorke, 2002). High quality feedback has been shown to be particularly important in the higher education environment, aiding students in successfully navigating transition periods, reducing attrition, promoting self-regulation, and empowering students by creating a co-constructed and collaborative learning process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Student to teacher feedback in higher education: Current practice and context

Much is made of the role, purpose, and benefits of feedback from the academy to students, but far less attention has been given to the important role student feedback may play in the development of teachers, teaching materials and module content, and to the implications this may have for student engagement. McKeachie et al (1980) conducted a study at the University of Michigan, in which instructors who received student ratings, in conjunction with counselling that provided encouragement and suggested alternative teaching strategies, tended to change their classroom behaviours more so than faculty members who received only student ratings. This also fits within the perspective of Kuh (2009) who notes the requirement for institutions to involve empirically noted activities conducive to desired outcomes in education, which feedback of this kind appears to meet. Ultimately, incorporating practices of student-led feedback can contribute to improvements in teaching and learning provision.

Many universities do incorporate student feedback in existing models. However, it is important to note that often, and in keeping with the QAA guidelines on student feedback, this feedback is gathered through end of module feedback systems and the National Student Survey (NSS) (Kandiko Howson, 2015). Such feedback opportunities, when taken as the only variety of feedback from students, demonstrate a more evaluative purpose or a 'consumer satisfaction' approach (Kandiko Howson, 2015). However, feedback may, and perhaps even ought to, serve to enhance student engagement and professional development through initiating and supporting reflective practice in teaching and learning.

Engagement in higher education: Connections to student feedback

Enhancing student engagement in HE is considered through several different approaches. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) discuss the importance of incorporating student feedback in the context of 'student engagement'. They define this as 'the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience' (HEFCE, 2008), providing scope for feedback to be used to involve and empower, allowing students to shape their learning experience through engagement. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) highlights student feedback and representation as fundamental to the HEA conceptualisation of engagement, though the extent to which this translates into practice is not fully understood. Specifically, in relation to the HE

sector, student engagement is defined as 'participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which lead to a range of measurable outcomes' (Kuh *et al*., 2007).

Student to teacher feedback: A case for culturally embedded practice

Student engagement provides a useful framework for considering how staff and students can both use feedback to develop a dialogic partnership that works towards enhancing teaching and learning. The importance of student feedback within this engagement process is characterised by Kandiko Howson (2015), who suggest that student feedback can provide insights into module teaching and issues regarding student learning. When gathered throughout the term (rather than simply an evaluation at the end), feedback can address current issues more quickly, measure the effectiveness of teaching, and document progression. However, and most importantly, it can provide students with a means to appreciate that their experiences on a module matter.

Thus, effective feedback processes are built on three principles: firstly, that students are provided with an opportunity to feedback on their learning experiences; that this feedback is listened to and valued, and crucially, seen to be so by the students providing feedback; and finally, that the communication is acted upon, and again seen to be so by the students. Embedding a more dynamic and real-time student feedback process may serve to enhance HE by increasing student engagement and improving teaching and learning processes.

A multi-systemic feedback intervention

A multi-systemic feedback approach was used to design an intervention in one HE third year optional module in Psychology at the University of West London, with the purpose of engaging students in providing student-to-teacher feedback. This multi-systemic pilot intervention program involved three separate feedback approaches (i.e., 'treatment groups'). The first treatment group involved all students in the module (N=48) who were asked to anonymously provide weekly feedback via a Poll Everywhere survey, an in class, real-time provision where survey results are disseminated to students immediately upon collection. The second treatment group involved 9 students chosen at random who were asked to provide feedback in a semi-structured, one-to-one feedback session with the module leader. Students did this one-to-one feedback session three times throughout the module, once every 4 weeks. The third treatment group brought 5 other students (not those who participated in one-to-one feedback sessions, but otherwise chosen at random) into a focus group to provide feedback to the module leader in three focus group sessions, once every 4 weeks.

The present study

The present study aimed to examine the experience of participating in these interventions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine students' experiences of a providing student-to-teacher feedback and the impact this may have on their experience of the module, their learning and their engagement. Qualitative thematic analyses examined participants' experiences of these feedback processes. In contrast to typical approaches to gathering student feedback, this study was not concerned with the results of the specific feedback (e.g., how effective was the module) but rather, the effects of engaging in the student-to-teacher feedback process.

