"The Comments Were Clear But You Don't Understand": Supporting Written Feedback With Effective And Proactive Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper reports part of a dissertation research for the award of an MA degree at a UK University. The dissertation research investigated how Nigerian students adapted to novel pedagogic practices in a UK University. One of such novel pedagogic practices for some of the students was the receiving of feedback comments on coursework drafts and on summative assessments. Several studies have found that students may not always understand the feedback comments they receive, thereby undermining its learning and achievement potential (Chanock, 2000; Weaver, 2006; Smith & Gorard, 2005; Nicol, 2010). Reasons for this include comments that are too vague, general, ambiguous, abstract or in unfamiliar disciplinary discourse (Nicol, 2010). In this paper, it is argued that for feedback comments to adequately support learning and achievement, it should be followed up by dialogue that is proactive and effective, initiated by any of the concerned parties in an environment of trust.

Keywords

Feedback comments,Dialogue, Learning, Assessment, Achievement

1. Introduction

Feedback should reveal the gap that exists between where learners are in their learning and where they ought to be as well as proffer guidelines for bridging the gap (Sadler, 1989). However, some studies found that feedback did not necessarily support learning (e.g. Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smith & Gorard, 2005). One of the factors that influence the impact of feedback on learning is the quality of feedback comments (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Butler & Winne, 1995; Nicol & Macfarlene-Dick, 2006; Stobart, 2008). When students do not understand feedback comments, it is difficult for them to engage with such feedback in ways that will improve their learning and achievement in current and/or future assignments. Hence, there may be need for effective and proactive dialogue over feedback to help clarify comments and address misperceptions, misconceptions and wrong understandings. Blair & McGinty, (2013, pp. 466-467) described the dialogue over feedback as "a collaborative discussion" between tutor and student or between student and student "which enables shared understandings and subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on the exchange". By proactive, it is implied that dialogue must be initiated or caused to happen by any of the concerned parties in a feedback interaction. This is the central argument of this paper.

2. Describing Feedback Comments

In this paper, Carless' (2006:220) description of feedback as the "written annotations and comments on drafts or on finalized assignments, in addition to verbal dialogues prior to or after submission" is adopted. Several authors have classified feedback comments in a number of ways (see Hyatt, 2005; Hyland, 2001; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Brown and Glover, 2006). For example, analyzing 60 feedback commentaries of Masters level assignments in Educational Studies, Hyatt (2005) suggested seven types of feedback comments (each with sub categories) based on their **purpose**: *Phatic*, *Developmental*, *Structural, Stylistic, Content-related, Methodological and Administrative* comments. *Phatic comments* establish and maintain teacher-student academic relationship. *Developmental comments* aid students with subsequent assignments. *Structural comments* address how an assignment is structured. *Stylistic comments* deal with the language and presentation style. *Content-related comments,* as the name implies, evaluate the appropriateness/accuracy of content. *Methodological comments* concern itself with the methodological process, approach and procedures underlying an assignment. While, *administrative comments* relate to administrative procedures.

Based on **function**, Brown and Glover (2006) identified comments that are mere *indications* of the actual level of a student's understanding or performance on an assignment, comments that provide *corrections* and those that provide *explanations*. On the other hand, Hattie and Timperley (2007) distinguished feedback comments based on four **levels** at which they can be directed at. Comments directed at the *task level* are focused on how well a task has been performed or achieved in relation to established criteria or standards. At the *process level,* comments goes beyond giving periphery information about a task, to providing strategies for students to construct their own understanding and establish meanings for themselves. Comments directed at the *self-regulation/metacognition level* focus on the task in relation to the way students regulate their actions toward learning goals. At the *self/personal level,* comments contain little or no information relating to the task, rather, focusing on the self/person in terms of ability, self-esteem etc. These classifications do not exhaust the potential general categories of feedback comments, but they offer a framework for understanding the nature of common feedback comments found in UK higher institutions.

