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Feeding forward: using feedback to promote student reflection and learning – a teaching model

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Engaging in reflection is a vital part of learning for university students and its practice should be embedded in course design. Feedback on written work can be used as a vehicle for reflection. Both the gift and receipt of feedback and the habit of reflection require practice and capturing this experiential learning can be achieved in a class environment. This paper outlines how reflection on written feedback may be used formatively by teachers in a university context. The paper reports on the use of a simple tool, a self-copying sheet, given to management undergraduates on the return of coursework, which engages students and captures their reflection on their feedback. The teaching model presented outlines an approach to reflective learning that recognises the need for students to engage with feedback in the classroom, to reflect on it and to feed forward to the next assessment, thus completing the learning cycle.

Keywords: reflection; feedback; Personal Development Plans; experiential learning; teaching model

Introduction

An essential part of the student learning process at university comes from engaging with and reflecting on the written feedback received on assessed work, yet lack of student reflection and lack of engagement with written feedback are common problems. This paper addresses these issues by proposing a means of using feedback on assessment as a vehicle for greater student reflection. Its objectives are to establish the links between the key literature themes of feedback and reflection and the challenges and benefits; to offer a teaching tool to facilitate the process of reflecting on written feedback; and to create a teaching model that illustrates the role of explicit reflection on written feedback.

Teaching reflection needs to be planned and integrated into students' individual courses of study, so that there are numerous opportunities to engage with reflection and learn throughout their higher education. Feedback offers students an experiential base for reflection. If learning from feedback is to be effective, programmes should be designed to include dedicated classroom time allocated for reflection on written feedback, thus providing an opportunity for feeding forward and for self-development for university students, and placing reflection on feedback at the heart (Mutch, 2003).

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The value of reflection

Reflection is a term which has been much used in the educational literature over the past decade (e.g. Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Moon, 1999) but there remains a lack of consensus over its meaning. The ability to reflect on and analyse material in order to form reasoned judgements is central to critical thinking and deeper learning. In order to enable students to learn from experience and to feed forward into continual personal and professional development, reflection needs to be captured and recorded in some way.

Several authors have attempted to explain the value of reflection. Moon (2002) suggests that reflection will facilitate both the diagnosis of core strengths and weaknesses, and the acquisition of a questioning approach. Sadler (1989) argues that in order to take effective action, students need to be able to evaluate their own learning and so develop skills in self-assessment. Transferring tacit self-knowledge (Smith & Pilling, 2007) into explicit plans for improvement increases the value gained from learning and helps students create a directional strategy. For the purposes of this paper, reflection is a mental process that incorporates critical thought about an experience and demonstrates learning that can be taken forward. A reflective student will practise and demonstrate transferable self-knowledge, based on a questioning approach to themselves, their situation and the roles of others, in order to create a new and different frame of reference. Figure 1, which has been adapted from Gibbs (1988), presents a framework for experiential learning that sums up the process of reflective learning.

In order to develop a more critical approach to their learning in general, Marton and Säljö (1984) proposed that students must engage in deep, not surface learning. Active learning through self-appropriation of knowledge rather than passive absorption of information is indicative of deeper learning, as is greater intrinsic motivation (Entwistle, 1987). Active learning has several layers (Dee Fink, 2007). These are firstly to acquire the information or ideas, from reading or lectures, then to have an experience, such as a seminar activity. Finally, there should be an opportunity for reflecting on the meaning of the information or the experience. It is this third layer that may be squeezed out in the modern context of higher education. Students may have little time to reflect on feedback on their work, for example, owing to timetabling,

Description – what happened?
Feelings – what did I feel about it?
Evaluation – was it a positive or negative experience?
Analysis – what sense can I make of the experience, where does it fit within my personal development?
Conclusion – what else could I have done?
Action plan – in a similar situation what would I do now?