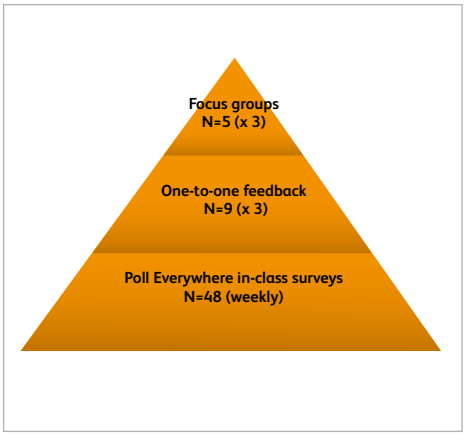

FIGURE 1: The Feedback Intervention Design

Methodology

Participants and procedure

Six students participated in one semi-structured interview each (4 female and 2 males, of varying ethnic backgrounds, mean age 29.33 years). Two students from each intervention treatment group were included (i.e., two who participated in the focus group feedback method, two who had given feedback in one-to-one sessions, and two who had only provided in-class real time feedback). All students interviewed had experience providing end of module feedback in university, but had not experienced providing student-to-teacher feedback during the course of a module as this intervention had introduced.

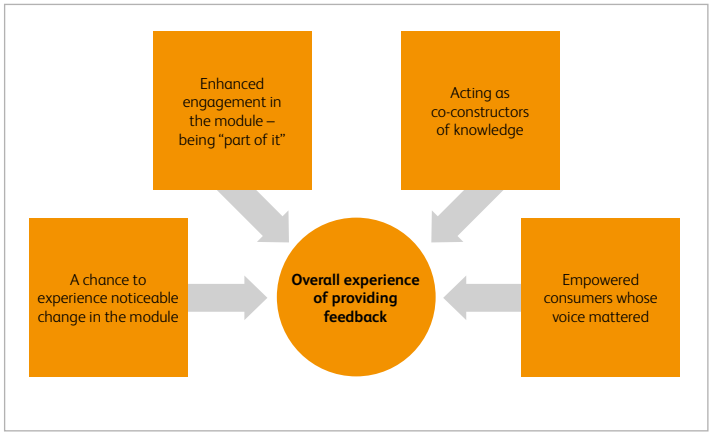

FIGURE 2: Students' overall experience of providing feedback

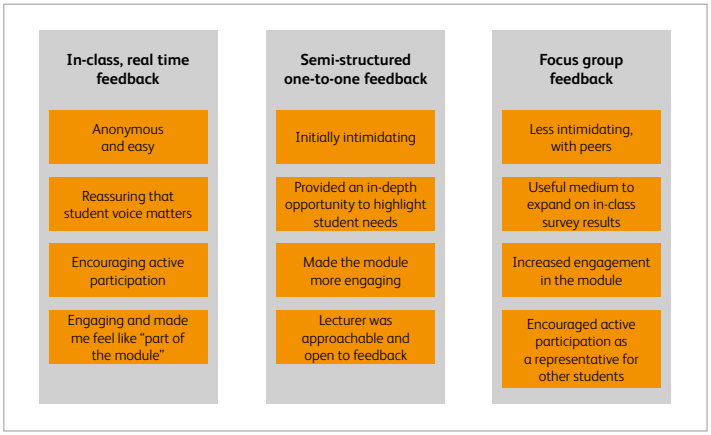

FIGURE 3: Students' experience of providing feedback through specific media

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to examine the student experience of engaging with feedback. Semi-structured interviews were used due to their flexibility, theoretical elasticity, and ability to highlight subjective meaning (Breakwell, 2006). Interviews lasted for an average of 40 minutes and refreshments were provided. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically in accordance with the analytical recommendations of Braun & Clarke (2006).

Findings

Two key areas were discussed by participants: the overall experience of engaging in feedback (findings 1); and how different feedback methods were experienced (findings 2).

Findings 1

Figure two (above left) illustrates the key themes that emerged from participants' overall experience of providing feedback throughout the module.

