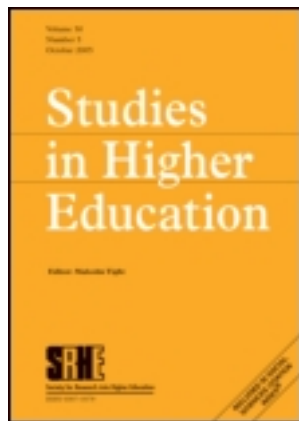


This article was downloaded by: [Deakin University Library]

On: 09 October 2012, At: 22:03

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Studies in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cshe20>

### Feedback: focusing attention on engagement

Margaret Price<sup>a</sup>, Karen Handley<sup>a</sup> & Jill Millar<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

Version of record first published: 02 Feb 2011.

To cite this article: Margaret Price, Karen Handley & Jill Millar (2011): Feedback: focusing attention on engagement, *Studies in Higher Education*, 36:8, 879-896

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.483513>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## **Feedback: focusing attention on engagement**

Margaret Price\*, Karen Handley and Jill Millar

*Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK*

Within many higher education systems there is a search for means to increase levels of student satisfaction with assessment feedback. This article suggests that the search is under way in the wrong place by concentrating on feedback as a product rather than looking more widely to feedback as a long-term dialogic process in which all parties are engaged. A three-year study, focusing on engaging students with assessment feedback, is presented and analysed using an analytical model of stages of engagement. The analysis suggests that a more holistic, socially-embedded conceptualisation of feedback and engagement is needed. This conceptualisation is likely to encourage tutors to support students in more productive ways, which enable students to use feedback to develop their learning, rather than respond mechanistically to the tutors' 'instruction'.

**Keywords:** feedback; student engagement; assessment; student and tutor perceptions; level of engagement

### **Introduction**

'Feedback' is firmly embedded in the educational process. Whether seen as external feedback given by tutors making a judgement on students' work, or as internal feedback generated by students as they reflect on their work in relation to a performance goal, feedback is considered essential to the process of learning. As Laurillard (1993, 61) has said, 'action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner'. Yet there is a widespread belief that many students are disengaged from the feedback process, thereby limiting their learning opportunities. For example, although we know from the literature that students want feedback and appreciate good feedback (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002; Hyland 2000; O'Donovan, Price, and Rust 2001), there is also evidence that student experiences of external feedback are varied and all too often rather negative. In the UK, a feature of the National Student Survey, since it began five years ago, has been that students are less satisfied with their assessment feedback than with other aspects of their higher education experience. Furthermore, academic staff have found that 'it is not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 20).

This situation is unproductive for both students and staff, and suggests that the potential for feedback to enhance student learning is considerably underdeveloped. In addition, within the resource-constrained environment of higher education, the wasted effort of staff preparing feedback that is not read, let alone reflected upon, should not continue. There is a danger of merely trying to respond to student dissatisfaction with

---

\*Corresponding author. Email [meprice@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:meprice@brookes.ac.uk)

*more of the same*, but this is likely to exacerbate rather than address the problem. Therefore, a new perspective on the feedback process, focused on the process of *engagement* rather than the technicalities of feedback, needs to be explored.

This article first acknowledges the complex nature of feedback, treating it as an aspect of the social practice of learning. In our analysis we explore the factors which influence the ways in which students engage with (or disengage from) feedback, and put forward a simple model of the engagement process. Grounded in prior research, the article presents and draws on empirical data from a three-year study on engaging students with assessment feedback, which aimed to critically review the engagement process.

### **The nature of feedback**

Although a commonly-used word, feedback does not have sufficient clarity of meaning either in pedagogic literature or practice. Hattie and Timperley suggest that it is useful to consider a continuum between instruction and feedback, with the points towards the centre where ‘feedback and instruction become intertwined’ (2007, 82). Feedback provided at different points on the continuum is likely to serve different purposes. For example, its purpose may only be for correction of errors or, much more broadly, concerned with developing new ways of knowing (Lea and Street 1998). Although not mutually exclusive, these differing purposes are likely to result in feedback that plays very different roles at different points in students’ intellectual development, and in the context of different disciplinary epistemologies. Much assessment feedback in higher education has far greater ambitions than correcting errors, seeking instead to guide and develop student learning through identifying a gap between performance and the expected standard (Sadler 1989), and seeking to enhance students’ self-evaluative capabilities.

