Generating dialogue in assessment feedback: exploring the use of interactive coversheets

Abstract

Theoretical approaches to understanding student engagement with assessment and feedback are increasingly emphasising the importance of dialogue in recognition that learning tacit knowledge is an active, shared process. This paper evaluates an experimental approach to providing feedback which was designed to create this dialogue between tutor and student without additional work for staff. Tutors on an Outdoor Studies degree attempted to set up a dialogue with students by providing written feedback in response to students' questions about their work, requested on their assignment coversheets. Data was collected in the form of their feedback questions, interviews with students and a focus group of staff. The data indicates that the approach encouraged students to think about their writing but that students' limited understanding of staff expectations and standards limits their ability to initiate a meaningful dialogue with their tutors. More positively, the research suggests that if staff capitalise on and develop existing peer discussion of assessment, it may provide an important foundation for the greater challenge of entering into a dialogue with academic staff.

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Introduction

Achieving success as a higher education (HE) student, measured essentially through the capacity to write satisfactory assignments and examinations, is perceived as a complex task and not open to simple tutor instruction or written advice. It involves the learning of tacit knowledge, new social practices and forms of expression, and negotiating the meaning and demands of individual assignments with tutors and peers. Indeed, recent work, is emphasising how students can only 'come to know' the expectations and standards of their subject discipline if they become partners in the assessment process (O'Donovan, Price & Rust 2008), if they join the relevant academic community of practice (Lave, Wenger 1999, Northedge 2003a). Attempts to make standards more transparent by providing explicit assessment criteria, learning outcomes, or grade descriptors have been undermined because written descriptions generally 'do not have unique meanings or fixed, context-free interpretation' (Sadler 2009:1) and they are written in the discourse of the academic discipline, inaccessible to those outside that community of practice.

Indeed, evidence is growing that frequent engagements with a task are more important than 'explicit' criteria in helping students understand the standards and expectations of assessment tasks (Gibbs, Dunbar-Goddet 2007). The rationale for this is that learning the tacit knowledge apparent in communities of practice can only take place through activities such as observation, imitation, participation, and dialogue (Lave, Wenger 1991). It is an active, shared process, not a passive engagement. Therefore repeated cycles of formative and/or

summative assessment create the circumstances for students to gradually become part of that subject community.

This theoretical perspective raises the question of how far students can digest and act on written feedback which is usually a one-way 'monologic' communication (Lillis 2001, Millar 2005) located in a discourse which students may not have access to (Carless 2006) and recent empirical research supports the contention. A study of students in contrasting assessment environments tends to support the view that frequent oral feedback, with the potential for dialogue, is an important feature in helping students understand assessment standards (Gibbs, Dunbar-Goddet 2007). Likewise students in Bloxham and West's (2007) study identified dialogue with tutors as a key aid in negotiating the meaning of both assessment guidance and written feedback. The Equality Challenge Unit report (2008) on black and minority ethnic (BME) students' attainment found that BME students sought dialogue with tutors in order to help them understand what tutors are looking for and therefore to have confidence in marking. The report recommends that institutions should consider 'ways in which to strengthen conversations with students about study expectations, standards, performance criteria, assessment and feedback' (p29). Likewise, Caruana and Spurling (2007) stress the importance of tutor-student dialogue in helping international students understand the expectations of UK assessments. Carless (2006) also emphasises the importance of 'assessment dialogues' between students and tutors as a means to tackle students' misunderstandings regarding feedback and assessment processes in general and the differing perceptions of students and staff.

The lack of dialogue in most feedback may well be a source of students' dissatisfaction with this aspect of their experience (NSS). As Nicol (2008) argues, increasing feedback will not satisfy students because they seek dialogic not monologic communication. However, in most

current HE contexts, the prospect of tutor-student dialogues appears enormously resource-heavy.

