Paper 14

Understanding the pedagogical significance of higher education wherever it's taught

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a project run in association with the FDTL5 project 'Engaging Students with Assessment Feedback: What works?' The original FDTL project, based at Oxford Brookes University, started in the academic year 05/06 with a group of lead institutions developing a set of four models designed to enhance student engagement with assessment feedback in Higher Education (phase one). During 06/07 the findings were disseminated to an extended group of cascade partner institutions who were tasked with testing and evaluating these models (phase two). At this stage all project work had been done in business schools, but by the end of phase two the project team was keen to further test the models with a series of micro projects in other disciplines.

Following a presentation of their work by the project team at the University of Sunderland I agreed to run a micro project to test the models with HE taught in Further Education Colleges (FECs), using as a case study a Foundation Degree (Fd) in Education and Care which is delivered across a number of collaborative partner colleges. This case study was considered to be a particularly useful test of the project models, since Foundation Degrees like the example chosen have been criticized for inconsistencies in the feedback and assessment of student's work, which is unsurprising given the number of staff and students involved. However, anomalies such as this provide a platform for challenging such inconsistencies and trialling of new approaches to engage students with their assessment feedback and learning opportunities.

This paper outlines the process used to implement the project model, and reflects on the delivery of that process. An overview of the educational challenge was to use one of the models with those teaching and learning HE in FECs. In particular, the challenge presented was to ensure high quality education with a range of diverse and engaging scholarly activities supported by the institution, but challenging to those seeking higher level qualifications. However such ideals are contested by research (Hounsell et al. 2007c) who revealed through their study of undergraduates across four subject areas and eleven universities, that despite the teaching and learning environment tending to support learning there was a notable 'pervasive student dissatisfaction with the adequacy of guidance and feedback.

Such dissatisfaction made public has unnerved many Higher Education Institutions, (HEIs) and in particular such dissatisfaction on aspects of assessment and feedback has been fuelled by the explicit findings of the National Student Survey (NSS). Research from within our home university extrapolated from Sanders'(2008) first phase work with the FDTL project research included:

- o Feedback often concentrates on the 'negative' i.e. what the student has done wrong, and there is insufficient focus on informing students what they have done well and why, so that they can build on their strengths.

- o Academic staff are often unaware of how students perceive or use the feedback provided; there is often a 'perception gap' between staff who feel that they have provided feedback (e.g. verbally in seminars; to groups; via WebCT) and students, who feel that no feedback has been provided (see above).

- o Students are not always aware that feedback is being provided; they tend to perceive feedback as only the written comments on summative assessments. Thus, the emphasis that has recently been placed on formative feedback techniques is not having as great an effect as intended.

    o   Some students do not know how to use feedback to improve their future performance. They lack skills of reflection, may not understand the academic 'jargon' often used to provide feedback, and they often see the 'mark' as the only valued feedback. (In some modules up to 30% of marked assignments are not collected by the students).

Furthermore students' perceptions included:

'Personally I felt feedback was uninformative and feel that grading criteria could have been more useful.'

'The marking scheme and lack of feedback is sometimes very, very poor. In fact, it knocks your confidence.'

'I didn't understand the assessment criteria and didn't receive effective feedback in order to improve my grades at the next assessment.'

'The tutor gave the wrong feedback that resulted in my group taking a turn we would not have done if the feedback had not been given. Feedback made the final product worse.'

'When I asked for an interpretation of the feedback I was given on a piece of coursework, the lecturer became defensive and unwilling to make comment.'

Overwhelmingly the views stemming from original FDTL project concluded that that the promotion and actualization of quality dialogue between students and staff was the key to resolving such issues.

'One tutor wrote on my assignment 'Think about your structure'. What was that supposed to mean? So I had a little think about it and then carried on with what I was doing! Useless!'

The above findings that have now been disseminated widely to Universities, however, as a specialist in vocational education and collaborative provision, I considered the most interesting findings to be around inconsistencies.

'There's inconsistency in the marking schemes between different lecturers. Sometime you get penalised, sometimes you don't. It's unfair as we're not told why by the lecturers.'

'At a previous University I submitted the same assignment twice and it was marked by two different tutors. I got marks of 35% and 80% -for the same work! Experience has taught me not to give too much importance to feedback.'