When feedback aims to correct or benchmark work, or to diagnose problems, it is concerned with the work already carried out. However, when feedback is used to address future development (‘feedforward’) it has a relevance beyond the immediate context, and indicates an often-neglected temporal dimension. This temporal dimension is significant to the learning being undertaken. While some feedback can be applied quickly and directly to the next assignment, much of the learning and development in higher education is focused on slowly-learned aspects of course outcomes, such as epistemological understanding, academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998) and mastery of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2005), requiring a process of practice, feedback and more practice repeated over time. The user of such longitudinal feedback must engage with their feedback in a way that allows them to integrate it into their learning process.

Whatever its purpose, feedback is a response to students’ work and is almost always given with an expectation of a response from the student, whether in terms of, for example, increased motivation to learn, greater understanding of the topic, greater academic literacy or greater *pedagogic* literacy, in the sense of being conversant with the role of feedback in developing an understanding of the subject and the characteristics of high-quality work, leading to improvements in learning and future performance (see also Huber and Hutchings 2005). Students’ responses are ideally exhibited in subsequent work and thereby feedback becomes a two-way process, a dialogue (Carless 2006; Hyatt 2005), in which information is exchanged, interpreted and transformed. Feedback is not simply a unidirectional transmission of knowledge. Rather,

both the construction of feedback comments and their reconstruction by feedback recipients are influenced by the interaction between staff and students, as well as the feedback environment, where there is likely to be a certain amount of ‘noise’ (quality systems, resource constraints, etc.) that will cloud the intended meaning of the message (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001). For example, a tutor who, in line with good practice, seeks to be developmental and encourage the student to be questioning and enter into dialogue (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003; Sadler 1989), could, unwittingly, employ language and tone that undermines that purpose, such as using the imperative, which invokes the idea of truth, rather than encouraging exploration and dialogue (Hyatt 2005). In addition, the sender carries, and may subliminally convey in the communication, particular views of the learning process, whilst on the other hand the receiver’s past experience will colour their interpretation of the message being given.

Confusion over expectations of what feedback can achieve, and the difficulties associated with establishing a dialogue between staff and students, should not be underestimated. Inevitably, these will impact on the extent of engagement with feedback that can be achieved. It is unlikely that, without a clear and shared understanding of the nature of feedback by all parties involved, feedback can be improved.

### **The nature of engagement and the feedback process**

Engagement with feedback, like feedback itself, is conceptually different when seen as either a product or a process. Viewed as a *product* there is little interest in the response to it, perhaps only an expectation of ‘passive’ engagement (in the sense of listening but not thinking), invoking at best a behavioural response rather than a cognitive one. Within the cognitivist literature, engagement is acknowledged to be multifaceted (Bryson and Hand 2007; Chickering and Gamson 1987), and Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris suggest that ‘engagement is a meta construct’ (2004, 60), with all components (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) encountered simultaneously. Moving beyond feedback as a product to a recognition of feedback as a *social practice*, McFadden and Munns assert that ‘student engagement is a process rather than a product’ (2002, 362), and one which is strongly influenced by relationships between students and teachers. If we build upon this perspective, then we see that feedback itself plays a role in determining that relationship, and thereby engagement, as it not only carries content, but also relational information about the person giving it and the context in which the giver and receiver is situated. On a very basic level, whether the feedback is legible/audible or clearly stated can give an indication of the importance accorded to the process by the teacher.

From our perspective, the relationship between staff and student is underpinned by the broader learning context. As McInnis (2005) points out, a sharing of values and approaches to learning between staff and student is a key to good engagement. Therefore, the extent to which students are involved in the learning community should be an indicator and an enabler of engagement (O’Donovan, Price, and Rust 2008). In line with this, Hyatt (2005) emphasises the need to encourage dialogue through feedback, with a view to supporting induction into an academic discourse community. If feedback is part of a dialogue, the issues of the medium and timing of feedback are also relevant, and often raised in relation to engagement. Feedback may be oral, visual, written or kinaesthetic (referring to ‘body awareness’; see Gardner 1993), with formal feedback mainly in written form. Written feedback is often seen as unidirectional and

limited in its scope to communicate meaningful knowledge (Price and O'Donovan 2007), limiting the scope for dialogue, which may make engagement difficult. Similarly, delays in the return of student work and feedback is a common cause of complaint because, as Gibbs and Simpson (2004, 18) point out, engagement will be greater if 'it is received by the students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance'.

Bryson and Hand (2007) identify student expectations and perceptions as critical to engagement. As already explained, feedback plays multiple purposes, therefore it follows that these could lead to a multiplicity of expectations among both staff and students of what feedback can and will provide. Student expectations are likely to be determined by their own goals, which 'provide a framework for interpreting and responding to events that occur' (Yorke 2003, 488), so expectations of feedback will differ according to their goals, be they performance enhancement or satisficing.