Interactive cover sheets

This research examines a process explicitly aimed at increasing the dialogue between tutor and student whilst not creating an additional workload for staff. It emerged from concerns that staff on an Outdoor Studies degree were devoting inordinate amounts of time to written feedback whilst students were reporting that they did not receive enough, nor was there evidence that feedback was being used to improve future assignments. The process was designed to shift the balance of responsibility in assessment such that it moved the learner from a passive and powerless role in the feedback process to one in which they could take some responsibility for their interaction with the marker. In addition, tutors were keen to improve their understanding of the different processes students go through in order to produce an assignment. It was envisaged that giving the tutor some analysis of the background to writing as well as the work itself would give them a greater insight into how students tackle their assessment. Both aspects were planned to enable staff to target their feedback comments more effectively in order to support student understanding of their performance and thus to support self-regulation.

The intervention involved *interactive cover sheets, (ICS).* These sheets, similar to a typical sheet attached to the front of a student's assignment, included identifying information on the student, the module and the assignment as well as space for tutors to write feedback. The unique feature of the ICS is the additional section where students are asked, on submission of their assignments, to identify particular aspects of their work on which they would like

feedback. The tutors completed their marking by writing feedback aimed directly at answering the students' queries about their work.

The intention of the ICS is that the students can prompt dialogue on the issues of importance to them. In doing this, some of the control passes to the student and it was hoped that the process would enable them not only to get specific help on matters of concern but also to help them engage with their feedback and learn from it in terms of the goals and standards of their subject discipline. A pilot intervention took place with volunteer first year students during 2006-7 and, as a result, the process was extended to all first year students in 2007-8. Students took part in an initial workshop which used an experiential approach to explore and develop their skills at asking questions that would elicit useful answers. Immediately after this workshop students were asked to fill in the ICS for their first assignment and to submit their work. Tutors were advised to provide feedback to students on their initial assignments even if they did not ask for it if they considered it important. An interim workshop took place with the students midway through the second semester to evaluate previous feedback and identify potential sources of feedback over and above written tutor comments. This workshop focused on developing their skills in giving and receiving feedback and used the *guidance and feedback loop* proposed by Hounsell et al (2006) as a basis for identifying further opportunities for receiving feedback. The students were then warned that they would receive no feedback on their final assignment unless they asked questions.

The research reported here focuses on the 2007-8 experience. The whole cohort of first year students (n=23) completed six modules in which there were three coursework assignments and one examination which used the ICS. Two final assignments were submitted electronically without paper coversheets but the students could ask questions in the text or at the end of their assignment.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected throughout the year and included:

- Interviews with 9 students conducted by an independent interviewer at the end of their first year. The interviewees are an 'opportunity' sample based on volunteers. All names have been changed.
- A focus group with representatives of staff who taught the year group (n=3)

The interview schedule was constructed using Sadler's (1989) assertion that improvement is contingent on students' achieving an understanding of goals and standards and the 'gap' between their achievement and those standards. In addition, they need access to strategies to fill the 'gap'. This is fundamental to students' capacity to take an active, and self-regulatory approach to their writing (Nicol, Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Consequently, the interview commenced with general questions about what help they seek in doing assignments, from whom they seek help, their views about the assessment and feedback they had received and their sense that they understood what tutors were looking for. The later questions focused more specifically on the ICSs and the extent to which they found them practicable and helpful in terms of feedforward. In particular, the latter questions explored how effectively the ICS procedure afforded students greater insight into these aspects of both the context and their own performance. The interview and focus group data was independently analysed by three researchers and a range of consistent themes were identified. Informal feedback by staff is also reported. The results, set out below, follow the thread of the student interviews in describing their wider assessment and feedback perceptions before focusing on attitudes to the ICSs.

Understanding of standards in writing

All the students interviewed expressed some problems with understanding what tutors expected of them in their academic writing. This was apparent amongst those who were doing very well as well as weaker students:

> *I know this isn't quite what they want and I know this isn't quite the right standard and I'm like, I'm at degree level, what kind of do I need to, what is degree level …* (Jane)

Two thirds of the students mentioned that dialogue with tutors at either the guidance or the feedback stage of assignments is important for helping them grasp the task in hand or their level of performance.