Participants experienced several sources of impact as a result of feeding back, highlighting two emergent themes of interest. Principally, participants noted the impact that providing feedback had on their learning experience on the module, highlighting noticeable changes for the positive (e.g., extending focus on particular points of interest, providing extended additional reading materials, and delving deeper into specific debates at the request of students):

> **Emma:** It feels like it was a worthwhile exercise because it actually changed things. It gave us a way to highlight the good, not just the bad. The sessions the module leader taught were really helpful… He made sessions longer, illustrated critical evaluation as it came up, and helped prep for the exams based on what we requested so it was a useful forum.

Students also noted a general enhancement in engagement in the module as a result of providing feedback. Specifically, participants expressed wanting to note the good and bad in the module as critical co-constructors of knowledge and understanding:

> **Louise:** Oh, it has been really useful for me… I have found it like having statutory rights ya know… like I can say when I am not happy with something while it's happening rather than having to wait till the end. It made me sit up and say this is or isn't ok. It was refreshing because as students we don't often get a chance to give our input in real time and that made me want to fully appreciate what I liked and what I wanted to change. I was given a voice and I wanted to use it. I think it made me engage more because I was looking for things to feedback on…

Generally, participants reported feeling like trusted co-contributors to the module and that providing feedback in this way allowed them to make things better for them, rather than the following cohort (as with end of year feedback). Feedback through this intervention was highlighted as an empowering experience, allowing students to play an 'active' role in the module, with the added benefit of creating a diligence among the students, almost as if being empowered consumers enhanced engagement in their 'consumption'.

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Findings 2

Figure 3, above right, highlights the themes which emerged from considering the specific medium of feedback. Within these findings, insights are provided about the participant experience of engaging in each form individually: either in anonymous, real time feedback in the form of weekly in-class survey feedback (Poll Everywhere); semi-structured on-to-one feedback sessions; and focus group feedback sessions.

Poll Everywhere feedback

Poll Everywhere was identified as reassuring as well as engaging, and the anonymous nature of the dialogues encouraged students to take part freely. This perceived freedom provides students with anonymity from both their teacher and their peers, creating an environment where students do not fear asking particular questions or providing insights that may otherwise make them stand out.

> **Toby:** I think it's really good to have students do this… We only usually give mid-way and end of module feedback but this was kind of encouraging from the beginning of the module. It allowed us to see that we matter throughout the module, rather than just to evidence how we felt about it after the fact. It at least encouraged me to think that it mattered what I thought during and that I could

be responded to… Like my experience could be tailored to some extent. It encouraged me to contribute and being anonymous helped that.

Furthermore, the weekly anonymised feedback also provided students with reassurances about their rights within the module and their place as active contributors. Notions of feeling like an important part of the module, rather than simply students working under the instruction of a teacher manifested in the experiences of participants:

Victoria: In a way, I suppose it gave us an active role, it meant that we could say what we thought, we knew that others could see that and most importantly we could see that the teaching staff could see it. There and then we could also try to understand what, if anything, could be done, perhaps… does that make sense? In a way, I guess it meant that we were somehow involved and not just as students… each week we had this time and it meant we could develop things for ourselves. It was like we were part of the thinking within the module…

One-to-one feedback

Thematic analysis of the participant's experiences of feedback interviews also highlighted the emergence of several key themes. In contrast to the Poll Everywhere feedback, interviews were primarily noted as intimidating due to the lack of anonymity and the face-to-face nature of the interviews. Despite extended efforts to reassure students that their information is developmental, may be good and/or bad, and is unrelated to their performance on the module; and reiteration of the confidentiality, anonymity, and desire for honesty in their views, this was raised by Sara and Emma. Emma notes that this is something she was able to get past. It may be that this process could be less intimidating if conducted by a third party, which is further considered in the discussion section.

Sara: Well obviously it's a little different, being a one-to-one interview, it isn't anonymous. Emma: It was good to have an opportunity to speak more in-depth… You have to get past the fact that you are sat there with your lecturer being asked to give good and maybe bad feedback.

Despite this intimidation, participants further discussed interviews as a useful experience for their learning:

Sara: but I think that's the price you pay for being able to get the good quality feedback, the stuff that most represents what you want to say about your experience of the module. Once the barriers had been broken down, like after the first five minutes of the first interview it was just a conversation and it flowed… It was really supportive and allowed me to give examples and go in-depth about my views of the module and that was a really supportive environment to be in.