Within a social constructive perspective, identity is both shaped by and shapes engagement with feedback. Identity thus influences students' readiness to engage, and this will be particularly relevant for feedback which has the capacity to challenge or reinforce notions of identity. Feedback that is likely to reinforce positive perceptions of self is far more likely to engage the receiver, and both Hattie and Timperley (2007) and McInnis (2005) point to the importance of positive student identities to promote engagement. However, the negative effect of feedback itself can impact on self-efficacy (Wotjas 1998), and therefore potentially discourages future engagement. Relationships and membership of community provide feelings of belonging that enhance engagement (McInnis 2005; O'Donovan, Price, and Rust 2008) and reciprocity and due consideration of student effort and time have also been highlighted as important (Blair 2006). For this reason, staff attitude and perception of their role in the learning process is also a key factor in student engagement, as well as the extent to which trust relations are established (Bryson and Hand 2007).

Variations in the extent or level of student engagement must also be given consideration and raise questions about what is sufficient to constitute engagement. Interpretations of engagement mean that some would deem a learner to be engaged if they listen/read feedback attentively, while others would seek other evidence of engagement, such as asking questions or providing confirmation of understanding. Efforts to measure the broader nature of educational engagement using student questionnaires (e.g. National Survey of Student Engagement 2009) have tended to focus on student reports of their behaviours in class, and their 'mental' activities such as analysis. As Hand and Bryson (2008) have argued, this particular interpretation of engagement may capture some of its manifestations, 'but does not offer much clarity in really explaining how the student experiences education and the consequences of those experiences' (4). This means that engagement has an element of 'invisibility', in as much as we cannot see it happening, and the critical point of engagement is difficult to determine.

As with all aspects of learning, feedback, although apparently a simple idea, is deceptive in its complexity, and engagement with feedback, it seems, adds a further layer to that complexity. So for feedback to be effective not only must the content and processes be appropriate, but the conditions for engagement must be supported. The work of Chinn and Brewer (1993) complements the notion of feedback as a social practice, since it reframes 'engagement' as a process in which students have choices of action. A processual conception of engagement is helpful in an educational context, because it allows questions to be asked about the points at which academics can

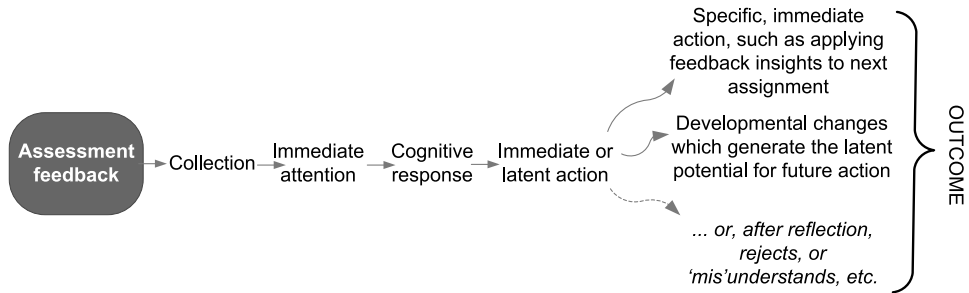


Figure 1. Student experiences and responses to assessment feedback.

influence students' choices, and how they can best do that. Building on their work, we propose a model of student engagement with feedback showing the stages in the process to leading to a considered response (see Figure 1). Each stage does not necessarily play a role of equal importance in engagement, but as a precursor to the next stage of the process it is essential. The extent of progress through the process provides some indication of the extent of student engagement.

For simplicity, Figure 1 depicts only the student's immediate experience and responses. What is not shown (but is critically important) is the socio-cultural context which creates the conditions for interactions and relationships, which together influence the nature of the student experience. A student's cognitive response, for example, may be influenced by their confidence and trust in the tutor (which will have developed over time and as a result of multiple interactions), as well as by specific interventions such as a dialogue between student and tutor regarding an item of feedback.

Ideally, students will fully engage with feedback and follow the complete process but it is possible that engagement may be suspended at any stage. Full engagement is dependent on achieving the right balance of multiple factors. That balance is hard to find, and consequently it may be easy to minimise engagement or even prompt disengagement with a combination of the wrong factors. Engagement with feedback in higher education urgently needs to be improved so the points of weakness and potential interventions can be identified.