> *…go to the lecturer, see if they can explain the question or whatever you have to do slightly more so that you can understand it a bit better.* (Robin)

> *..with the feedback it doesn't seem to be something that I understand as well, I mean written feedback's so very narrow, it'd be nicer sometimes to discuss it.* (Jane)

However, despite the majority of students citing the importance of a dialogue with tutors, the data suggests (seven interviewees) that they are either too embarrassed or intimidated to ask for help or choose not to for other reasons.

> *I don't want to go to my module leader who's given me how many lectures on this and you would have thought by now I would have got it and go, well actually I still don't know what you're after from me* (Jane)

This attitude on the part of students prevents them seeking the dialogue with tutors that they consider important. This was also evident in Carless' (2006) study and reinforces Hounsell et al's (2006) view that tutors need to be proactive in providing guidance particularly for struggling students; not waiting for students to turn up at their door.

The students also recognise the importance of dialogue with peers with seven of the nine indicating that they would talk to their friends, usually as a first resort, if they needed help with an assignment.

> *Well, you'll sit there with some of the other people on your course and just make sure you've got the right end of the stick so to speak* (Dale)

> *It's a lot easier to talk to your friends (than to a tutor) if they're doing similar things to you* (John)

This desire for dialogue with tutors and peers supports theoretical explanations of how students 'come to know' assessment standards; absorbing the shared repertoires (Northedge 2003a) of the relevant academic community of practice through informal participation and dialogue.

The value of participation in gaining an understanding of standards also extended to seeing other students' work

Find it useful, of how people have approached it and how that's worked, so like not just shining examples but where people have gone wrong perhaps and how to avoid that. (Luke)

This finding regarding students learning from each other is supported by Nicol's research with undergraduates who found on-line informal group discussion provided powerful scaffolding for their growing understanding of psychology (Nicol 2009). Given the resource constraints in HE, more explicit use of peer dialogue to help students understand and reflect on their writing tasks needs to be considered. Comments from students regarding formal peer interaction such as peer assessment often contradict the positive views regarding peer dialogue found here and therefore greater attention needs to be given to helping students recognise its potential value.

Finally, the changing nature of the assessment method (poster, essay, project) was considered unhelpful by students in developing their understanding as they were considered to have different requirements. This impact of diverse assessment methods on students understanding of goals and standards has emerged in other recent research (Gibbs, Dunbar-Goddet 2007) and is an important consideration in the balance between student familiarisation with academic expectations and selecting methods which are fit for purpose in assessing the diverse learning outcomes of contemporary higher education.

Sense of progress

Most students seemed to be aware of some 'gaps' between their performance and the expected standard although those were largely limited to where they felt they had made an obvious error, such as leaving out a section or answering the wrong number of exam questions, and to pieces of work in which the student had not invested much effort.

> *… I know when … I've just completely missed a section or something like that but if I think that I've handed in a good bit of work, I won't know and then when they tell me, it'll be like, how obvious was that, or yes, sort of kick myself because I missed something stupid or something like that. … when you know you've handed in a pap bit of work, you know which bits you haven't … covered …* (Carol)

Conversely, the interviewees seemed to have more difficulty in identifying the nature of the 'gaps' in pieces of work into which they had put a lot of effort, suggesting that students' grasp of standards for writing is fairly unsophisticated which is not surprising given the early stage in their university careers.

> *You know how much effort you've put in, don't you really. … but the odd time you put loads of effort in but you've just missed the mark, then that's when you get confused, isn't it?* (Mark)

The difficulty of judging their own performance in more subtle or abstract ways beyond basic or technical requirements was an important factor for students in relation to posing questions to staff on their cover sheets. This aspect is taken up below. In the staff focus group it was suggested that students have their own rules that govern *… how they should go about writing an essay and what one might be like …,* and that they will only be aware of gaps in relation to these rules. The issue of how conscious these rules might be or how tutors could help students develop a set of 'rules' which closely resembled their own is an important issue which needs further consideration.