With higher education programmes now stretching beyond the boundaries of the campus across the region and wider UK and been offered in local further education colleges, the potential is for greater and increased inconsistencies rather than parity of experience and a reduction of inconsistency. The FDTL5 invitation to participate in a micro project proved to be opportunistic and the catalyst to attempt to model consistency and alignment with that of the awarding institution. Most importantly, earlier studies had all focused on provision within the HEI not their partner institutions.

Historically, new ideas for HE tend to be developed by academics and researchers in traditional HEIs, but caution must be taken to avoid overlooking those whose contribution and capacity can add to this scholarly mass, those who have empirical understanding of the discipline as they have responsibility for the teaching and learning of HE in FECS. This work has largely been viewed as 'building capacity in relation to widening participation and learning and teaching…' (Jones 2008 cited Parry et al. 2008). The fact that there is recognition of such duality of regimes for advance level study should in itself be a stimulus to ensure that those teaching and learning HE in an FEC do not become entrenched in systems that are detrimental to the student experience, or deviate from the ideals of higher education. Parity of learning, alignment with current developments, modes of teaching and innovation in pedagogical approach are therefore all critical to HE *wherever it is taught.*

Jones (2008) cautions that currently the work of HE in FECs tends to be about subject updating rather than pedagogy. This is supported by the work of Parry (2009) who suggests that HE in FE partnership arrangements tend to be over simplified and paradoxical in terms of a zone of exchange, transition, and transgression with numerous transactions and trade offs. HEFCE's 2009 good practice guidance 'Supporting Higher Education in Further Education Colleges: Policy, Practice and Prospects explains the scholarly activities of colleges as having a 'broader definition (2009:106). Yet this is countered, in part, by a caveat which suggests that most colleges are now functioning in a parallel mode, by developing research strategies as part of their overall strategic plan, but their staff engage in research and scholarly activity in a very different climate to that of the HEIs. The engagement of FEC staff in research and scholarly activity can depend on 'the level and health of the relationship' established with the awarding body, 'where research is enabled this is achieved through joint research projects', and 'there is potential for more such development' (Ibid:107).

Opportunities for alignment

The FDTL 5 project in its secondary phase was presented with the clear intention to actively engage students in their learning and enable them to make sense of the feedback provided by their lecturers (Gibbs and Simpson 2002, Higgens, Hartley and Skelton 2001, Hyatt 2005 and Skidmore 2006). The ability to understand, value and use formative feedback as guidance to improve comprehension, critical thinking, referencing, and presentation of work, impacted on the quality of students' work and enabled further development of knowledge and application which is instrumental in terms of the learning process. The lecturers engaged in the micro project were furnished with the national research collated by Oxford Brookes. These were supplemented with statements that reflected the views of our HEI students' such insightful comments indicated that there was a 'a perceived unfairness', 'lack of trust 'emotion', 'meaningless feedback', 'lack of understanding of the assessment criteria' and these findings had been collected and collated across the institution for work on the student experience and the psychological contract (Millar, J and Sanders, G 2009; Sanders, G 2008).

The local students comments had provoked the need for staff development sessions. The HEI was making a conscious effort to redress such issues by embedding in the FDTL formative feedback processes and introduce new and alternative pedagogical approaches for teaching and learning, whilst being mindful of the need to enhance the student experience. The critical issue seemed to be that while there were and are many policy drivers to engage students with their HE experience, there is little in the literature to guide teachers and students to models of good practice in the process of learning through engagement with feedback. Quite simply, nobody has addressed the issue of how to become scholars for teachers in FECs who teach higher education courses.

The duality of regimes mentioned earlier remains a major research challenge particularly for HE in FEC institutions. Experience highlights there is the ability and capacity to undertake pedagogic research, but this is sporadic and patchy to date, largely because the duality of regimes aligns more closely with FE rather than HE provision. This in turn highlights the disparate alignment between HE in HEIs and HE in FECs, it also sends out a warning that the vision and models of good practice from the widening participation agenda which impact on all higher education has not historically embedded within it a strong pedagogic research function.

Although several micro projects commenced in the second phase there was only one which considered HE outside of the HEI. College Staff interested in the project with a remit for teaching FDs were able to consider their role and understanding of the possible effect and affect assessment has upon individual students. The adoption of one model from a group of possible four had a schedule of time framed tasks and what should occur in terms of 'in-class' and 'out- of- class activities'. This paper presents the findings of the offsite HE in FEC collaborative college participants.

