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“Ka Pai, well done”

Student perceptions of assessment feedback purposes and practices from a cohort of distance student teachers

Higher Education Assessment Symposium, Wellington, November 2008
Session Overview

Research process
- Question
- Context: Participants & programme
- Assessment feedback: Theory & practice
- Project methodology

Student perspectives:
- Written feedback to foster learning
- Motivation
- Grades
- Relationships
- Holistic perspective
Research Question

What is the nature of the written feedback that students find effective for their learning and motivation?
Context: Participants

- Distance (mixed mode) students enrolled in Dip.Tchg.(ECE) – national context
- Typically over the age of 30 years, career change or ‘second chance’ education
- Majority female
- Typically concurrently working in ECE alongside their study
Context: Programme

- Level 7 qualification (degree level)
- Selection criteria includes evidence of ability to academically succeed
- 3 years full-time or 6 years part-time
- Distance course materials, regionally-based weekend workshops, practicum
- Sociocultural programme philosophy
Assessment feedback: Literature

- Mackenzie (cited in Higgins et al., 2002) – written feedback the major source of support
- Assessment of and for learning, feedback and feed forward
- Higgins (2004) formative assessment must foster student learning, part of continuous cycle of learning
- Provide useful information and guidance (Brown, 1999; Ding, 1998; Higgins, 2004)
- Motivational function (Hyland, 2000)
Assessment feedback: Practice

Open Polytechnic Dip.Tchg.(ECE) feedback:
- Written comments on scripts
- Feedback letter
- The Open Polytechnic (2002)
  - Specific technical guidance
  - Identify strengths & weaknesses
  - Recognise effort and achievement
  - Encourage the learner in their study
  - Recognise the learner as an individual
Research project methodology

Methods
- Postal survey (125/257 returned) sent to all students currently in the programme who had completed at least 5 assignments
- 3 Focus groups (urban, provincial, Māori)

Analysis
- SPSS quantitative analysis
- Thematic analysis of quantitative data (Mutch, 2005)

Paradigm
Participatory and constructivist (Lincoln & Guba, 2000)
Student perspectives

1. Written feedback to foster learning
2. Motivation
3. Grades
4. Relationships
5. Holistic perspective
1a. Written feedback to foster learning: Student perspectives

Students viewed feedback process as

- Important to their learning
- Helped them improve their written work
- Served to link theory and practice
- Part of an ongoing process – not limited to particular courses
- Change in level – emphasis on technical aspects at level 5, deeper content at level 7
- “It makes me want to do better.”
1b. Written feedback to foster learning: Links to literature

- Hyland, 2000; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2002 - found undergraduate university students believed strongly in potential value of written feedback, considering it not only enhanced learning and motivation but also encouraged reflection and clarified understandings.

- Differing conceptions, depending on the discipline, of what essays and essay writing are about can lead to student anxiety and uncertainty (Drew, 2001; Hartley & Chesworth, 2000; Hounsell, 1987)
2a. Motivation: Student perspectives

Students saw the purpose of written feedback as:

1. Strengthening their work
2. Motivation to continue with their study

They valued the strength-based approach to learning.

“I find the written feedback useful and encouraging”

“Feedback is so important. It gives me the confidence to tackle the next assignment.”

“It is encouraging to receive comments that are amusing or just encouraging eg. “yes, you have a good point here.” Or “ka pai, well done.”
2b. Motivation: Links to literature.

- Gallimore & Tharp (1990); Hattie (2002) – specific and constructive feedback assures that assessment practices impact positively on students’ motivation and motivation is more likely to result from positive comments.

- Alton-Lee (2003) – negative feedback can have an adverse effect on students’ motivation and engagement

- Orsmond et al. (2002) – including negative as well as positive feedback leads to students being more likely to motivated to develop greater understanding of their subject.

- *Whatever the view, it is clear that a statement of weaknesses should be accompanied by a constructive explanation of how to address them.*
3a. Grades: Student perspectives

- 81% of students found grades become a motivating factor when accompanied by justification of why they are awarded.
- Opportunity to raise grades was a motivator for some students; “Motivation to try harder and achieve higher grades.”
- Others focused on programme completion, and for a large number their motivation centred on wanting to be “a good teacher” or make a positive difference working with children and families.
3b. Grades: Links to literature

- Swan & Arthur (1998) consider that grades are the prime motivator for students, they claim students want feedback in order to enhance their mark.

- Findings concur with view it is ultimately the student’s own reasons for finishing a course which motivates them - they do not support the belief that grades alone are the prime motivator.
4a. Relationships: Student perspectives

Students

- commented that when their work was marked by people with whom they had a relationship, the comments were more meaningful.

- indicated that they felt less confident about contacting assessors with whom they did not have a relationship.

- More likely to take “on board” an assessor’s written feedback if the assessor was known personally.

- “When you know then it’s like having a photo to go with the name and the comments are more real.”
4b. Relationships: Student perspectives

- Giving feedback might be more meaningful for markers if they had a relationship with the student (Focus group)
- Personal contact /rapport allowed the tutor to relate better to the student (Focus group)
- I commend the markers on taking the time required to help us with future studies through comments given (Questionnaire)
Higgins et al. (2002) identified variables related to the quality, quantity, timeliness and language of comments as contributing to students’ understandings and utilisation of feedback.

Complex interrelationships and power differentials at work between students and tutors within higher learning institutions tempers teaching and learning (Higgins, 2000).

Social power and status of assessment relates to student anxieties over grades (Ecclestone & Swann, 1999).

Taylor (1997) – Jurgen Habermas – notion of open discourse in the assessment relationship, where communication is oriented towards understanding and respecting the perspectives of others.
5a. Holistic perspective: Student perspectives

- Over 80% of students found comments, whether written on the script or in the feedback letter, to be informative.
- 80% of students, when completing their assignments, use feedback from a range of courses and noted that feedback with programme-wide relevance is appreciated.
- Reported “looking back”, although mostly within strands of the programme, eg. human development.
- Some content perceived to be “generically” useful.
- Feedback to consolidate current knowledge.
5b. Holistic perspectives: Links to literature

- Hyland (2000) and Orsmond et al. (2002) found that the majority of their respondents claimed to read feedback and to use it for subsequent assignments.

- Many students discussed the ongoing benefit of knowledge gained about perspectives of learning and theories of human development. Courses with this content were positioned early in the programme, and students reported that they related their understanding to many subsequent courses.
Implications for Practice

- Feedback (forward) has a key role in the teaching and learning process.
- Teaching is relationship-based – relationships are important to the assessment process in distance education.
- Relevance for practice (theory-practice connection) was important for this cohort of students.
- Feedback for learning rather than only assessment of achievement is important.
- Effective feedback has relevance beyond any individual course – across programmes and for generic learning skills.
- Students and their perceptions should be respected.
References


Acknowledgements

- TLRI
- The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
- Student participants 2005
- Trish Murphy, Angela Edlin, Jenny McClew & Dr Anne Meade

- www.tlri.org.nz