A further issue emerging with regard to students' sense of their own performance against standards is the fragmented nature of their assessment and related interaction with staff. Five of the nine students made comments indicating that they miss the opportunity they had in school or college for a relationship with a tutor who helped them keep track of their progress. In this study, students seem to equate the continuity of a tutor with the possibility for ongoing dialogue about their work and this was missing. .

> *I don't feel like um any of the lecturers or markers actually know where I'm weak at or where I'm, they've only seen like one piece so they can't compare it to the other piece of work that I've done. So it's kind of hard 'cos I can't say, oh do you think my structure's better when they haven't seen any of my previous work, that kind of thing……*(Carol)

The contribution of interactive coversheets

To what extent did the ICS process appear to help students with the factors discussed above? The interview data presents a complex picture about the success of this experiment but for the most part, students identified the potential value of the process

> *…it's definitely got use, because…it's a training tool for later in life when people will need to start asking questions of themselves, of their performance and how other people rate them…*(Dale)

Several indicated that the process made them think about their work

> *it did make me think about the work more because I tried to reanalyse what I'd done myself, so yeah, I think it does, if you really try to ask the questions,* (Luke)

However, the majority (seven out of nine) were less satisfied with the reality of the questioning process. For example, the last-minute nature of student work prevented serious engagement with the process

> *…to expect the student to do the assignment and then, …with a limited amount of time,… decide what constructively they want answering after they've done their assignment is sort of doing your own feedback beforehand really.* (John)

Whilst others shared Carol's opinion that by the time it comes to writing a list of questions

> *you just want to hand your work in and you don't want to think about it any more* (Carol)

Of particular importance was the number of students who found it difficult to ask questions

> *I found it quite hard actually, ……..I always seem to ask the same questions and they're always very general, quite broad questions as opposed to looking at specific areas of the assignments.* (Dale)

Indeed, the issue of framing appropriate questions appears to be influenced by their limited sense of the expected standards of writing as discussed above. Their responses suggest that posing useful questions requires the student to have some sense of their strengths and weaknesses which they can articulate.

> *… It's almost asking you to know what you've done wrong. If you know what you've done, why haven't you changed it.* (Mark)

I don't, I'm not really aware of what to ask to get like the knowledge (Luke)

This is an important finding in suggesting that interaction with students regarding their work only appears to become meaningful to them once they have obtained a certain level of understanding of the standards they are aiming at. This notion could be stated as:

There is something here that I don't understand but I don't understand enough to ask questions about it.

And supports existing research discussed in the introduction that suggests written assessment guidance and feedback are confusing to students until they have begun to have some sense of what is expected. In advance of that they struggle to interpret the language of guidance and feedback in a meaningful way. Likewise these findings suggest that without a reasonable grasp of the expected standards, the students were not able to frame meaningful questions about the more abstract and complex elements of their work. Instead, they were more likely to ask questions about superficial or concrete features such as the technical aspects of referencing or assignment layout.

This finding links strongly to other writers' views that assessment standards are communicated through participation in 'informal knowledge exchange networks' (O'Donovan, Price & Rust 2008). Lave and Wenger (1999, 1991) use the concept of 'communities of practice' and the notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to explain the process by which novices acquire the knowledge, skills and habits needed for greater participation in a community. However, there are aspects of academic communities of practice that create particular challenges for new entrants. Northedge (2003a) maintains that peripheral

membership for new students differs from those joining other communities as they are not allowed the freedom to take a passive role. Even as complete novices, they are expected to speak, write and criticise in the new discourse. He contrasts this with everyday or work-based discourse groups where novices would be expected to hear, absorb, accept and obey but not necessarily participate in a generative way.

The students in this study would appear to be on the periphery of an academic community, not yet comfortable in actively participating except in the safe confines of their peer groups. This poses a challenge for staff, in providing the participatory experiences which enable students to move away from a passive role. O'Donovan et al (2008) recommend tutors 'seed' the community of practice through their teaching interventions and this will be discussed further in the recommendations emerging from this study.