Figure 1. Reflection framework. Adapted from Gibbs (1988).

their part-time jobs, and the pressures of modular degrees. Thus, this essential element of learning is frequently the one on which students spend the least time, as a formal time is not made available (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002). Our contention is that students need dedicated class reflection time and that this is currently lacking.

There is a strong case for linking time spent in class on reflection to the feedback and assessment cycle. Students are interested in and value feedback and there is evidence in the literature that it can prompt reflection and deeper learning (Higgins et al., 2002). Written reflection can be more powerful than oral discussion (Yinger & Clark, 1981) and provides a permanent record for later reference. During their time at university, students will receive regular written feedback on their submitted work from experts that most will rarely experience again (Cottrell, 2003). Good feedback practice 'facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning' (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 207) and indicates things to build on (Hyland, 2000). Feedback is the most powerful single factor that enhances achievement and increases the probability that learning will happen (Hattie & Jaeger, 1998), though in order to achieve this, good feedback practice is essential (Juwah et al., 2004). Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, and Litjens (2008) propose a model that incorporates a guidance and feedback loop to promote learning from all types of assessment, with emphasis on feeding forward to the next piece of work as the final step; though evidence suggests only some students will use it in this way (Ding, 1998; Hyland, 2000).

The transition from student to graduate worker requires a significant shift in thinking, including acquiring the ability to self-reflect and to evaluate one's efforts. Students need to be familiar with reflective practice before entering the world of work, and be able to demonstrate transferable skills such as the ability to reflect (Smith & Pilling, 2007). Positive changes in an organisation may be more likely when employees are involved in assessing their own learning and can apply new knowledge and skills (Nolan, Raban, & Waniganayake, 2005). Self-evaluation and self-assessment are pivotal to developing lifelong learning (Boud, 2000; Rushton, 2005) and acquiring the habit of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) is a core management skill. Reflective practice is a requirement of many professions (Betts, 2004) and of university courses, driven by the government agenda which promotes the teaching of skills, such as reflection, that underpin lifelong learning.

Using feedback as a vehicle for reflection

Giving feedback is a socially constructed process, affected by the conditions in which it was produced, distributed, and received (Fairclough, 1995; Lea & Street, 1998). Evidence from institutional audit suggests that it is not always done well in higher education (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2006). In more than 40% of business schools inspected by the QAA, feedback was of variable quality, lacked focus, was too brief and provided too late to be of value (QAA, 2001). Feedback that is formative – in that it can be used by both tutor and student to improve learning, teaching, and achievement – has potentially a key role to play in promoting student reflection. Formative assessment should provide students with the tools to enable them to improve their performance, but the quality of the formative feedback is critical (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Students need help in making the connections between their feedback, the characteristics of their work, and how to improve it in future.

Good quality feedback must be accurate, timely, comprehensive, and appropriate but also accessible to the learner, have catalytic and coaching value, and inspire confidence and hope (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Sadler, 1998; Weaver, 2006). In order for it to enable learning, students need to understand the purpose of feedback and assessment criteria (Weaver, 2006) and to be actively involved in monitoring their own learning and progress.

Feedback on generic issues has greater potential to feed forward into future tasks (Carless, 2006), though Higgins (2000) contends that many students are unable to understand feedback comments and to interpret them correctly. Student self-esteem may be damaged by feedback (Ivanic, Clark, & Rimmershaw, 2000) and students are concerned by the timing, fairness, extent of feedback, and the lack of development that it may afford (Holmes & Smith, 2003; Mutch, 2003). If papers are returned after a module or unit is completed, there is less incentive to think about the feedback (Ding, 1998; Higgins et al., 2002; Hounsell, 1987). Written feedback is relatively under-researched (Higgins et al., 2002). Written feedback sheets, as Randall and Mirador (2003) have pointed out, also have other audiences (external examiners, internal examiners, and other faculty staff). The language used by academics, the lack of debate and dialogue, the power relationships, and the emotional nature of the student investment in writing an assignment all inhibit understanding (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002). As a result, students do not find feedback to be routinely helpful (Maclellan, 2001), and may feel so disempowered by not having the opportunity to discuss and to question it, that they disengage from learning from it (Hyatt, 2005).