### The study and research method

To investigate how to engage students more effectively with assessment feedback, the study sought to explore the stages of the engagement process and, drawing primarily on socio-constructivist perspectives on feedback, as exemplified in the work of Rust, O'Donovan, and Price (2005), identify factors (for example, behavioural, cognitive and socio-cultural) that promote or prevent engagement. Implicit in this approach are some key assumptions:

- first, that staff and students are active participants in an interactive feedback process which supports students in seeking to construct meanings based upon their own experience and beliefs, formulate their own learning goals, and engage in actions to achieve those goals in a continuous reflexive process (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006);



- second, that feedback is not simply a matter of linear communication, but involves complex ‘issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse’ (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001, 272); and
- finally, that assessment and feedback are culturally and contextually situated. For instance, they operate within institutions constituted in – as well as being sites of – discourse and power (Lea and Street 1998).

Bringing together these conceptual ideas, a central theme which informed both the research design and analysis was the premise that student engagement with assessment feedback is not a student responsibility alone. Nor is student engagement simply a function of psychological factors, such as self-motivation and time spent on extra-curricular activities. Instead, engagement is part of (and influenced by) a wider process involving others inside and/or outside a community of practice. These assumptions were reflected in the project research questions:

- How do staff perceive, use and deliver feedback?
- How do students perceive and use feedback?
- How do staff–student relationships affect the way feedback operates?

To explore these research questions, four strands of work were identified and conducted in three business schools in UK universities (two post-1992 universities and a pre-1992 university). Whilst there were some differences in mission and culture between these institutions, the focus on one subject area provided strong commonality. The data did not reveal significant differences between the institutions for any of the strands of work.

The aim of strand 1 was to get an overview of student perceptions of feedback, and identify key areas of concern. To achieve this, 776 closed-response questionnaires were collected from undergraduate students at the three partner institutions, to ascertain students’ evaluations of different forms of feedback, such as individual written feedback, peer feedback and informal feedback from family and friends. Student evaluations informed the design of strand 2, in which feedback methods believed to engage students were trialled in seven case studies across the three institutions, with postgraduate and undergraduate students. The case studies investigated student and staff perceptions of peer review, feedback on drafts, self-assessment and exemplar assignments. In addition, data was obtained from documentation such as self-assessment forms, self-reflective essays, feedback pro forma forms and module evaluation forms. Analysis from strand 2 allowed for conceptual generalisations (Firestone 1993), for example, about the nature of ‘engagement’, and enabled us to deepen our investigation of the research questions. Informed by and parallel to the case studies, the third strand involved 36 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students (16) and staff (20) across all three institutions, to investigate more deeply their own perspectives and experiences of feedback in a higher education context. Finally, during a fourth (cascade) strand of the project, strategies identified in our research as supporting feedback engagement were developed through initiatives in seven higher education institutions.

In this article, we draw mainly on the third strand of research, and particularly on the student interviews, which illuminate their hopes and concerns about feedback, and their motivations to engage with it. We refer briefly to the questionnaire data to present a broader picture of students’ ratings of different types of feedback. Our analysis of the case studies, and students’ experiences of *particular* feedback methods, is reported elsewhere (Handley et al. 2009).

The questionnaire data was analysed by calculating frequency statistics and cross-tabulations to establish any significant associations between student responses and the categorical variables such as gender, age and domicile. The qualitative interview data was analysed thematically to draw out patterns of experiences, using the proprietary software package NVivo. As part of our research strategy we tested our initial insights by discussing them with others inside and external to the project. In the early stages of analysis, for example, interview transcripts were discussed extensively within the extended project team in order to produce robust interpretations whilst discarding others which – on reflection – lacked empirical evidence. We also used early seminars and workshops with staff at partner institutions as opportunities to test the face validity of findings so that, if necessary, we could go back to re-analyse data. The fourth strand provided further opportunities to work with both staff and students at other higher education institutions to evaluate our research findings and recommendations.

We acknowledge that the accounts of feedback provided by staff and students represented their subjective perceptions, shaped by expectations, and framed within broader personal and cultural experiences. Whilst we cannot claim to know what interviewees ‘actually’ experienced, our interview protocol did elicit, where possible, concrete information about the feedback given and received. Our focus on *engagement* meant that such details were important, but not sufficient, to explain students’ evolving sense of the ‘norms’ of feedback engagement over time and across modules, and so our data collection strategy emphasised student/staff narratives rather than the specifics of each piece of feedback. This inevitably means that interviewees’ statements do not automatically translate into prescriptions for improvements; for example, the call by one student for ‘more detailed feedback’ requires interpretation, not necessarily more and more pages of (perhaps still unread) written feedback.