Interestingly, some of the students were implicitly aware that asking questions was part of this participatory process in that they wanted the question and feedback stage to develop into more of a dialogue with their tutors

> *I would have liked to have just gone and asked another question….. sort of to follow it through because it didn't always, I'm sure he knew what he was saying and I knew what I was asking but they didn't quite match* (Sarah)

One conclusion is that students might be more able to ask questions once they had received some element of feedback, so they could pursue aspects in detail and generate a more in-depth understanding of how their work matches the standards. One of the lecturers expressed this view in suggesting that tutor feedback should just be a set of notes to prompt

a discussion with the student and there was a feeling amongst the staff that the questions needed to be part of an ongoing process for the full value of this approach to be exploited.

Despite student concerns regarding asking questions, staff were generally positive about the process. All staff found it speeded up the marking process. This may be partly a result of the fact that some students did not ask questions but the staff judged the speed to be the result of other reasons.

> *It helped me focus my thinking*

> *Yes. Sometimes I find it difficult to decide how to phrase feedback, which bit to highlight and focus on, and I find answering a question helps me do this. On the other hand it could mean that I read the piece less objectively so I read the questions after I have read the script*

Staff were also positive about the further insights they gained into students writing processes, an explicit aim of the interactive cover sheets

> *It added another dimension to their work. It is almost as if you can assess their ability on the module by the way they assess their own work and the level of engagement and thought they put into it. Also you were better able to distinguish between academic ability and effort/time management in more cases*

Staff expressed concern about the impact on students who, for whatever reason, did not ask questions and there were mixed feelings amongst the staff regarding confining feedback comments to answering student questions in the latter assignments.

I wrote comments on other things as I found it hard just to stick to what they were interested in receiving feedback on especially if it was something that was glaringly obvious.

However, on balance the staff felt it was a useful process

…I do think…if I ask the question I'm much more likely to respond to and hear, engage with the answer and that's, for me, if there was a power in that process and certainly as somebody giving feedback, I felt like I was meeting their need…

The positive reaction of staff both in terms of time saved and a sense that their efforts were more focused on student needs is important. Hounsell (2007) reports on the downward spiral that is likely to emerge when staff commitment to providing feedback is damaged by a sense that students do not value or use it.

Conclusion

This is a small scale study and thus the conclusions remain tentative. In particular, further activity and evaluation is required to test the findings with larger groups, in other discipline areas and in higher levels of study than year 1 undergraduates. However, the study has served to highlight certain key issues in fostering dialogue between staff and students regarding assessment tasks and feedback. The coversheet experiment was designed to prompt dialogue without an increase in resources and there was some evidence of this taking place. More importantly though, the study indicates that students' limited understanding of

staff expectations and standards can limit their ability to initiate meaningful dialogue with their tutors.

Certain recommendations follow from these conclusions. As discussed earlier, O'Donovan et al (2008) suggest that tutors need to 'seed' academic communities of practice. In a sense, the ICS experiment was an attempt to 'seed' participation in an academic community but this research suggests that other steps need to be taken to prepare students so that they can benefit from ICSs. For example, the findings indicate that tutors should capitalise on existing peer discussion of assessment. Students are informally discussing assignment standards (what the assignment is about, what tutors are looking for) and building this dialogue into sessions or virtual environments may improve the amount, quality and timeliness of the discussion (see Nicol (2009) for an example). It may also help bridge the apparent gap between students' entering discourse about assessment and that of the academic subject community; their tutors. So, whereas students in their first year appear to struggle to frame questions about the more complex or abstract elements of their work, structured peer discussion could be used to help them generate such questions. Support could also be given in other ways such as providing class time or on-line activities to help students devise better questions or showing them examples of high quality questions created by previous students. Overall, the findings suggest that we need to develop more effective methods for helping students to confidently enter into a dialogue with academic staff.

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