3. Literature Review

According to Chi (1996) cited in Watkins (2000:77), "learning is fostered through co-construction, exchanging narratives in the process we call dialogue". In co-constructivist pedagogy, feedback is viewed as a dialogic relationship, which enable learners reflect on learning and meta-learning in its appropriate context, and in relation to previous and intended learning (Askew & Lodge, 2000). The learner is viewed as active and capable of independent thought and reasoning, which can be "moved toward some shared frame of reference" (Bruner 1999:13). Through enquiry, discovery learning, open-ended questioning, negotiation, discussion, collaboration and interaction, the learner assumes an active role by constructing knowledge for him/herself (Askew & Lodge, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) echoed the co-constructivist view that learning is an active meaning-making process but further emphasised that social interaction was fundamental for cognitive and intellectual development. Vygotsky argued that knowledge is socially constructed and highlighted the roles of social processes in the internalisation and mediation of thought. This school of theory has been described as Social Constructivism.

Central to Vygotsky's theory was the presence of a more skilled partner, be it a peer or an adult in the learning process, whose responsibility it was to guide the learner towards taking control of their learning (Wood & Wood, 2013). The role of the more skilled has been variously described as ""guided participation" (Rogoff, 1990) and "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). According to Rogoff (2013:280), social interaction facilitated the cognitive development of the individual through "joint problem solving with guidance by a person who is more skilled". To conceptualise feedback as a two-way social constructive process, it has to incorporate effective dialogue, which enables the tutor who is supposedly "more skilled", to provide appropriate guidance to the student. Essentially, effective dialogue should, as Laurillard (2002) highlights, be *adaptive*, *discursive*, *interactive* and *reflective*. By *adaptive,* dialogue should suit the needs of the individual student. Usually, feedback is tailored to the needs of each student as perceived by the tutor, and so must effective dialogue. By being *discursive,* dialogue should be contingent on the feedback tasks or actions, drawing mutual conclusions through reasoning and engagement. As *interactive,* dialogue should be a two-way communication process. A dialogue should be *reflective* by motivating the parties involved in the feedback process to reflect on the tasks, actions and goals of the feedback. Carless (2013:90) argue that such effective dialogue provide adequate opportunities for the clarification of expectations, sharing of interpretations and negotiations of meanings.

In the absence of dialogue over written feedback, feedback processes aligns itself to a didactic pedagogy that promotes a transmission view of teaching and learning. Didactic pedagogy sees the mind of learners as a 'tabula rasa', that is, a blank slate, and imposes a view of pedagogic activities directed at filling up the slate of the learner's mind (Bruner, 1999). This form of pedagogy is essentially a one-way communication and offers an unequal power relation that stifles students control over their learning, by constraining them to unquestioningly accept the expert's (tutor) view (Rogoff, 2013). The teacher is seen as an authority/expert in particular field(s) of knowledge and is responsible for preparing the knowledge to be transmitted, and in motivating the learner (either by incentives or by punishment) to be receptive to what is being transmitted (Rogoff et al., 1996). However, Vygotsky argued that the inequality lay in "skills and understanding rather than in power" (cited in Rogoff 2013, p. 287). It is important to add that when dialogue is ineffective, it may have adopted the transmission pedagogy. Such ineffective dialogue has been branded "monologue disguised as dialogue" or might merely be a "technical dialogue" which is just concerned with the exchange of feedback information (Buber (2002) cited in Stern and Backhouse 2011, p. 339).

4. Research method

The research adopted an interpretive qualitative research design, drawing methodological guidance from some aspects of a form of phenomenology called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). By purposive sampling, six (6) Nigerian students studying for a MA degree in a UK University were selected. Their informed consent was formally sought and received after fulfilling standard ethical requirements of the University. The sample size of six was indicative because Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) "is resolutely idiographic, focusing on the particular rather than the universal" (Eatough & Smith 2013:183). According to Smith and Osborn (2003), the in depth analysis of individual transcripts is time consuming, hence, keeping sizes small help ensure that depth is covered without being overwhelmed by breadth. Thus, they recommended a reasonable sample of five or six participants for students using the IPA method (Ibid.). Data was collected from each of the participants on two different occasions, within about five (5) months interval, using semi-structured interviews. This paper focuses on data relating to the participants' experience of feedback comments.