### **Engagement with feedback**

The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the major factors related to the process of engagement with feedback. First, contextual information is provided in terms of a summary of the range of feedback methods used (as reported during staff interviews), and an overview of student perspectives on the effectiveness of different feedback methods (based on the questionnaire data). Perspectives on expectations, and relational and dialogic aspects of feedback are then presented, drawing on interview quotations, before the stages and context of engagement are used as a framework to analyse the factors that support or weaken engagement.

### ***Variety of feedback methods used and experienced***

Table 1 summarises the range of feedback methods used by the staff interviewed. The number of methods used exceeds the staff total because staff used more than one feedback method.

Across all three business schools there was a consistent reliance on written assessment feedback. At the same time more innovative feedback methods were also attempted, but were not always well received. One member of staff, for instance, described how ‘despondent’ he was that students neither attended timetabled feedback sessions nor collected any additional feedback that he provided. The variety of innovative methods used is an indicator of staff concern to provide effective, engaging and developmental feedback, but may also reveal that staff sometimes take an



Table 1. Feedback methods used by the 20 interviewed staff at the three partner institutions, X, Y, Z.

Written (Personalised)	X	Y	Z	Oral	X	Y	Z	Other	X	Y	Z
Tick box form	4	1		Presentations/ debate	3	1	2	Peer (non-formative)		2	1
Comments form/page	1	4	4	Discussion sessions	1	1	1	Staged		2	1
Comments on script		1	2	Formative	1	2		Generic		2	3
Comments by email			1	Face-to-face on collection		4		Exemplar		2	
Formative		1	2	Face-to-face by appointment	5	4	5	Feed-forward to next module		1	
Format not known		2	2	Feedback seminar	1	1		Revision sessions		1	
Grid highlighting grade			1	Individual timetabled Examination				1 Written exercise		1	
							2				

individualistic approach to feedback. As the experience of the tutor quoted suggests, there were indications that the heterogeneity of methods caused bewilderment among some students, who were unclear about how to respond to feedback in different forms:

It [feedback] is sometimes different because one module I did last semester ... things [were] different and he [the tutor] just wrote on a blank paper like this and he just wrote this is good, you can do this ... that is it. There was no structure, what he expected as in you are getting marks for this, for the introduction or the layout or what have you. (Student interviewee)

Sadler points out that students generally have no control over the patterns of feedback that they receive, and that there may be long term-exposure to defective patterns of formative assessment. The socialisation of students into having to accept a wide variety of practices and teacher dispositions (1998) may lead them to be, at best, sceptical if not dismissive of the benefits available from the feedback process. As the student quoted above commented: 'Whatever I get [in terms of marks and feedback] I get; that's why I don't question it no more. Because no one will listen to me'.

Within the different feedback methods used there was variety in the styles and extent of feedback provided. One member of staff whom we interviewed asked students regularly to identify areas on which they would like feedback, and also talked of 'writing pages and pages ... all over [the script and feedback form]'. However, some staff were cautious about giving too much feedback, for fear that you almost 'write the next piece of work for them'.

In line with previous studies (for example, Parikh, McReelis, and Hodges 2001), questionnaire data revealed a preference among students for personalised feedback from their tutor. Least valued was feedback not originating from the tutor, or 'general feedback to all students on the module'.

### *Expectations of what feedback is for and can achieve*

Unsurprisingly, there was a spectrum of views of the purposes of feedback among the student and staff groups. A majority of staff (16) highlighted the developmental

purpose of feedback, and in addition several (6) recognised feedback as having a benchmarking role, suggesting a primary purpose as justifying grades: ‘flag up why they got the mark’; “‘to cover my back” from students and moderators’. ‘Efficient’, tick box methods, could mean that students saw feedback as a ‘yardstick of performance’. Often a conflation of formative and summative assessment created confusion, among both tutors and students, about the purpose of feedback. The overall emphasis on the summative aspects of assessment became the focus, and negated the formative aspect: as one tutor commented, in face-to-face feedback discussions, ‘you are almost getting into a sort of a mini dispute ... I had a student the other day to whom I’d given 63% on a project, and they said I think I ought to have got 68%’. However, some staff still expected feedback ‘to move students in the right direction’, to help students to ‘leapfrog to the next level’ and be a ‘catalyst’ which drives learning.