Tutors often do not see the impact of their feedback, or the lack of it, on the students' next piece of work. After reflecting on their own teaching practices, teachers are more likely to discuss feedback with their students and to encourage them to use the feedback they have received (Haigh & Dixon, 2007). The extent to which they are reflective affects the effectiveness of their feedback, and increased awareness of their role in giving feedback can contribute to their own development as reflective practitioners (Yorke, 2003). Designing opportunities for reflection on feedback is important (Mutch, 2003), as are the conditions in which it is received. Using a familiar classroom environment can help facilitate an appropriate mental state for reflection, (Gustafson & Bennett, 1999). An active classroom facilitates personal involvement with the material and provokes students into discussion and into one type of reflection (Browne & Freeman, 2000).

Method

Using the framework suggested by Gibbs (1988), and acknowledging Moon's work on reflection (1999), we devised an exercise for second- and third-year students to prompt them to reflect in a more structured and systematic way (Cottrell, 2003) about the feedback they had received for coursework assignments. After some careful introductory remarks, the undergraduate students received their assignments back in a seminar with a blank reflection sheet. A copy of this sheet and an explanation of its purpose were also presented in the course documentation. The sheet consisted of two pages of carbon-imprinted paper with three questions.

The first question, *what do I feel about this feedback?*, enabled students to focus on the emotional response to the feedback and its attendant mark, so that the student could document how they felt upon receiving their feedback. This question was created to empower the student (Moon, 1999) and to recognise their positive and/or

negative emotions. It records an immediate reaction, which Surbeck, Park Han, & Moyer (1991) suggest is one level of reflection. By writing their feelings down, students could separate their emotional response to the feedback from rational thought and begin to reflect.

The second question, *what do I think about this feedback?*, encouraged the students to be analytical about the feedback. This section of the form incorporates the 'evaluation' and 'analysis' elements of Gibbs' framework (1988). The third question, *based on this feedback what actions could I take to improve my work for another assignment?*, combines the two final aspects of Gibbs' framework, 'conclusion' and 'action plan', with the key characteristics of reflective practice, such as the 'aim to improve practice in the future', 'aim of self-development' and 'better understanding' (Moon, 1999). It encourages the student to think of concrete actions they can take to improve the outcome next time and helps develop an experience into learning (Boud et al., 1985).

The students were encouraged to read the feedback they had received, reflect on it, and fill in the self-copying sheet. They then tore off the top copy and, if they wished, could leave it with the teaching team. They retained the bottom copy. It was intended that the students could then build up a bank of reflection sheets, with points for action on each one. Not only does this 'force' some type of reflection whilst the assignment is still fresh in their minds, it also offers an opportunity to collate a portfolio of reflective activities, providing material for Personal Development Plans (PDP) (Cottrell, 2003). The sheets can form a useful resource for tutors, by giving a real insight into the students' reflections (Figure 2).

Reflection on Feedback
What do I *feel* about this feedback?
I feel that this feedback is useful, because it will help me to improve my writing and range of
sources in my other/future modules
What do I *think* about this feedback?
I think this feedback is valid and has made me aware of my weaknesses
Based on this feedback what *actions* could I take to improve my work for another assignment?
1. Research in greater depth as far as using more journals and theories
2. Ensure that my statements are supported by evidence
3. Double check referencing
4. Plan my essay in detail so that I do not miss any important parts out

Figure 2. A real example of a completed reflection on feedback sheet.

The reflection on feedback sheets have been used on two undergraduate modules, for the past three years, one with second-year and one with final-year students within a post-1992 university business school. A total of 167 sheets were reviewed to judge whether the students had used them as intended. There was manual content analysis of the sheets' comments by both authors independently, to identify the most often repeated words and phrases that the students had used in their reflective comments, as suggested by Krippendorf (1980), and all of these were coded into polythetic groups (Bailey, 1994), as illustrated by Table 1. Themes were not identified in advance but emerged from the analysis of the completed sheets.