5. Findings

From the interview, the students attested that the giving and receiving of written feedback was a novel experience for them. There was a consensus that feedback had been helpful especially formative feedback on drafts, despite apparent difficulty in understanding some of the feedback received:

> *The feedback in a way has helped me to say 'let me improve on what I have done before'. These are the things I should do which I have not done or should not have done which I have done before.* (Efe)

> *Without that critique of the draft, I would have been travelling down a road where I don't know where it was heading.* (Ibrahim)

It further emerged that the challenges associated with the feedback comments and the need for dialogue served as precursors for and to proactive dialogue.

5.1 The Challenges of Feedback Comments

> *The comments were clear but you don't understand. This is a new field. You are still struggling to understand the concepts. They gave you guidelines on what to do but if you don't understand and they are telling you what to do, how do you do it? (Caro)*

> *I clearly understood what I was expected to do but how to go about it is my main struggle now. (Jane)*

The students indicated above had received feedback comments on coursework drafts and were expected to re-present a final copy for assessment, after complying with the expectations highlighted in the feedback comments they received. Walker (2009) observed that because comments are expected to convey so much in few words, concepts might be used in ways difficult for students to understand or assumptions made about students' conceptual understanding of the topic. If students do not understand the feedback received, then they will neither be able to effectively engage with it in ways that will enhance learning nor adequately effect the recommendations of the feedback for better achievement. When there are conceptual mismatches between teachers and students understanding of concepts, students' meaningful interpretation of feedback comments becomes difficult (Hounsell, 1997). Again, students may understand the feedback comments received and still not know how to achieve its recommendations. It therefore appears necessary for students to have interactive engagement and dialogue over the feedback they receive, in order to achieve relevant understandings, make meaningful connections and gain new insights (Askew & Lodge, 2000). As earlier mentioned, dialogue encompasses both student - teacher and student – student active interactions.

5.2 The Need for Dialogue

> *When I sent the draft, the first feedback that I got was like some of the data I used, my tutor commented about some being old and that I should look for current data and my tutor also made reference to some points that I raise that he feels I didn't explain well enough. I tried to effect the feedback that I got from him …maybe that was why I was very*

surprised to get a C+ because I thought every correction he made on my draft essay, I effected it. **So, I was like "what else was needed?" What else didn't I do?** *(Rose)*

The student above was dismayed and demoralized after receiving a grade that she felt did not correlate with her effort; having effected all the changes she interpreted was required from the feedback. Increasingly, students are becoming dissatisfied with the outcomes of feedback comments and would really like opportunities to clarify their understanding of the feedback received through dialogue with their tutor (Blair & McGinty, 2013; Cozier et al. 2008; Thomas, 2002). Viewing the giving and receiving of feedback as a communication process, Higgins et al. (2001) argue that it occurs within "complex contexts, and so is mediated by power relationships and the nature of the predominant discourse within each setting". Chanock (2000) analysed how the same comment can have different meanings and require different approaches / responses across different disciplines and with different tutors. Furthermore, the meanings that students may derive from the same feedback comments can differ as a result of a number of variables like intelligence, emotions, sociocultural background, academic profile etc., which differ across students.

