Developing students' ability to construct feedback
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The power of teacher feedback

While much has been written about the power of teacher feedback as a means of enhancing learning, evidence of its effectiveness as currently practised in higher education is not compelling, at least for the majority of institutions with large student cohorts. The UK National Student Survey [NSS] shows that students are less satisfied with the quality of teacher feedback than with any aspect of their course. Each year across all disciplines and across most institutions students show concern about the timeliness of feedback, about its level of detail and about its failure to clarify things they did not understand. Institutions have responded with interventions such as faster turnaround times for assignments, feedback clinics to enhance dialogue or have made criteria clearer and developed more structured feedback rubrics to improve efficiency.

Although the NSS has usefully highlighted feedback as an important aspect of learning, the interventions brought about in HE as a result of that survey are not without their problems. Firstly, such interventions will require a significant increase in staff workload, which is problematic given current resource reductions. Second, they might not result in higher levels of student engagement in learning. Indeed, academics are still finding that students, even those who are vocal in requesting more feedback, do not bother to pick up their assignments with teacher comments. Also, feedback is never enough or of the right type for some students. Third, increasing opportunities to tell students what is right and wrong and what can be improved in their assignments is, to some researchers, not a convincing way to develop disciplinary expertise. Some researchers maintains that telling as a single feedback strategy will actually dis-empower students, and especially weaker students, making them more dependent on others, usually their teachers.

Finally it could be argued that most feedback interventions that focus only on improving the quality and quantity of teacher feedback will not directly prepare students with the attitudes and skills to be self-reliant and effective assessors of their own work. These capabilities are necessary if students are to be able to confront and make judgements about the open-ended and value-laden situations of complexity they will meet in a rapidly changing world [for an elaboration of this argument see (1)].

The case for peer feedback

One practical response to the feedback problem in higher education is to enhance opportunities for peer feedback, students evaluating and giving feedback on each other's work. Peer feedback can address some of the issues above. It can add significantly to the amount and variety of feedback students receive, without a corresponding increase in teacher workload. As well as increasing the quantity, peer feedback can address the timeliness issue. For example, if students engage in collaborative projects, then they will receive feedback in a timely manner, while it still matters and with the opportunity to act on it. It has also been shown that feedback from peers is often more helpful than that provided by teachers because peers are able to provide commentaries on work at a level, and in a discourse, that is more understandable than that of the teacher. The receipt of feedback from multiple sources (peers) rather than a single source (the teacher) also mimics more closely the reality of life beyond university. In

employment settings, professional must decide which feedback to respond to and how to reconcile different feedback perspectives.

However, peer feedback, if seen only as an addition to teacher feedback, is still located in a delivery paradigm. Peer feedback is however more than this. It brings into play a different feedback paradigm.

Students as constructors of feedback

Active Learning

The unique feature of peer feedback is that students are not just consumers of feedback they are also producers. Engaging students in the construction of peer feedback is a high-level activity that is cognitively very demanding. You cannot be passive when producing feedback. Think of the effort required to review a journal article in your own discipline. While students can avoid paying attention to or reading the feedback they receive (even if it is provided by peers) they cannot avoid engagement if they are required to produce commentaries on the work of others.

Active engagement with criteria and standards

A second aspect of peer feedback production is that it requires that students actively engage with assessment criteria and standards. They must exercise criteria from multiple perspectives as they review and comment on different examples of the same work. Hence criteria and standards are likely to become internalised in a way not possible through feedback consumption.

Reciprocity: producing and receiving feedback

Peer review is particularly powerful because students both give and receive feedback on the same piece of work. This adds considerably to the benefits. First, when students review the work of others they learn about different approaches and tactics to the same assignment they have produced. These insights are often transferred to their own future assignment productions. Secondly, seeing a range of approaches to the same assignment helps students realise that quality is not a fixed attribute but can be produced in different ways. Thirdly, peer feedback encourages students to take more responsibility for learning, their own learning and that of others.

Disciplinary expertise

Giving students regular experience in making evaluative judgements and writing feedback commentaries also develops disciplinary expertise. In making judgements, critically analysing the outputs of others, students are put into the same decision space as experts. Writing commentaries on these evaluations also helps clarify students' understanding. Through these processes, students not only acquire explicit understanding but also the tacit knowledge that experts use when tackling a task. Sadler has argued that the reason teachers are so effective at evaluating students' work is that they make hundreds of evaluative judgements each year and justify their decisions (2). If we wish students to develop these skills they should be given the same kinds of experience as their teachers.

