

Engaging feedback: meaning, identity and power

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Abstract

This paper uses a methodology that synthesises an Academic Literacies approach and Critical Discourse Analysis to explore student experiences of feedback on written assessments in two higher education institutions. The qualitative analysis of student interviews is oriented around three topics:

- the socially situated meaning of feedback;
- feedback and self-identity; and
- the power/knowledge relations of learning and teaching.

In the purposeful dialogue created by interviewer and interviewee, emergent themes of concern to students are critically analysed to capture something of the complexity of feedback as a genre of academic communication. We conclude that feedback literacy is characterised by diversity and difference; that there are different levels of engagement with feedback; and that there is no universal formula for producing effective feedback.

Keywords

Feedback literacy; situated meaning; self-identity; power asymmetries.

Introduction

Our interests lie in feedback literacy, particularly the ways in which student interpretations of feedback are shaped by the socially situated meaning of feedback practice, tutor and student identities, and the power/knowledge relations of learning and teaching. What stimulated us to engage in research on feedback was our 'not uncommon' (Crisp, 2007:572) frustration at repeating the same feedback to the same students. Why was it that some students could not, or would not, use feedback? Evidence surveyed by Falchikov (1995) suggested that significant numbers of students do not understand or act on written feedback and some students do not even deem it worthy enough to be read. Duncan (2007) also argues that many students are not interested in feedback. However, Higgins et al. (2001, 2002), Orsmond et al. (2005), Weaver (2006) and Hounsell (2007) suggest that most students do read feedback. However, this does not imply that they either understand the feedback or that they can successfully engage with it. Accounting for this situation by simply 'blaming students' (Crisp, 2007:578) seemed to us an inadequate explanation. Therefore, we began our quest to understand the complex nature of feedback discourse and practice, and why feedback means different things to different students.

An Academic Literacies Approach

Shortly after commencing the literature review for our research we discovered a framework to theorise student reading and writing which was comprehensive and persuasive: the Academic Literacies approach. This approach has been developed by Lea and Street (Lea and Street 1998, Lea 2004, Street 2004). It positions student reading and writing as a particular form of literacy which must be acquired within particular contexts. The Academic Literacies approach emerged from the broader New Literacies Studies (Gee, 1990) which problematised the idea that general literacy was a simple technical skill – the ability

to read and write. Influenced by the work of Bakhtin and Foucault, New Literacy Studies conceptualised literacy as a complex set of social practices powerfully shaped by wider social and cultural forces (Barton et al., 2000).

The Academic Literacies approach deploys this insight within the specific context of higher education. It maintains that acquiring academic literacy, just like any other form of literacy, means that students not only acquire new technical skills, but, crucially, acquire new ways of knowing and making sense of the world, and themselves. Learning to read and write in an academic context therefore involves a complex set of psychosocial processes which some students may find problematic. The problems experienced by some students trying to acquire academic literacy are therefore not seen as simply a study skills deficit, or a failure of academic socialisation; that is to acculturate adequately to the norms and practices of academia. The Academic Literacies approach incorporates both the study skills and academic socialisation approaches into a more comprehensive theorisation of student reading and writing in higher education (Lea and Street, 1998). These three approaches are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Approaches to student reading and writing in higher education.

| Approach | Focus | Academic reading and writing |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Study skills | Student skills deficits | Technical/instrumental skills |
| Academic socialisation | Student orientation to learning: deep, surface, strategic | Learned through acculturation to norms of academic practice |
| Academic literacies | Epistemological and ontological dimensions of learning and teaching; institutional power relations | Situated complex and contested literacy practices |

Adapted from Lea and Street (1998:169–170)

So, researchers within the Academic Literacies approach position student problems engaging with and effectively operationalising feedback as emerging from ‘the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation’ (Street, 2004:15), and from the institutional power relations within which learning and teaching are implicated. As Lea and Street (1998:3) argue, the Academic Literacies approach views:

‘...the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power.’

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is a method that combines elements of sociolinguistics with the broader analysis of the operation of power in social relations and institutions. It is a multidisciplinary method but its use does not necessarily require a detailed knowledge of linguistics, sociology, psychology or politics (Fairclough, 1992). As Fairclough (1992:225) argues:

‘...there is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis.’