Despite the belief that students are generally only interested in the grade, few students saw their grade as simply synonymous with feedback (although feedback that did not ‘correspond’ with the grade was confusing). Some saw feedback as ‘an overall diagnosis’ and ‘giving you a push in the right direction’ rather than giving the answers; ‘But the written [feedback] seemed too general for me to improve my performance’. Very often the students’ focus was on the next piece of work – ‘Something that helps you do better in the next piece of work’ – and they expressed wishes for more specific/less generalised feedback. ‘I find that some teachers – it seems like they have read the work thoroughly and that they said OK you’ve said this but you didn’t expand on this particular point, they actually put the specific point down so you actually know, rather than it being very general feedback’.

The mismatch between student and staff views about the purpose of feedback (or between staff themselves as they assess student work) often gives rise to considerable confusion and frustration for both groups. As one student said about written feedback at her university, ‘you get it oh whatever, bin it, keep it whatever but you know you are not really taking it on board because in most cases there is nothing to take on board’.

### *Relational dimensions*

The relational dimension of feedback featured strongly as a factor in the engagement of students; not only the relationship students had with their learning and subjects, but also with their tutors. The relational dimension with the tutor often hinged on the extent of reciprocity exhibited by staff: ‘It is a vital thing for lecturers actually to acknowledge their students a lot more’; ‘I like to know what has been said about all that effort I have spent’ on coursework. A disengaged student thought ‘they just want to give a quick sort of thing, get it over and done’. One student compared poor experiences of feedback with another when she received ‘a whole paragraph’ of feedback on her coursework: it brought tears to her eyes to think that her tutor had taken the time to respond carefully to her work.

Reciprocity was also measured by the clarity of the feedback. Perceived ambiguity was seen as a result of a lack of effort of the staff’s part. Students were frustrated by a vagueness in the content of feedback comments: ‘What does “clarify your aims and objectives” mean?’, as well as contradictions – ‘And I said look can you explain this for me because you haven’t explained, you’ve given me a low mark but you’ve said I’ve done really well so that doesn’t make sense’.

Staff recognised the need for reciprocity and expressed the concern that students disengaged if they feel that staff have not carefully read their assignments. One

interviewee had been advised to use 'stock phrases' (i.e. feedback comments copied from a menu of common phrases) in order to cut his marking time, but was concerned that 'students recognise the stock phrases and feel that their work hasn't been looked at individually'. Some staff did recognise the value of the relational dimension of feedback, acknowledging that 'we need to build up [a good] relationship, that is something to do with respect I think'.

If students were confident of the relationship with staff, and staff encouraged them, students welcomed the opportunity to talk to staff to clarify and interpret feedback: 'She gave me a lot of feedback on it and we had a one-to-one [discussion] ... because she was so interested in the project she gave me support on it'.

Students responded to staff interest in them: '[I] find it easier to take things on board'. They typically felt motivated to 'express my mind' and 'try my best'. However, the resource constraints that are currently a feature of many universities have translated into a widespread student perception that staff do not have time to engage with them. Students commented on their reluctance to question staff, who are 'too busy' and 'always in a hurry', with 'other things to do'. One student talked of her reluctance to interrupt lecturers, adding that she would 'only go to them if really desperate'. Some students described experiences that had dispelled any expectation of a relationship: 'I knocked on the door, yeah what? I said I just need some help with my transcript, oh just email me I'm busy'.

In contrast, although slightly more students in our sample chose to speak to staff than did not, the staff believed that students did not want to take up opportunities for dialogue.

### **The engagement process**

The findings show that many students became progressively disengaged with feedback during the course of their university programmes, as a result of repeated unsatisfactory experiences. This accords with the findings of studies showing that students are less likely to take a deep approach to learning as they progress through university (Kember 1997; Richardson and Edmunds 2007). Disengagement did not appear to be an instant response, but instead developed over time. Exploration of the engagement process reveals that each stage can trigger further engagement or disengagement. Engagement in the early, visible stages can belie the prospect of full engagement, with many students struggling to integrate their feedback with their learning. Where students become disillusioned with the usefulness of feedback for their learning, their disengagement becomes obvious in the earlier stages of the process. As Figure 2 shows, there are many points of disengagement, which are discussed next.

### **Collection**

The stories of uncollected feedback in staff offices are firmly embedded in the higher education culture. 'Collection' is the most visible indicator of student *intention* to engage. Most of the staff confirmed failure at the first stage, with one interviewee suggesting that 'In reality 50% will collect', unless they took deliberate steps to deliver feedback to students. Unsurprisingly the perceived usefulness of feedback, including the opportunity to apply it, influenced student perceptions of its value, and was a strong factor in motivation to collect it.

