Enhancing first year management students' engagement: An action research project to explore the use of the Essay Feedback Checklist (EFC)

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ABSTRACT

Feedback represents one of the key factors that affect students' learning. A question is raised here as to what extent engaging students with feedback and considering their voices as partners in the assessment process can improve their confidence and therefore their learning. The objective of this action research was to support the introduction of the Essay Feedback Checklist (EFC) to first year management students at a British University. This research examined the use of EFC as an interactive two-way communication tool between tutors and students. The research also aimed to help management students to be more aware of the assessment criteria and thus to be more engaged with their feedback. Data was collected from students and tutors before and after the use of the EFC in order to compare their attitudes towards the use of the tool. The research findings show that students found the EFC a useful tool to support engagement with the feedback and for improving their confidence to develop their work further. Tutors and students claimed that the EFC created an interactive environment in providing feedback and helped to open a dialogue about it, but they also highlighted some drawbacks.

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1. Introduction

The pedagogic literature in higher education puts a special focus on assessment and feedback as a core activity within the teaching and learning process. Most of the literature indicates the importance of assessment for learning (c.f.i. Biggs, 1999, 2003; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011; Race, 2010; Sadler, 1998). One of the main factors for successful learning is the provision of feedback that enables learners to make sense of their learning (Race, 2010). There are two main forms of feedback, formative feedback which focuses on how students' learning is progressing and summative feedback which generates marks and levels to evaluate whether students have reached the required standard (Price et al., 2010).

Assessment for learning involves: setting clear guidance for the standards or goals which should be achieved; providing information about how current achievement compares with those standards; and, giving feedback about how to take actions to reduce the gap between the standards and actual work (Sadler, 1998). Therefore, effective feedback needs to be combined with effective instruction about the required performance, the setting of specific tasks or challenges which focus the students'

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attention on what is required to be successful, along with an understanding of how an increase in effort will improve their grade (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Thus, engaging students with feedback, providing information about their progress and motivating them to achieve the required standards will help students to recognise their performance (Nicholls, 2004). Therefore, feedback can be seen as a system of guidance (rather than an event) which is mainly based on a continuous dialogue between students and tutors (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011).

This supports the argument that teaching and learning activities which are more active and with high student engagement have a positive impact on students' deep learning (Nicholls, 2002). This reflects that feedback has now become more student-centred (Bailey & Garner, 2010) and for feedback to work in practice, it must connect with the students (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002:54). The literature also reveals the importance of students' self-assessment in developing their learning (Carless, 2006). According to Fluckiger, Vigil, Tixier, Pasco, and Danielson (2010) engaging students in a partnership in the feedback process strengthens their learning, indicating strong positive results and benefits to students (see also Black & Wiliam, 1998:15).

Therefore, good feedback practice should involve the development of reflection in learning (self-assessment) which helps tutors and students to clarify what is good performance by identifying the desirable criteria or standards (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Achieving the previous objectives requires a way of communicating between tutors and students which helps the students to be aware of the assessment criteria and that helps the tutors to provide the expected feedback in line with students' expectations.

The literature also indicates that the information provided on a student's progress though feedback has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument to further develop that student's learning (Hyland, 2000:234). Although based on a reflective evaluation of the situation in higher education, feedback remains conceptualised and is defined as a transmission processes whereby tutors transmit feedback messages to students about what is right or wrong in their academic work. Therefore, they expect that students will use this information to improve their work in other pieces of work (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Thus, the questions being addressed: Are students aware of these standards? Do they know the main criteria for marking their work? There is also an issue related to the quality of feedback which remains a major concern for higher education institutions (Beaumont et al., 2011).

2. Using the EFC (Thinking of ways to tackle the problem)

Norton (1990) asked students to rank the criteria that they thought their tutors were looking for in a particular assignment. She then asked the tutors to rank, in order of importance, the same criteria provided by the students. Norton's (1990) findings showed a mismatch between the two with students putting content fairly high in their rankings whereas the tutors did not rank this criterion at all. The Essay Feedback Checklist (EFC) has been designed to list the assessment criteria used in essay marking and, then, students are asked to rate how confident they felt when writing their essay on each of the criteria. This is categorised using a three-point rating scale of 'Completely Confident', 'Partially Confident' or 'Not Confident At All' (Norton & Norton, 2001; Norton, Clifford, Hopkins, Toner, & Norton, 2002). Therefore, the idea of the EFC is that when tutors come to mark students' work, they can look at the students' ratings and, then, put their own ratings underneath, providing targeted feedback for areas where there is a large mismatch between the two.

The rationale for this research was to build a dialogue and an interactive approach to providing student feedback. Highlighting the way in which tutors encourage students' engagement in the assessment and feedback process could have a positive effect on the level of knowledge shared between the tutor and students (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). Bloxham and West (2007) study identified that the dialogue with tutors was a key aid in negotiating the meaning of both assessment guidance and written feedback. Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2000) argued that students often struggled to use tutor feedback effectively because they were unable to understand the comments and interpret them in the way intended because of the failure of tutors and students to communicate. Therefore, the use of the EFC, as a tool in giving feedback, could help to make assessment standards more transparent for students, creating a good opportunity to provide explicit assessment criteria and interactive feedback between tutor and students; this creates the circumstances for students to become part of the assessment and feedback process. In the EFC's end section, after asking students to rate their level of confidence for the assessment criteria, students are asked to identify particular aspects of their work on which they would like feedback. This is designed to help tutors to target the specific areas of concern for the student and to create an interactive dialogue between the tutor and students.

The EFC could also be used as a tool to help students to improve their essay writing (Norton et al., 2002). Designing the EFC involves making a list of the assessment criteria by which the first year management students' essays will be marked. Prior to submission of their assignment, students will be asked to rate these criteria and then to submit these ratings along with their essay. In this case, the EFC becomes a tool to help students to judge their own work and as:

> A reminder to students about the essential elements of their assignments that they should be focusing on while they are actually writing (Norton, 2009:163).

This research was designed to follow Norton and Norton (2001) study with a particular focus on gathering first year management students' views of the usefulness of the EFC as a tool to help in the process of writing management essays and as