Main findings

Students undertook the task of reading the feedback they had received positively, reflecting on it and completing the sheets within class time. This supports the research from Gustafson and Bennett (1999) that a familiar formal learning environment was conducive for reflection to take place, and Weaver's (2006) suggestions about actively involving students in the feedback they receive. Dedicating class time emphasises the importance attached to reflection and encourages the students to engage with it (Higgins et al., 2002). Students appeared enthusiastic about a tool for capturing their reflection on paper (Yinger & Clark, 1981) and the opportunity to make their thoughts explicit, echoing Daudelin and Hall's (1997) comment on the importance of capturing reflection. Some students wrote in note form, whilst others wrote short paragraphs, and, particularly in relation to the first question, used exclamation marks and emoticons liberally, illustrating their engagement with the process by using familiar symbols to express their feelings.

The responses to the first question illustrated the students' ability to vent their emotions and 'dump' their feelings (Surbeck et al., 1991) before considering the feedback. Initial responses such as 'gutted', 'relieved', and 'happy' reflect their level of personal involvement (Browne & Freeman, 2000) and their readiness to record their reflection on paper (Yinger & Clark, 1981). The second question on the pro-forma

Table 1. Aggregated comments from the 'reflection on feedback' sheets.

	Student year and number of completed sheets	
	Second year (75)	Final year (92)
What do I *feel* about this feedback?	Pleased, happy, relieved, disappointed, irritated, gutted, motivated, upset, satisfied, worried	Happy, relieved, disappointed, saddened, upset, pleased, mixed emotions
What do I *think* about this feedback?	Fair, helpful, useful, constructive	Constructive, justified, useful, valid, fair
Based on this feedback what *actions* could I take to improve my work for another assignment?	Check marking criteria, improve referencing, provide more evidence, extend ideas, give clearer structure, apply more theory, be more analytical, go to peer review, don't want to make same mistakes again, improve time management, make more of a plan for my essay	Leave time to review piece once written, improve referencing, better explanation of ideas, read around subject more, start assignment earlier, move from being descriptive to analysing, improve criticality, make sure I focus on the question asked

elicited objective comments including 'fair', 'constructive', and 'useful'. Based on these comments, the students appeared to be able to distance themselves from their work and reflect on the feedback given, as suggested by Higgins et al. (2002).

When answering the third question, there was a group of broader statements, such as 'provide more evidence' and 'better explanation of ideas'. Most students demonstrated a degree of self-reflection and active learning (Dee Fink, 2007) and were able to identify development needs through the use of the feedback sheets (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsman, 1999; Sadler, 1989). The progression of tacit knowledge into specific future actions for self-improvement was evident from the actions that were suggested that might improve future work, for example, 'go to peer review', 'start assignment earlier', and 'improve referencing'.

From the findings, not all the students found it easy to pinpoint future actions on the basis of their written feedback. Two comments demonstrated a real lack of empowerment; 'these are the usual things that my coursework says' and 'these comments reflect other pieces of coursework'. These students are aware of recurring themes in the feedback they receive, but do not seem to be able to progress forward from that point. This may illustrate a limitation with the approach taken, in that some students may not possess the critical faculties to reflect on their feedback, form written comments and then to feed forward. Not understanding the feedback they receive, and therefore not being able to reflect upon it, is also an issue that should be raised. Ideally, students should collect their reflection sheets from a number of different courses or modules and reflect on the assembled material. They could then build a coherent and comprehensive action plan to further improve themselves as learners.

Development of the model

Students regularly present oral, written, or other work for assessment and receive written feedback on it from their tutors. They may ignore the feedback, read it and take no action, or read it and take some action. Using a pre-printed form as a vehicle for reflection on feedback could be seen as endorsing a rather instrumental approach to learning. If students come to regard the reflection sheets as the sole extent of their reflection on their learning, they and their teachers will have missed the purpose. The aim is to use the sheets to prompt greater reflection and to kick-start the process of reflective learning, by making sure that the students have a concrete experience or set of experiences on which to reflect in an orderly and structured manner, with a series of outcomes or actions that can feed forward into future learning activities.