Sara suggests that the process being slightly intimidating is the price you pay for working towards tailoring the learning experience. In the above extract, it can be seen how Sara notes that the initial barriers get broken down early in the interview – it becomes far more conversation-like through a supportive interview environment. The provision of an in-depth opportunity to highlight students' needs offers a chance to consider what may improve the learning experience for them, with the opportunity to share their voice holding particular importance. Furthermore, Emma notes that the process encouraged her engagement and made the academic teaching staff appear more approachable. This openness to feedback appears to be a key means by which the process is associated with engagement for participants.

Emma: I think it makes for a useful experience all round as it made me engage more and I think it makes you (academic) more approachable too.

Focus group feedback

Participants involved in focus group feedback noted that the process was useful as an expansion on the in-class feedback exercise, allowing participants the opportunity to go into greater depth:

Louise: The focus groups were a good and useful forum to develop the points and bring things up, maybe in a more thorough way.

Significantly, focus group attendees also reflected on the role the feedback played in their engagement in the module:

Dan: Being invited to actively give feedback was a good thing, it felt like I was being invited to participate in a way that meant I was getting out of it what I needed, or at least… ya know… being offered the opportunity to express that, does that make sense?

Students were positive about the opportunity to provide real-time feedback within the module, which was the essence of this intervention

Louise: Yeah, I think the group bit helped to frame it that way for me… it was like we were part of a panel of people being involved in this thing to represent the wider group. Like a student representative committee for the module. I took it seriously and wanted to get my points across, good and bad, or kind of developmental, ya know… not bad.

Dan and Louise discuss a sense of contributing to the learning experience in relation to the feedback process. They also note that the focus group medium served to reinforce their engagement, bringing with it a role of representation. Interestingly, participants involved in focus group feedback do not note the brief intimidating experience that was common in the one-to-one interviews. The presence of peers perhaps diluting their individual exposure.

In summary, students were positive about the opportunity to provide real-time feedback within the module, which was the essence of this intervention. Figure 3 highlights key themes, and interview narrative excerpts highlight the impact this had on students' engagement with the module and empowerment they gained over their own learning through the process of providing student-to-teacher feedback.

Discussion and implications

The inclusion of student perspectives and experiential feedback is not a new proposal. However, the implementation of holistic, embedded, multi-systemic feedback dialogues within a module provides new insight into the role such systems may play in student engagement. Experiential accounts have highlighted this to be a process which increases engagement and creates a more active system of student participation, with benefits to both student and teacher. Working closely with students in the pursuit of active feedback mechanisms throughout the module may serve to empower students and encourage them to become more involved in their educational process. The findings of this brief evaluation are consistent with the outcomes proposed by Kandiko Howson (2015), who highlights that such feedback systems can be mutually beneficial to teaching staff and students and may enhance teaching, learning and the overall experiences of students.

Embedding this as a wider practice at the university has important potential for student engagement and attainment. This would represent a mutually beneficial pedagogical practice, with the provision of a means to enhance teaching, learning and the overall experiences of students (Kandiko Howson, 2015). As a model, this positions feedback as a culturally embedded social practice, where engagement is not considered an outcome but a process, particularly when students are given choice and input in their experiences. This represents a different challenge entirely, but the benefits of approaches which aim to foster feedback in this way are evident (Baxter, Magdola, & King, 2004). Feedback represents a key process for transforming experiences by empowering students to bring their own perspectives, share their experiences, and shape the co-construction of knowledge.

This project was implemented as a teaching intervention during PGCert Higher Education Training. As such, there are a number of limitations on the scale and scope, not least that as the module leader, teacher, interviewer, and focus group facilitator, demand characteristics are present within the procedure. In developing this research, an unrelated third party may be used for more impartial data collection. Beneficial future directions include expanding the sample and data collection as well as examining the effects of participating in student-to-teacher feedback on important indicators of student success, including engagement and attainment. These early, tentative findings are intended as a pilot study to encourage consideration of how to best enhance student engagement, improve student attainment and retention, and support teacher professional development in higher education.

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