Thus, several researchers have advocated the need for feedback dialogue in order to minimise existing dissonance between the intent of tutor's feedback comments and students' understanding of the comments (e.g Hounsell et al., 2008; Higgins et al., 2001; Nicol and Macfarlene-Dick, 2006). Written feedback is dominantly a one-way communication (Nicol, 2010), with inherent didactic characteristics. Students are expected to engage with the written feedback they receive, rather than negotiate feedback (Blair & McGinty, 2013). When written feedback moves beyond the mere transmission of feedback information where student engagement is limited to using the provided information to make future improvements, to a (social) constructive feedback model which facilitates students' active engagement and reflection while encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning, learning and achievement is enhanced (Murtagh & Baker, 2009; Nicol & Macfarlene-Dick, 2006).

5.3 Proactive Dialogue

The dialogue is initiated by any of us. There are times that I initiate the dialogue because I feel that need to address the issues that have been raised, you know through the [comments]. And there are times it was the tutor who had requested for a dialogue because he felt that there are issues that we need to talk about. (John)

I didn't know if I could still go back after being given my feedback. I didn't know if I could still go back and bother him. I was too scared to explore that option. (Jane)

Tutors and students have a responsibility to stimulate and facilitate feedback dialogue if there is need for it. However, tutors have a greater responsibility to foster a confident and trusting pedagogic relationship within which students can be confident to seek assistance. It is not uncommon for students to exhibit reluctance in seeking assistance from tutors over feedback comments especially in scenarios where the giving of feedback is inherently transmission. The student, John, took active steps to seek dialogue when he needed it even when the tutor did not initiate it. Feedback was not perceived as a "gift" from the expert tutor to the novice learner, but as an interaction "constructed through loops of dialogue and information" (Askew & Lodge 2000:13). Dialogue is most effective when students feel comfortable enough to be open about their ignorance/partial understandings (Carless, 2013) and to seek assistance when needed. For tutors that contend with large classes and heavy workload situations, other sources of dialogue

like the peer dialogue can be maximized. Engagement in dialogue should be *proactive*. Students should be able to seek feedback if they perceive it as necessary and teachers should offer opportunities for dialogue to students they suspect would benefit from it.

6. Implications for Research and Practice

Although this research was a small-scale project, it does provide insight into international students' perspectives on their novel experience of giving and receiving of feedback, as opposed to the dominance of literature with the experiences of students in general. However, implications for this research field are limited considering the sample size and the restriction of its scope to the experiences of MA international students in just one UK University among so many. This paper does not underemphasize the importance and usefulness of written feedback with its accompanying comments. Rather, it strongly suggests that the giving and receiving of feedback should not end at that point. It should be followed up by a verbal dialogue that allows "more open discussion, collaboration and negotiation" (Higgins et al., 2001). Furthermore, tutors should create specific opportunities for students to engage in critical self-reflection, knowledge construction, and self-assessment in order to acquire shared meanings of the feedback comments. This can be achieved by the provision of one-to-one tutorial that allows students to identify and ask questions on any aspect of the feedback that isn't well understood. In large class size situations where this is difficult to achieve, Tutors can facilitate peer dialogue by asking students to share and discuss tutor feedback comments in organized small groups and giving collaborative assignments (Nicol, 2010).

On the other hand, tutors should endeavor to give feedback comments that are understandable, specific, timely, non-judgmental, contextualized, balanced, forward looking and transferable (Nicol 2010:512-513). It would however be more proactive to extend invitations for tutor-dialogue to students who are still dissatisfied with peer-dialogue. It is a fact that students may choose to either seek tutor-support or peer-support or even work independently (Murtagh & Baker, 2009). However, tutors and higher education providers should endeavor to build an environment of trusting relationships (Carless, 2013) with students, so that they are motivated to proactively seek help and support, if necessary. This can be achieved by reaching out to students who obviously need assistance as inferred from their work and throwing open invitations to students who desire dialogue. In the absence of these, most students will not seek assistance even when needed. Furthermore, there should be opportunities for students to develop their "assessment literacy" through critique of peers' work (Price et al. 2012). Finally, students should proactively take advantage of the dialogue opportunities that are available around them, while maximizing the increased access that Internet and technology provides.

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