The procedural openness of this method suggested to us that it could provide a general purpose methodological toolbox that had the potential to be used innovatively within practitioner research.

The aim of our research was to analyse student perceptions and understandings of feedback discourse within particular institutional contexts. So Critical Discourse Analysis was an appropriate method for research within the theoretical framework of the Academic Literacies approach.

- For our purposes, a fine-grained linguistic analysis of our interview texts was inappropriate as we wanted to address the broader ‘text structure’ (Fairclough, 1992:75) of our interviews. Our analysis, therefore, would have two dimensions:

- a macro-sociological analysis of feedback as a form of practice, powerfully shaped by institutional and wider social structural factors; and
- a micro-sociological analysis of feedback as a 'genre' of communication: a class of communicative events with particular communicative purposes (Swales, 1990:58), actively produced and made sense of by members of particular 'communities of practice' (Fairclough 1992:72, Lave and Wenger 1999).

Crucially, as Lave and Wenger (1999:25) argue, use of the term 'community' does not imply 'some primordial culture-sharing entity', but rather that:

'...members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints.'

In our research, we used a simplified version of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. This consisted of:

1. Understanding the meaning of the statements within our interview texts;
2. Exploring how the discursive practices that produce feedback both enable and constrain the ways in which it is communicated to, and consumed (interpreted) by students; and
3. Analysing feedback as a type of social practice shaped by wider institutional and structural power relations, which open up and close down the possibilities for particular individuals to feed forward feedback.

Principally, we are interested in:

- the ways in which feedback practice is shaped by and shapes the social identities of tutor and student;
- the location of feedback within the social relations of learning and teaching; and
- how feedback contributes to the construction of academic knowledge systems.

That is, the political and ideological effects of feedback discourse (Fairclough 1992).

The Data

The corpus of texts analysed was constituted by transcripts of 21 semi-structured student interviews from two higher education institutions – one in England, one in Scotland – carried out during the 2008/2009 academic year. The participants in the research were full-time undergraduate students (Years 1, 2, 3, and 4) at University College Plymouth: St Mark & St John (UCP Marjon) and Edinburgh Napier University studying sociology as part of their degree programme. Students were interviewed through self-selection and convenience sampling. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 48. Some of the participants self-disclosed specific learning needs and/or a disability. There was little ethnic variation among the participants who were overwhelmingly white British. Ethical approval for the research followed the Ethics Policy guidelines set out by UCP Marjon and gained clearance by the University College's Sociological Research Ethics panel.

The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions informed by topics that had emerged from our literature review. The topics acknowledged to be of greatest salience to the research team were those of meaning, identity and power. Students were encouraged to discuss their experience of feedback in the light of these topics. Questions provided opportunities to discuss student understandings and feelings about:

- feedback;
- the effect of marks and how the nature of feedback received affected their self esteem;
- how highly feedback was valued; and
- whether students would seek out tutors for clarification and further dialogue around feedback.

Care was taken to allow themes of concern to students to emerge so that student ‘voices’ could be extensively articulated. The interviews, therefore, aspired to be a form of purposeful dialogue between the research participants.

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed. The research team identified key statements relating to three key topics:

- how the meaning of feedback discourse is constructed by students;
- the ways in which tutor and student identities impact on feedback practice; and
- the ways in which micro and macro power/knowledge relations impact student engagement with the feedback process.

The research process is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the research process.

| Methodological approach | Focus of research | Interview topics selected | Emergent themes from data |
|---|---|--|---|
| Academic Literacies and Critical Discourse Analysis | Meaning of statements in feedback texts | Socially situated meaning of feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades • Language • Criticism |
| Multidisciplinary: linguistics, sociology, psychology, politics | Feedback as discursive practice | Feedback and self-identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor identity • Student identity |
| Explores micro and macro dimensions of feedback discourse | Feedback as social practice | Power/knowledge relations of learning and teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power asymmetries • Individual power |

Data Analysis

Topic 1: The socially situated meaning of feedback discourse

The starting point of our investigation into feedback literacy was what Light and Cox (2001) call ‘an engagement model’. Within this model, students in particular learning environments are conceived to be actively engaged in the creation and mediation of meaning (Higgins et al., 2002). The meaning of feedback is made both individually and collectively by students reading feedback on their own and within the context of their peer groups – or what two students referred to as their ‘study buddies’.

