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Mediating factors in the provision of lecturers' written feedback to postgraduate taught students



Katie Dunworth*, Hugo Santiago Sanchez

Department of Education, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research that investigated the factors mediating written feedback provision by lecturers teaching on three postgraduate taught programmes at a university in the UK. The study adopted a case study approach, with the postgraduate programmes as the cases. Lecturers participated in background and stimulated recall interviews, with their authentic written feedback used as the stimulus. The study identified multiple mediating factors that impacted on the staff members' feedback processes. These could be separated into three main categories: experiential, social and environmental. The mediators indicated that written feedback in higher education may serve multiple simultaneous goals that relate not only to student learning but also to lecturers' perceptions of their roles and function within the broader institutional context.

1. Background

When compared to research on the student perspective, the experience of staff is under-researched in studies on feedback in higher education (Evans, 2013). Reasons put forward for this greater focus on students include institutional concerns about student dissatisfaction as expressed in student surveys (Hyland, 2013), the increased emphasis on the student experience (Tuck, 2012), the growth of the literature on formative assessment (Bailey & Garner, 2010), and the acknowledged importance of feedback as a tool for educational development (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014). While these explanations illustrate why there has been comparatively little research into the experience of staff, our knowledge and understanding of feedback would be greatly enhanced if the experiences and perceptions of those who provide the initial feedback input were to be explored in the same depth.

There are several reasons why this is necessary. First, there has been a consistent move towards a theoretical understanding of learning as situated, socially constructed and dialogic (Ion, Cano-García, & Fernández-Ferrer, 2017; Ormond, Merry, & Handley, 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2013), which, in the case of lecturer-student feedback, places the lecturer alongside the student in the learning experience rather than in the background. Second, in alignment with such a view of learning, the concept of feedback itself is undergoing a metamorphosis. The traditional view of feedback as a form of output produced by the feedback 'provider' and transmitted to the feedback 'receiver' is giving way to the more current understanding of feedback as a social process involving teachers and students, which is not complete until an initial input is responded to, appropriated and transformed (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). In staff-student feedback, therefore, both lecturer and student are inextricably linked, from the perspective of educational development as well as with regard to the quality of the experience.

In addition, some of the limited research that has been conducted into staff perspectives on feedback has revealed, whether directly or indirectly, that the multitude of factors that impact on feedback processes are complex and sometimes conflicting, thereby demonstrating the need for systematic investigation focused on the experiences of staff as a specific group. Bailey and Garner (2010),

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: cmd45@bath.ac.uk (K. Dunworth), H.S.Sanchez@bath.ac.uk (H.S. Sanchez).

for example, argue that feedback practices are constrained and shaped both by the policies and practices of the institutions in which they occur and by the ‘standards’ approach represented by quality assurance agencies. Other studies have pointed to the different roles that lecturers have to undertake and how they are not always easy to reconcile. For example, [Tuck \(2012\)](#) identifies three roles played by the lecturer: the assessor, the worker and the teacher; while [Li and De Luca \(2014\)](#) report a study that found staff experienced pressure in coming to terms with their dual roles of objective assessor and learning facilitator.

Another article ([Evans, 2013](#)) presented the concept of a feedback landscape that incorporated fifteen ‘feedback mediators’ that, it was suggested, were shared by staff and students. The list itself was developed from a review of the research literature at the time rather than an empirical study, and as a consequence is somewhat generic and could be applied to many educational activities – for example, it included, *inter alia*, gender, culture, personality, ability and cognitive style. The list nevertheless served as a useful indicator of the complexity of the issue, and partly provided the impetus for the current paper’s focus on uncovering, in more specific detail, mediating factors in the feedback process, deriving them in this case from a specific empirical study.

The project which provided the data for this paper was an investigation into lecturer-student written feedback in three masters-level postgraduate programmes at one UK university. The choice of this particular type of feedback was made in consideration of the ubiquity of this form within higher education, as indicated in a number of studies ([Agius & Wilkinson, 2014](#); [Bailey & Garner, 2010](#)). The word ‘lecturer’ in the study, it should be noted, was used to describe an academic staff member involved in teaching, assessing and providing feedback to university students, and was not intended to denote a particular educational approach or an individual’s employment status. Although the study as a whole involved the participation of both lecturers and students, the need described above for further research into the staff perspective led to a separate process of particularised analysis of the data from staff. The research questions driving that procedure were (a) what factors mediate the written feedback provided by lecturers; and (b) what role do these mediating factors play in the process of providing written feedback? The term ‘mediating factor’ in this context was used to refer to any feature identified within the study data that had some kind of moderating impact on the behaviour of the lecturer participants in relation to the feedback process.

2. Methodology

The three masters-level postgraduate taught programmes selected for the study were all located within the university’s faculty of humanities and social sciences, although they differed with regard to disciplinary fields, which were applied linguistics, education and social policy. This range was intended to promote the robustness of the data through the variation in assessment tasks, but in the event the assessed work which provided the material for the study took a similar form across programmes, as each one involved essay-based assignments that required students to analyse texts, design a research proposal or respond in an argumentative form to written questions.

As explained above, the overall study had incorporated data from both the students and the lecturers on each of the three programmes. For the phase of the study reported in this paper, the data were derived from the lecturers only. Two lecturers from each programme (six in total) had been originally invited to participate through convenience sampling, although one eventually withdrew from the project. They were contacted first by email and then a face-to-face meeting was arranged to discuss the purpose and characteristics of the study and their participation. The participants were all permanent members of staff with expertise in the field relating to the module they were teaching. A table of the participants’ profiles, outlining their qualifications, teaching experience and fields of expertise appears in [Table 1](#) below.

The study was qualitative, drawing on two types of individual semi-structured interview. The first was a background interview conducted at the start of the academic semester in order to establish a profile of each participant’s educational and professional background, and to obtain initial data on perceptions of feedback in higher education (see Appendix A for details of the questions). These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min. The second interview, which lasted up to one hour, took the form of a stimulated recall interview conducted at the end of the semester within two weeks after the end of the feedback cycle. Samples of written feedback which tutors had provided to students and which they had selected themselves for the interviews (formative and summative feedback forms, marginal comments on assignment outlines, and e-mail correspondence) were used as recall support. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The study generated a database of 79,947 words across the data collection instruments and participants. This constituted a large body of data, reflecting the intent of the study, which was to obtain depth and richness of response rather than breadth. [Table 2](#) below lists the word count from both forms of interview for each participant.

Each transcript was then sent to the relevant participant for comment, although in the event no participant chose to make changes. The use of multiple methods and participants, each interviewed at the beginning and the end of a period of five months,

Table 1
Participants’ profiles.

Tutor	Qualifications	Teaching experience in Higher Education	Fields of expertise	Programme discipline
Janet	BA (UK), MA (UK)	12 years	additional language education	applied linguistics
Claire	BA (UK), PG Cert (UK), PhD (UK)	10 years	global education, sociology of education	applied linguistics
Daniel	BA (Spain), PG Dip (Spain), DPhil (UK)	4 years	education policy	education
Troy	BA (Greece), MA (UK), PhD (UK)	16 years	sociology, social policy	social policy
Alice	BA (Argentina), MA (UK), PhD (UK)	15 years	political sociology	social policy

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