Figure 3 presents a model of this process. The completed sheet could form part of the portfolio of evidence of learning and skills that contribute to the student's PDP. It can also be used to feed forward into the next stage of learning and assessment. In this way, the initial assessment can feed into the next one and the cycle of learning is completed. This teaching model of reflective learning supports key findings in the literature on feedback. This includes the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) who suggested that effective feedback helps students to make the connections between their own work and the scope for future improvement. It is timely (Weaver, 2006), encourages students to become more actively involved in monitoring their own progress (Mutch, 2003), and provides them with a vehicle to feed forward (Hounsell et al., 2008) to future work, reinforcing Mutch's (2003) view that designing opportunities for reflection is important and valuable to students. The model provides practical guidance to teachers on how to complete the assessment/feedback/feeding forward loop (Hounsell et al., 2008).

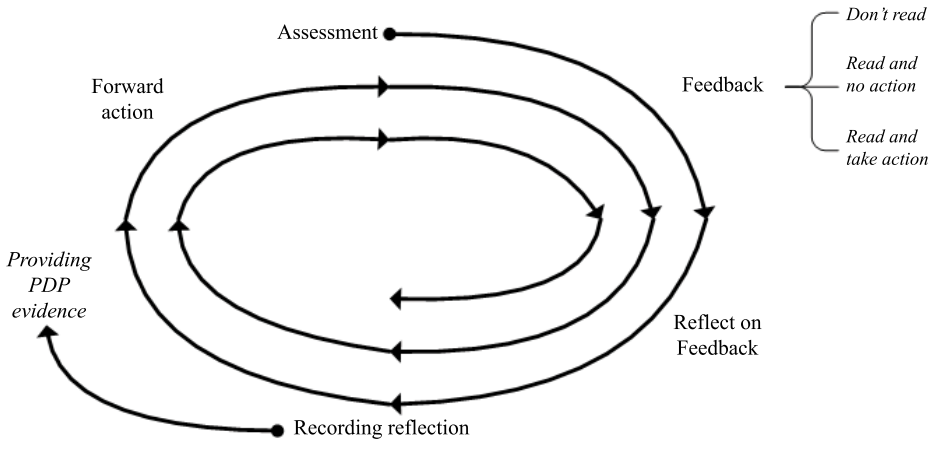

Figure 3. Model of reflection, recording and forward action.

Conclusions

Reflection is central to learning from experience and encouraging and practising reflection should be part of routine teaching. Currently, there is insufficient dedicated class time given to reflection. Learning and practising reflection should be embedded into course design at the level of the degree programme, as it needs to be iterative and regularly reinforced.

In this paper we have demonstrated the use of a structured and simplified tool which facilitates a starting point for reflection and helps provide answers to the many problems posed with written feedback in a university context. Reflecting on written feedback in a controlled class environment captures learning by doing and enables students to feed their learning forward into their future work. The feedback sheet acts as a practical teaching tool to unpick a complex subject and offers a means for capturing reflection that can be used across a wide range of course types. The results from trials indicate that students can use it as it was intended. The use of Gibbs' framework as the foundation of this form is both a strength and a limitation.

The teaching model outlines an approach to reflective learning that acknowledges the need for providing PDP evidence in addition to completing the assessment, feedback, reflection and learning cycle. The model illustrates the opportunity provided by capturing reflection on feedback (through the sheet), and for closing the gap between reflection and feeding forward into future work. This paper's contribution lies in the fourth and fifth elements of the model, namely the recognition of the importance of recording reflection on written feedback and the subsequent feeding forward into future assessment. This simple model of experiential learning if used in teaching will enable students across disciplines to develop reflective habits which they need in order to support their future role in the work place.

Notes on contributors

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