Bakhtin (1981, 1986) provides useful insights for practitioners concerning the making of meaning in feedback discourse. For Bakhtin (1981, 1986), meaning is always created in dialogue. Thus:

'...meaning always implies at least two voices, assumes underlying difference rather than identity.' (Wegerif, no date: 2)

This is a useful insight, as it foregrounds the need to listen to and understand 'student voices' and not efface their difference or subsume them within 'tutor voices'.

The three themes of greatest salience that emerged from within this topic were:

- the importance of grades;
- the difficulties presented by academic language; and
- the importance of what students termed 'just criticism'.

Grades

Within academia it is perhaps commonly held that students are primarily interested in the grade, with written feedback being of secondary consideration.

... at the end of the day you kinda have an idea of what kind of comments are going to come with the mark anyway (Year 4 student)

So written feedback could be redundant. Given that the grade descriptors provided by higher education institutions forms part of the institutional dialogue with students, perhaps this statement is not as blinkered as it may appear.

For other students the grade is the initial source of meaning, and the first point of engagement with feedback: the prism through which feedback is read.

...(I) generally look at the grade first and go from there' (Year 2 student)

*I go to the grade first because that tells you what position you are in ...
I read the feedback to enable me to improve my work (Year 2 student)*

However, the grade signifies different meanings to different students.

If I get a good mark I'm more inclined to read the feedback (Year 3 student)

Well, if I get a pass, and it's not the mark I was expecting, then it would make me read the feedback a lot more in depth to see where I went wrong. (Year 2 student in the same institution)

So the grade can be a powerful form of feedback to students. Concentration on the grade can be interpreted by tutors as a lamentable sign of a surface or strategic approach to learning. While acknowledging student instrumentality, we consider it to be only part of the complex process in which students produce the meaning of feedback discourse. Students inhabit a learning environment in which grades are powerful signifiers of success and failure. Furthermore, economic imperatives, particularly the need to undertake employment to finance their studies, impel students to adopt an instrumental strategy towards their studies. Increasingly, students are enrolled as full-time but are – in reality – studying part-time (Gibbs, 2006).

However, valorisation of grades does not necessarily mean students adopt a simple instrumental approach to learning. Our research has shown that such instrumentality can be fused in complex ways with the academically more desirable 'deep' approach to learning.

Language

While recognising the need for academic language, a Year 2 student thought its opacity acted as a 'barrier' to understanding feedback. Decoding the meaning of academic language in feedback discourse can be problematic.

It's like learning a foreign language (Year 3 student)

Cultivating students' feedback literacy may require careful consideration of the complexity of the language we use and reflection upon what form of language in feedback is appropriate to particular levels of study. As a Year 3 student commented about grade descriptors:

... it's just words, it doesn't really mean much.

Rather than facilitating Year 1 students' engagement with feedback, using the formal language of grade descriptors may prove to be a hindrance rather than a help.

Criticism

If students interpret feedback discourse to be 'just' then they are more likely to actively engage with its meaning.

Well, nobody likes criticism, but if it's just criticism, then that's fine (Year 1 student)

Even if a tutor has a reputation for being a 'hard' marker, as long as students interpret the feedback provided as just, they will accept it. Alternatively, if feedback discourse is read as containing statements that are unjust, the engagement with it becomes emotionally charged.

If somebody feels that they have been marked down wrongly it can become really emotive, quite emotional ... and they can really struggle to get up from that (Year 3 student)

This reinforces the notion that feedback can become 'obscured by emotional static' (Chanock, 2000:95). Indeed, there is now a burgeoning recognition that emotion is an important dimension of the process of reading feedback (Higgins et al., 2001, Falchikov and Boud, 2007).