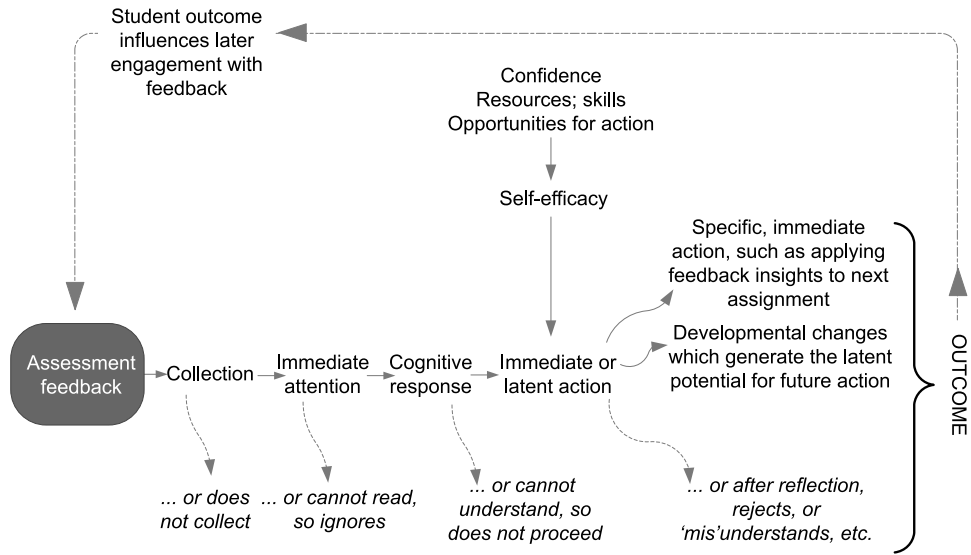


Figure 2. The temporal dimension of student engagement with assessment feedback.

This study confirmed previous studies (for example, Gibbs and Simpson 2004) showing that feedback provided long after the work was done was not seen as useful: ‘So by the time you get the assignment back you’ve sort of forgotten about it’. However, students emphasised the opportunity to apply the feedback as a more important factor in engagement. Some students were particularly mindful of their next assessment task and the relevance of feedback to it. Many had a strong expectation that useful feedback could be ‘easily’ applied in subsequent work: ‘Good feedback is when you point out certain things that you can improve on ... turning them into a sort of action plan’. Where there was a diversity of assignment tasks in a programme this reduced the likelihood of collection, especially where students did not anticipate a similar task in the future, because of the feedback’s perceived limited utility. The modularity of courses exacerbated this problem: ‘Where you have a next module you have a similar sort of assignment, you can kind of take [feedback] to that but ... when it is over it is kind of over so you can’t really you know use it again’. Similarly, because students perceived each tutor to have unique assessment preferences, feedback received from one tutor was not seen as relevant for work for another tutor. As a member of staff commented, ‘too many subjects are taught “in pigeon holes” and that feedback was equally pigeonholed’.

Some staff believed that access to marks online removed an incentive to collect feedback, which was true for those students who regarded a grade/mark as sufficient feedback. For a few students where the mark was ‘good enough’, or their self-assessment was confirmed by the mark, their motivation to collect feedback was reduced. More common, however, was a disinclination to collect resulting from previously unsatisfactory feedback experiences.

### Attention

We know that some students pay it no attention and put the feedback in the bin, while others will read it and *then* put it in the bin (Gibbs and Simpson 2004). Students were

clear that illegible or mechanistic (tick box) feedback did not encourage attention, and was not kept for future use. Most students did read or listen to feedback at least once, but some never referred to it again. However, many students do give their feedback close attention and try to use it: 'I usually file it in my folder for that module and then when I come to do any additional assignments or revision for my exams I use it as a kind of indication about how I should and shouldn't be doing things'.

Where the feedback is usable the level of attention it commands is influenced by multiple factors, including: the perceptions of reciprocity and relational qualities discussed above; the ease with which the student could understand the feedback (for example, Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001; Lea and Street 1998); the trust in, and the credibility of, the teacher; and, as already reported, the immediacy of the opportunity to apply the feedback to future work.

The attention paid by students to feedback is largely invisible to staff in the engagement process. Staff cannot easily gauge the extent of student engagement: 'A number of students who simply look at the grade and then it goes straight into their bag', 'I think that some students don't understand the role of [feedback or] anything'. Some staff did monitor engagement by trying to work closely with students and discussing their progress. In a case where staff offered students formal face-to-face feedback to supplement written feedback there was a high response from the students, and staff used it as a way to monitor student understanding.