Professional skills for employment

Finally, if we focus on developing in students the ability to be effective assessors of others' work, they will be more able to review and assess their own work, as the same skills are involved. The real problem when all feedback comes from the teacher is that it does not directly help develop student judgement. Being able to make qualitative judgements and provide feedback on them is a core skill in most employment settings. It also underpins the development of most, if not all, graduate attributes [see (1) for an elaboration of this argument]. Therefore it is surprising that this skill is rarely explicitly stated as a learning outcome in course and programme documentation.

Implementing peer feedback

New lecturers often raise issues about how to implement peer feedback. Some are concerned that students do not have the knowledge or skill to comment on other students' work. Others argue that students can be too critical and harsh in their comments. Still others lament that students will plagiarise from others. All these concerns have been addressed through well-designed peer tasks. In first year, some simple review tasks would suffice with complexity and depth being enhanced in later years. Ideally these tasks should tap into important concepts and skills in the discipline. Tasks need not ask students to criticize each other's work: they might be as simple as suggesting an improvement for next time or raising an issue not addressed in the work. One can circumvent plagiarism by having students review a peer's assignment and then comment on their own but without having the opportunity to rewrite. A specific question concerns the administrative workload involved in peer review. Many software systems can ease this burden. Further suggestions on task design and software can be found in the literature [see (3) and (4)]

In the context of this paper, peer feedback refers to scenarios where students construct a feedback response in relation to the work of other students. This would usually be a written response based on an evaluative judgement of work against some criteria. Sometimes students would be given the criteria and at other times they may be responsible for formulating them. There are numerous ways of implementing peer feedback that can be easily integrated into current practices. Here are a few examples

Examples

Gibbs (www.testa.ac.uk/resources/videos) describes a scenario where a lecturer who was concerned about the poor quality of students' lab reports in science redesigned the task by asking students in groups to produce their lab report as a poster. All the posters were pinned to the walls in the lab class and the lecturer asked students to walk round look at the posters and scribble feedback comments on them. This led to significant learning gains in lab reporting and in the exams. This study emphasises a number of factors. Students learned week by week from evaluating and constructing a feedback responses to each others' posters, it was a regular activity so they had opportunities to use their learning in subsequent reporting, it was a required classroom task so there was a high level of engagement, it was public so it enhanced students' motivation - it encouraged positive competitiveness across groups who didn't want their work to look stupid in public – and it created a positive social climate for classroom learning.

Hammer et al (2007) describes peer review and feedback for draft essays in an English class with 80 students where peer review and feedback were implemented using Aropa software, which manages the anonymous distribution of assignments (5). Marks were awarded for participating in the reviews but not for the quality of participation. Students selected a topic from six for their assignment and carried out three reviews, hence the reviews were not on the same topic. The lecturer provided a rubric for the review. Responses were required to the following: What issue is the essay addressing? What is the main argument or suggest an argument? What support does the writer offer for the argument? Suggest a counterargument: Identify a characteristic sentence in the draft and suggest how it might be improved.

In surveys and interviews the students were positive about this experience. They reported that doing the review and using the rubric gave them insights into the way lectures evaluated their work, They believed that providing feedback would help them become more critical, detached, analytical and logical in their own writing. They reported that reviewing revealed blind spots in their own writing and that they learned from the writing styles and ideas of others.

Assessment and peer feedback

In reviewing the literature on peer feedback, it is clear that its learning potential has not been fully realised. One reason for this is that most published implementations of peer feedback focus on scenarios whereby students award each other grades rather than scenarios where it has been implemented for formative reasons as described above. This literature is, in fact, dominated by studies of peer-tutor grade correlations, often with the purpose being to show that peers can act as surrogate assessors for teachers.

Peer feedback need not involve students grading each other and to gain maximum learning benefit it is better not to use peers as surrogate markers. Some notional peer marking might accompany feedback reviews but it is better if these marks do not count in the final grading. Teachers might mark students peer comments to encourage engagement but this also needs to be handled sensitively.

References and resources

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