Institutional approaches to feedback interventions

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The UK National Student Survey has usefully raised the profile of feedback in higher education with the result that many institutions are devising interventions to improve feedback processes. However, these interventions run the risk of being quite limited in scope and effectiveness because the NSS inadvertently promotes a rather narrow conception of feedback.

The feedback statements in the NSS focus on the input message, on how teachers transmit written feedback information – whether it is timely, detailed and understandable to students. In all other areas of higher education, however, it is now accepted that for students to learn they must actively construct meaning from transmitted information; they must do something, analyse the message, ask questions about it, discuss it with others and connect it with their prior knowledge.

If feedback is to enhance learning, institutions need to adopt a more sophisticated conception of what feedback is and how it works. Feedback is essentially a dialogue not a one-way transmission process: it depends as much on what students do as on what the teacher does. Also, there is no ideal level of written feedback: instead the optimal level of detail and advice depends on learner needs. While too little feedback might leave some students in difficulty, too much feedback might hamper the long-term learning of other students by perpetuating their dependency on the teacher. Delivering written advice is therefore only a starting point if students are to learn from feedback. What is more important is the quality of students' interaction with the feedback message. This will determine feedback effectiveness and should inform the level of subsequent teacher input.

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have taken the idea of student responsibility further by arguing that the goal of feedback in HE is to enable students to become self-regulated and lifelong learners. This requires not only active student interaction with teacher feedback but also opportunities for students to generate their own feedback through self-assessment and to develop skills in evaluating and providing feedback on the work of others

through peer processes (Nicol, 2006, Nicol, 2009). Rich feedback dialogue from multiple sources and of many types is more effective and more representative of what happens in professional practice.

Viewing feedback as a dialogical process offers many benefits (see Nicol, 2010). Firstly, dialogue implies that both the teacher and student get feedback on the result of their actions. Hence it will be easier to address any misunderstandings deriving from poorly constructed written feedback comments. Secondly, if many sources of feedback are invoked it will be easier to adapt feedback to individual student's needs. Thirdly, viewing feedback as a shared process should lead to a more productive use of both staff and student time and help ensure that feedback is actually used to make future improvements.

In conclusion, institutions wishing to improve feedback must base their interventions on conceptions of feedback that are consistent with what is known about good practice. Indeed, without a broader understanding than that implied by the NSS most interventions are likely to produce only short-term and limited learning benefits.

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