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Feedback for Learning Development: Tourism students' perspective

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ABSTRACT

The process of providing feedback is core to teaching and learning. However, literature infers that good feedback can get lost in translation. This study responds to this issue by exploring the nexus between feedback and Learning Development with tourism students at a British university. The study focuses on how students perceive and digest feedback to enhance their learning; addressing student concern. The findings reveal that students have mixed perceptions and are concerned with timescales, inconsistencies and the clarity of assessment criteria, which relate to their personal learning style. Practical implementations are presented to enrich learning materials from a student perspective.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, it has been recognised in order for undergraduates to reach their full academic potential, they need to be equipped with the skills necessary for Higher Education (HE) (Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1998). Learning Development (LD) programmes have become recognised as an effective means of administering the transition into HE for undergraduates (Skillen et al., 1998; Bannano & Jones, 2007). Although this research reviews the field of LD as a whole, additional focus is placed on the major themes associated with feedback processes within it. This is topical, as LD has emerged 'as a result of competing agendas and turbulent times' (Winter, Barton, Allison, & Cotton, 2015:2) in HE, at the same time that students consistently rate feedback as dissatisfactory within their institution (ALTC, 2009; Biggs & Tang, 2011; National Student Survey, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011).

From an academic perspective, the process of providing feedback is deemed as being 'bread and butter to teaching and learning' (Boud, 2000:155). Therefore, the only rationale for student dissatisfaction can be that good feedback gets lost in translation between the teacher and student (Rodgers, 2006). However, as a teacher, directed by the QAA general principles (Rust, 2002) to provide appropriate feedback (principle 12), it is crucial to develop an understanding about student practice. Once understood, the knowledge can then enrich learning materials, and ensure that feedback is communicated in the most effective way for students to digest.

Therefore, this paper aims to understand feedback, and to develop a learner-centred approach that is underpinned by LD (Hilsdon, 2010). The nexus between feedback and LD is therefore explored, and the nature of this connection is assessed through a number of objectives. The objectives are to determine the student perceptions of and concerns over the feedback

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process, to determine how students use feedback to develop their learning by determining the impact of feedback on student LD, and finally, to develop good teaching practice to enhance LD and teaching, from a student perspective.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learning Development

It has long been accepted there are differing terminologies and views into the definition of LD. Reviewing the literature, it is apparent there are three distinct perspectives which could be adopted: a skill (Northedge, 2005; Race, 2007) distinct as a symptom of autonomous learning; a tool of academic functions and practice (Cash & Hilsdon, 2008; Gibbs, 1988; Hilsdon 2010; Wisker & Brown 1996; Scouller, 1990); or, a process (Brandes & Ginnis, 1991; Cottrell, 2001; Gibbs, 1992; Lea & Street, 1998; Skillen et al., 1998; ATLC, 2009) which focuses learning efforts upon the student.

Underpinning these definitions is: students, academics, tools, guidance and balance. Amongst these emerging themes are also a collection of terminologies used to describe the features of LD, each with subtle differences: autonomous learning, independent learning, deep and surface learning as well as self-directed learning; with this in mind, LD could be viewed from a teaching perspective (self-directed) or from a student's (autonomous and independent). However, for the purposes of this paper, LD is viewed as a process. A process can be dynamic and interactive, and account for a range of learning styles as discussed by Huang and Busby (2007), which every student has when arriving at tertiary institutions (Race, 2007; Northedge, 2005). More specifically, the process can include students as self-directed learners, and acknowledge the learning material that lecturers utilise to support learning. This definition would also construct LD skills as being both an inherited capability, and something that can be acquired by students. Therefore, by viewing LD as a practice the varying range of learning processes (Miller & Parlett, 1974; Yorke & Knight, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002) can be accounted for, and a student-centred approach to learning can be taken, to replicate the more recent understandings of LD which has evolved over the years (ALDHE, 2012; Learn Higher, 2012).

Most early approaches to student learning adopted a 'do nothing' attitude, where it was assumed literacy skills and conventions of a discipline area could be taught through a process of osmosis (Baldauf, 1997). Skillen et al. (1998) reported past approaches to student learning did not properly facilitate the transition into HE. Even previous models of LD still assumed only selected students needed help or could develop skills for tertiary institutions (Skillen and Mahony, 1997; Skillen et al., 1998). However, since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in the issues associated with student learning at HE (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005); leading to the recognition that in order to adapt undergraduates to their new environment, there is a need to improve literacy and learning skills for all (Drury & Webb, 1991; Golebiowski, 1997); thus the 'IDEALL' approach was introduced which acknowledged this gap (ALDHE, 2012; McKinney, Wood, Little, 2009; Skillen et al., 1998).

Studies have proven that without suitable guidance to develop autonomous learning, many candidates will not reach their full academic potential (Skillen & Mahony, 1997). Hence the role of feedback in the LD process is to inform a student about *their* current level of understanding and to guide them for future assessments through their HE experience. In fact, many researchers argue the feedback presented based on an assessment is most central to learning (Carless, 2006; ALTC, 2009; Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011; Butler & Winne, 1995). However, many researchers note that students who do not have the adequate skills for university are often overwhelmed by the unfamiliar professional context, regardless of any history of academic success (Fisher, Cavanagh, & Bowles, 2011; Taylor, 1997; Gibbs, 1994, 1997; Reid, 2010). Therefore, it is questioned how students perceive and use feedback, and if it is effectively digested (from an academic perspective) to develop *their* learning. Evidence of this student-centred learning approach is commonly found in the more recent understandings of LD (ALDHE, 2012; Learn Higher, 2012), however, LD is centred on the student, and that can lead to the suggestion that there are a number of factors that affect the application of LD towards its goal of encouraging autonomous learning. Students therefore need to be taught how to take ownership over what they learn (Lublin & Prosser, 1994; Keenan, 2011).

Thorpe (2000) theory for independent learning suggested there are three perspectives which require a balance between guidance and candidates' own work, these are experimental learning, perspective transformation and cognitive monitor and meta-learning. Whilst some researchers support the idea of independent learning being the backbone to success, many argue it is a combination of personal attributes that affect a student's ability to develop autonomous learning skills (Higgins, 2000; Wickens, Forbes & Tribe, 2006; Tett, Hounsell, Chrisite, Cree and McCune, 2012). However, it is unclear from Liu and Carless' (2006) findings, if students acknowledge they have a responsibility in developing these lifelong learning skills. Even though Liu and Carless' (2006) research was very comprehensive, it did not investigate how much ownership students take for their own learning. These studies into independent learning suggest enhancing the development of this skill in students is a complex issue and overall determined by the motivation of the individual (Tyler, 1949).

2.2. Feedback

Feedback can be defined as 'all feedback exchanges generated within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received), and importantly,

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