Findings

The analysis developed seven themes within three broad topics.

Tutor identity

Several interviews emphasised the importance of the tutor's identity in mediating feedback, that is to say, feedback is read through the tutor-student relationship. The social relations of the production of feedback significantly impact upon the way in which it is consumed by students.

The relationship between lecturer and student is very important. I think some tutors care and some don't. (Year 2 student)

If tutors give the impression of not caring, then feedback can be written off as a manifestation of this lack of interest and dismissed. One of the signifiers of tutor care is the creation of bespoke feedback. Students engage more readily with feedback that is personalised but not personal, as this, to them, is a clear indication that tutors care about individual students' work. Furthermore, when tutors demonstrate

‘they actually care about what they are teaching’ (Year 2 student), then students generally feel more cared about and are more willing to engage with feedback.

The question ‘What does it mean to care for our students?’ is one we think deserves much more empirical study. As Handley (2009) argues, students rightly desire ‘reciprocity and respect’, but caring for students does not necessarily mean giving them everything they want. Rather it is about establishing appropriate boundaries between instruction and assessment. This is not without its difficulties. Both tutor and student collaborate to produce a successful assessment performance, but this runs the risk of fostering learned dependence (Yorke, 2003). Caring for our students, then, is characterised by a tension between the tutor’s roles as instructor and academic developer.

An integral dimension of caring for our students, we would argue, is creating opportunities for dialogue around written feedback. This allows students to clarify comments about both the form and content of their work. We cannot assume, however, that students know how to engage in academic dialogue. They may require guidance as to the nature of such dialogue.

A tutor’s academic identity significantly influences whether students feel comfortable engaging in a dialogue around feedback.

We know we need to approach this tutor to get help but we cannot because we are all scared. (Year 2 student, male)

Student identity

A growing body of research has found that feedback that cannot be understood by students produces a loss of self-esteem, and their identity as a capable learner becomes threatened. A student who perceives that they did not perform adequately in an assessment, but feels incapable of understanding why or what to do about it, is doubly disempowered. As Ivanic et al. (2000) argue, such students have a very personal reaction to feedback: it is interpreted not simply as a commentary upon their work but upon their failings as human beings. It compromises their ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991). That is, feedback possesses the potential to disturb a student’s sense of both their educational and social being.

Our interview data gave limited support to these contentions. As a Year 1 student stated, the impact of feedback on her identity ‘depends on my frame of mind’. The impact was mediated by whatever her current disposition happened to be. A Year 3 student argued that feedback had a limited impact upon her identity:

I don’t see it as personal criticism ... I see it as constructive criticism ... positive feedback enhances confidence.

The connection of feedback to confidence was also commented upon elsewhere in the interview texts.

Feedback is useful because it boosts your confidence, showing you that you are doing things in the correct order ... you don’t necessarily develop as a person through the feedback you are given. You develop as a person through some of the academic staff you meet (Year 2 student)

As Barnett and Coate (2005:117) observe, ‘the development of the being of the student calls for the insertion of the being of the lecturer’.

Two Year 3 students professed a competitive, individualised consumer identity with regard to their academic practice. However, one of these student’s individualism was tempered with a collaborative relationship with a particular ‘study buddy’. This is perhaps unsurprising in the context of the marketisation of Higher Education (Wright 2004), the emergence of academic capitalism, and a

neo-liberal ideology which creates the conditions for such an identity and concomitant competitive social practices to emerge. Other students, however, identified themselves as collaborative consumers.

*There has been a lot of pushing one another, helping one another, comradeship
(Year 2 student)*

Topic 3: The power/knowledge relations of learning and teaching

As Higgins et al. (2001:272) argue, power and authority are two of the most significant features of feedback discourse. The power and authority manifest in feedback is a product of both the micro-relations of learning and teaching and the macro-relations that exist in particular academic institutions. The Academic Literacies approach attempts to capture both these dimensions by considering feedback as both a discursive and a social practice.

The two themes of greatest salience that emerged from within this topic were

- asymmetries of power; and
- the power of the individual student.