Methodology

In order to address the issues outlined above it was decided to access a group of staff and students based in FECs who were collaborating with the university. The approach was to be a case study of a 2008 – 2009 cohort working with the Foundation Degree Education and Care offered by a range of local colleges working through the University of Sunderland. We wished to explore different models of learning, in particular how feedback operated to allow both students and staff demonstrable ownership of learning and increased awareness of self and further learning potential. The focus of this study would involve the exploration of different models of feedback and the choice of one which could be evaluated. The basis of this evaluation would be increased satisfaction with the learning process for both staff and students involved in higher education in the FECs. A key component was that dialogue was pivotal and the core for improvement.

The micro projects therefore provided staff and student cohorts with a tool to test out, or measure the effectiveness of one of the four assessment and feedback models provided by the FDTL team at Oxford Brookes University. These models had been designed, tried and tested earlier, they reflected the ideas from literature and had utilised the empirical evidence gathered from phase one. It offered those interested in formative feedback a series of tangible frameworks for use across a broad range of subject areas. The four frameworks included: 1) the use of exemplars; 2) peer review; 3) generic feedback and 4) self critique and CRAFTing feedback across wider discipline (see appendices 1-4)

The merit of each model was considered in the light of its appropriateness, questioned whether or not it was fit for purpose to be used to attempt consistency on the giving of formative feed back in Higher Education (HE) in the Further Education Colleges (FECs). The rationale formulated for the adoption and use of such a model was to challenge inconsistencies which are frequently raised at moderation events, standardisation meetings and has been noted by external monitoring and reported upon in external examiners reports. Most importantly, the critical question of comparability of HE experience across the partnerships tends to be avoided or driven by quality measurements rather than enhancement opportunities. Two key aspects of scholarship concerning FEC teachers were their lack of interest in research into their own pedagogical approach and their interest in standards.

The FDTL5 micro project offered a challenge, it was opened to a single Foundation Degree whose lecturers were willing to listen to the findings of earlier work and participate in staff development about the possibilities of entering into the second phase and micro project. A two day workshop was provided to lecturing staff from seven partner colleges, some of whom had several years of experience whilst others were in their first year of teaching. Lecturers were given an opportunity to consider the project as a response to their external examiners' constructive criticism; were presented with a summary of the salient issues from current literature; assessment and feedback issues from the National Student Survey and shown the four available models of engagement with assessment feedback as illustrated in fig 1-4. The model selected through wider discussion with the college participants was Model 3 Generic feedback and self critique.

Of the seven colleges running the same Foundation Degree five colleges agreed to send staff and they participated in two days staff development. Again the colleges were asked if they wished to participate in the formative assessment and feedback project subsequently four colleges chose to actively engage with the micro project and utilise a model of assessment feedback on their chosen module. The participants included ten members of staff; one hundred and thirty five students with a time scale of September 2008 – February 2009, twelve weeks was the time scale of the actual micro project 'engaging students with their assessment feedback'. The remaining weeks were allocated to data gathering and reporting.

Initial meetings were held with the four separate colleges' lecturing staff within the HE departments of the FECs, providing an opportunity to talk through the process, resolve concerns and answer any questions or issues staff had not considered or raised in the two initial days staff development. Staff had previously been shown all four models prepared by the Oxford Brookes team, but collectively selected model 3 'Generic Feedback and Self Critique'. Staff worked on creating a hybrid version of the original model 3, this was necessitated by the fact that the staff felt there were omissions at the beginning and

close of the model, it was also welcomed by the FDTL5 team as they wanted users to own the model they worked with. The amendments were made to ensure the relevance of the model for those widening participation or non-traditional students unfamiliar with the workings of higher education. A diagram of the hybrid model was then re- produced in very large scale with a high quality finish and displayed in the college programme base rooms, so that they could be a visual reminder of the process. Every student was also furnished with a personal A4 copy and provided with a rationale for participation in the project, this was explained at length to each respective student cohort and they were given an opportunity for questions and answers. Students were also reassured that they like other students 'on campus provision' were also participating in the phase two of engaging students with assessment feedback through other micro projects, in other disciplines. Staff and students were encouraged to participate in discussions, and each member of staff was given a pack of resources on Assessment and Feedback and provided with a list of URLs so that they could download and read further on this important aspect of learning.

The duration of the project was twelve weeks long, at the end of which the micro project lecturers were asked to seek students' reflections and retain comments from discussions. Additionally they were asked to complete questionnaires and participate in semi-structured interviews. It is worth noting that these took place as stated at the close of the module, but all comments from students were taken prior to the allocation and consideration of their marks.