Power asymmetries

Bakhtin argues that 'meaning is achieved through struggle' (Holquist, 1990:39). Meaning emerges from the continual dialogue between the different voices of tutor and student. While there was open acknowledgement of these differences voiced within the interview data, there was also a firm assertion by two widening participation Year 3 students of the necessity of asymmetries in power.

For us to learn, you need to have the power dynamic where the teacher has more power than the student. (Year 3 student)

I would just accept it. I wouldn't challenge it. Obviously they are the experts; you don't know what you are doing. (Year 3 student)

At first glance, this may seem like a form of acquiescent passivity, antithetical to the current preoccupation within Higher Education on the creation of students who are autonomous learners. A Foucauldian informed reading of this statement can construe it otherwise. This statement contains a recognition of the creative aspect of asymmetrical power/knowledge relations. For, as Foucault (1977) argued, power is not inherently oppressive, it does not simply create 'docile' students. The power effects of academic discipline may also be creative and be useful to students, enabling them to acquire knowledge, understanding and skills. Student acceptance of the institutional relations of 'loose subjection' (Becker et al., 1995:133), may be an empowering means to achieve the end of enhanced performance, rather than a symptom of learned dependence. As Leach et al. (2001:294) persuasively argue, 'Empowerment is not the same for everyone.'

Individual power

The theme of individualism, discussed above, emerged again in the context of discussion of the routes to academic success.

I think it's down to the individual because if you want to do well then you have to work out a way of doing well. (Year 3 student)

It's about learning to regulate your own learning style to make sure you get the best out of it. (Year 3 student)

Again, these statements may not be simple assertions of bourgeois individualism, but statements of self-discipline and self-esteem – a recognition of the necessity to accept responsibility for their own learning. This construction of the self as a responsible individual perhaps reflects the wider societal discourse concerning the marketisation of Higher Education and the acceptance by students of the subject position of ‘conscientious consumers’ (Higgins et al., 2002). Students are not simply unreflective individualists but pragmatic consumers responsible for their own choices in the educational marketplace. They are social individuals, shaped by discursive and social practices, yet also capable of re-shaping those practices for particular ends.

Diversity and Difference

Acquiring feedback literacy is part of the broader process of acquiring academic literacy, of learning to think, read and write in new ways. This process is also part of the transformation of the student self. In becoming feedback literate, students become different people. As Bakhtin’s work suggests, active participation in feedback discourse opens up the possibility of students acquiring a different voice, and provides opportunities for the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of students’ academic self-identities (Wegeirif 2006:59–60). As Lave and Wenger (1999:31) argue:

‘Learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon.’

What characterised our analysis of students’ interpretations of feedback discourse was diversity and difference:

- There was not one student voice but many;
- Feedback means different things to different students;
- Different tutor and student identities mediate feedback in different ways; and
- Power/knowledge relations within specific academic institutions take diverse forms and have diverse effects. This results in different forms of student engagement with feedback.

These forms of engagement can usefully be seen as having different levels (Barnett and Coate, 2005:124):

- an **epistemological** level, that is an engagement in knowing (acquiring academic knowledge);
- a **practical** level, that is an engagement in doing (reading, thinking about, and feeding forward feedback); and
- an **ontological** level, that is an engagement of the self (investment of identity in academic work).

The multiplicity of student experiences of feedback reflects the multiple functions feedback discourse performs within academic institutions. That is to say, the purpose of feedback is to:

- help and encourage students in their learning;
- justify the grade awarded;
- follow institutional policy and regulations; and
- ensure that quality and standards are maintained.

Our research also revealed that staff understandings of – and their commitment to – the provision of feedback to students is also heterogeneous.

While there can be no universal formula for producing engaging feedback or any guarantee that it will be successfully fed forward, there is clearly the potential for feedback to become more engaging. It is a salient dimension of learning and teaching in higher education and an essential component of 'assessment for learning'. Our research suggests that a change in practice is required which would necessitate the creation of more time and space for feedback in the curriculum. This would help raise the status of feedback, enabling it to become a highly valued resource by both tutors and students, and also help feedback to become more securely embedded in institutional structures and strategies (Hounsell, 2007).

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