Table 1. FEC sample participants

College	No of Staff	No of Students	No of Staff Question's and Interviews
A	2	16	1 – non participant
B	3	24	1
C	2	18	2
D	2	19*	2
E	3	74	3
	10	135	10

At the end of the project evaluation of staff and student experience was carried out using open ended qualitative questions and reflections. Staff were asked a number of questions which included aspects of change, attitudes and classroom behaviour with students and staff. They were also asked about the number of referrals for the modules when they had used the hybrid model of engaging students with their assessment feedback and whether or not they actually liked using the provided model framework with its build in time scale. Finally, staff were asked if they considered whether the model was worthy of further use on the Foundation Degree. Students were largely asked to reflect on the merits of such a model of formative assessment, what they had lessons learned. In particular they were encouraged to consider their own learning in line with such a framework. They too, were asked to consider whether or not the model would be a valuable tool for future modules and as an aid to student learning.

Findings

All of the staff indicated that there was indeed a change in relationships and improved levels of interaction. For example, even as students were entering the classroom staff observed that there was sharing of ideas and interaction which resulted in their moving chairs and seating positions. Because of the change in student's classroom behaviour staff became increasingly aware of the changes to the increased self confidence of students, which led to an increase in their resilience to learning an essential aspect of learning power that Claxton deems to be 'worryingly low' in all university students (Claxton, 2000:298).

Despite the project offering an opportunity for formative feedback midpoint, which was perceived by staff as an opportunity to ease or reduce student concern, the teaching staff indicated that instead of

worrying about the final deadline, some students were 'worried about the draft assignment'. All of the participants achieved a 100% pass rate in their modules. In addition, it was noted that through the intervention strategy that one student in college D* appeared to need additional learning support, therefore early identification of learning need was an unforeseen/additional finding. All students passed their module, and marks appeared to have peaked in comparison with other years. There were more marks above in the mid 50 – 70 + range than in earlier years, and even those who achieved in the 40-49% range did so at the higher end of this classification.

The evaluative judgments of the staff teaching HE in the FECs was that the level of engagement had increased and that students became very vocal, they talking more about their assignments; there was less questioning of whether 'is this right?' The idea that there was only one possible way to write an assignment task seemed to be dispelled; it increased research skills and definitely improved the quality of the bibliographies. Most significantly it broke things down for students and there was no tension, and no panic for their busy lives. There was a great variation in the drafts submitted for formative assessment as students were permitted to present drafts as plans, pen pictures, mind mapping of ideas or a more traditional written draft assignment, but it was the traditional draft submission that appeared. It enabled the students to take ownership and gave assurance of what was written or well planned and this led to a growth in confidence. As there were no referrals at the close of the module, this meant that it greatly benefited the staff, as they could then move on to new modules having finished the module with no outstanding referral, deferral or additional support and supplementary resources to find for students.

The most negative comment received was about the trialling of the model was the early engagement and formative feedback micro project had impacted and weighted heavily the work for both teachers and students from the earliest days of the module.
The students said:

> It was a good way of improving your work.
> I could check I was on the right track.
> I do feel this technique was useful when reading my draft essay however, I feel my essay is satisfactory after using the generic feedback and self critique.
> When writing my next assignment I will use this format to push myself toward the good elements and improve.
> I found the micro project process hard… Overall, it was worth it, to find out my strengths and weaknesses.
> The generic feedback and self critique was interesting, but had you thinking whether or not to put extra work into the assignment.
> The feed-forward approach helped me to understand where I was in my assignment and where I needed to get to.
> Points made about the whole group were beneficial to me too.

Although the adoption of the model was accepted all of the students said that they didn't particularly like the model approach, but it had merit as 'it clearly was a good way of improving the quality of your work'. Although there have been both positive and negative influences by the adoption of such a model, three additional colleges are now going to invest in the micro project and consider hybrid approaches of their own including the use of electronic and auditory feedback systems. It is worth remembering at the point of seeking students' reflections none of them had yet received their marks, so perhaps the findings would be different if they knew of their success.

Conclusion

The intervention strategy raised and realised aspirations of students. This was stimulated by the opportunities to remedy or improve their ideas, structure, argument and use of literature that had been highlighted through self critique and generic feedback. The second chance to submit meant students were really able to discuss and identify where they had gone wrong, and what they could and should do to demonstrate understanding of the topic. As they had to sift through and sort out areas of weakness, they appeared to take ownership 'of really useful knowledge' Johnson *(1998)*. Most importantly they owned the experience and their work this was clearly evidenced in their use of the use of personal pronouns 'I', 'my' and 'your. The behaviour shift and self directedness toward independence has a synergy with what Knowles (1996) refers to as *Andragogy,* his work has greatly influenced a conceptual

shift when working with adult learners and provides core principles which include the need to know, valuing prior experience, readiness to learn and motivation. The experience of students and their increased dialogue is suggestive that students were 'not just banking problem, but posing' them Friere (1993), again this illustrates an orientation to learning.

Throughout the in-class activities and self critique the learning increased and changed the students application of knowledge by understanding and critically sharing ideas on wider curriculum perspectives and indeed their own learning, such notions are akin to the theories of Experiential learning (Boud and Miller 1996); Transformative learning (Mezirow 2000) and through individual achievement a demonstration of 'developing power to perceive critically'.

A most important lesson learned from both the staff and students using the model included the idea that learning was hard; it required more work than they had perceived it required early interventions in their thinking, processing and use of knowledge as well as increased dialogue with peers and students to staff. Although all were critical of the model 3 approach, there was genuine appreciation and enthusiasm for the development of staff and student knowledge, building up a repertoire of skills which fit with the necessary requirements of becoming scholarly. As the coordinator and participant observer I thought that there were many lessons learned by the running of this micro project. One of which, is it is not acceptable to align HE in FECs with further education practices merely because that is the bulk of the FEC's portfolio and practice. HE in FECs is uniquely placed and established as part of the lifelong learning agenda. It has many positives which include small class sizes, identified HE locations and buildings, dedicated teaching teams and the quality of the education which in many colleges is supported through internal and external CPD programmes. A one size fits all approach or overgeneralization of the quality of collaborative partnerships does not reflect the FD Programme or the skills of staff who participated in the micro project. They were all committed to improving the student experience and willingly engaged in the research.

As such the dialogue of the staff became increasingly vocal and was heard regarding their role and their findings. The effect is that they have become change agents for formative feedback not merely in their own discipline areas, but across HE provision in the FECs. All of the participants are continuing to use this model or want to trial one of the other models. Two members of college staff have since presented the models approach to their colleagues and have initiated additional micro projects on engagement with assessment within their partnership HE provision. Furthermore, participants from other colleges who did not participate in the micro project but came to a colloquium on the findings, have sought workshops and are currently embedding the use of 'Audacity' a mechanism for the giving of verbal feedback into the framework of formative feedback. Therefore a new approach would be to highlight and acknowledge the difference of HE in FECs and allow for a differentiated, not seamless alignment of HE in FECs to current pedagogical research and practice of HE wherever it is taught, in this instance it has fired more enthusiasm off site and extended practice further than first initiated or planned.

There are clearly limitations to the method adopted here to date there is no comparative samples of study that this material can be measured against. Even if comparisons could be drawn with an HEI, it may reveal the duality of regimes rather than evaluative and comparable data of such a model. Therefore there needs to be a strong call for further pedagogical research if higher education is truly valued wherever it is taught, as there is a tacit requirement that staff and students should implicitly understand and own scholarship as a learning process.

Finally, there is still not yet enough research on the pedagogical frameworks of HE and alignment with traditional HEIs for those responsible for teaching and learning HE in FECs however, this micro project serves as a warning to any HEI in terms of complacency toward collaborative partnership growth. It seems that having worked with collaborative college partnership provision, and in particular the dedicated staff teams teaching higher education, that I have become increasingly aware of the development of skills, knowledge and the aptitude of these teaching staff. Such realisation of skills goes beyond Whitehead's notions of 'performativity', I refute his ideas and generalisation that such staff are 'no longer trusted nor relied upon to make informed professionals judgments'. Yet the difference for students accessing HE

from local college or a University is said to be the 'research culture' HEFCE 2009. Projects such as this and the enthusiasm shown toward small scale research will begin to refute such over generalizations. Woodrow back in 1993, cited in (Young, 2002:273) also described the growth and distinction between colleges and universities as a 'quiet revolution', which blurred the distinction of provision. In the context of this small scale study, the blurring has changed into clarity of vision, determination to offer a comparable experience and address inconsistencies.

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