### *Cognitive engagement*

Where the student has paid attention to the feedback, the extent to which s/he will consider it in relation to her/his learning is the next and most critical point of engagement. It is here where the expectations and beliefs about the purpose and nature of feedback are most significant. Beyond justification of the mark, most staff tried to provide feedback addressing broader learning development. Some students worked with this type of feedback to internalise it and learn from it, but this was not a common occurrence. None of the students related this type of engagement to participation in an academic discourse or community, but they did understand the temporal dimension of feedback, understanding that feedback could have relevance in the long term. The extent to which a student has developed *pedagogic* literacy, and thereby understands the way they learn will impact on their ability to use feedback: 'I learn from the mistakes that I have done ... and it is beneficial for me because later when I write another assignment, already remember what I have done wrong ... it stays in my mind'.

A few students understood that their feedback developed their learning beyond the next piece of work even if they were not sure how: 'It is like I don't really think I actually, I probably do learn from piece to piece but I don't know that I am learning it'. Where feedback could be understood in the context of developing understanding of a subject, some students had reframed their view of how feedback worked: 'we're no longer being pushed by staff but pulled'. Some students were frustrated in their ability to relate feedback to the development of their learning by the type of feedback provided: 'There is no writing, there is just a number of boxes and crosses in them ... So whilst I understand it, I don't understand it in relation to my assignment because there is no framework around it. There is nothing; no explanation'.

However, for many students, although they had engaged fully in the early stages of the engagement process, their expectations of specific directive feedback suggested

that they saw themselves as receivers of a product, rather than partners in a learning process. Being less prepared to make autonomous decisions about future work, they were less willing to engage in this cognitive stage.

The ability and willingness of students to move beyond this stance was largely dependent on the extent to which they understood the feedback and on their self-efficacy, where self-efficacy is defined as a judgement of one's ability to attain certain goals. Students often said they needed reassurance about their understanding of the feedback, if not extra help to interpret and understand it. Even where they were confident that they had understood it, their inability to act on the feedback without further help limited its usefulness: 'But if all they've said is you haven't analysed enough that is not really learning that is just telling me I haven't analysed'. Advice on how to improve analytical skills, for example, is often not provided.

Students in the study clearly indicated that their cognitive engagement is best supported through dialogue with staff, but there were several factors that increased or decreased the likelihood of dialogue taking place, probably the most significant being staff availability and attitude. Students identified approachability as key: 'it's more how confident I feel towards my relationship with the tutor ... because if he is friendly and has a positive attitude ... then I don't have a problem to ask', but it was not sufficient on its own. Many students interviewed appeared not to have the confidence to ask questions or engage in a dialogue with tutors. Even if students did approach staff, they sometimes felt rebuffed because their questions were not answered. Staff justified this with a fear that helping students too much would mean 'doing their work for them'. What is at issue here are potentially fundamental differences in staff beliefs about their role as academics, the process of enabling student learning, and the appropriateness of certain staff/student interactions. This is often exacerbated by the conflation of formative and summative assessment. 'Doing students' work' will ultimately never help the student develop self-evaluative skills, but staff comments on a draft outline may develop the student's appreciation of what the assessment criteria really mean, and what 'quality' looks like. What staff feel 'allowed' to do *behaviourally* depends on what they believe they are helping their students to achieve *conceptually*. Fears about going 'too far' may be groundless, but a greater shared understanding about how far their support should go may provide reassurance. A related miscommunication was that student queries about marks were interpreted by staff as a challenge to their academic judgement, rather than what might have been a simple request for guidance about future work. These contrasting perceptions might arise because of different beliefs about students' motives, or because students were unskilled in asking appropriate questions, and so their blunt approaches were interpreted as 'challenging'.

Not only is this stage critical, but it is also difficult to facilitate and support. It requires clear understanding and commitment to feedback as a process, opportunities for and facilitation of dialogue, and support for the development of better pedagogic literacy and intellectual development.

### ***Taking action***

Action resulting from feedback cannot be the ultimate measure of engagement with feedback, because a student may have been engaged at each stage of the feedback process but, in the end, still may not act on their feedback. This, of course, is their prerogative, but the reason for the inaction is at the nub of the notion of engagement. A student can exhibit behaviours of engagement but the engagement may not be



*substantive*. Shute (2008) suggests that for students to take action resulting from feedback they need motive, opportunity and means. Both intrinsic or extrinsic motivations will drive engagement, albeit of a different type, and action may result, particularly if the opportunity for application is obvious. If the feedback is very specific, can be applied directly for resubmission with the likelihood of a higher mark, even the strategic student is likely to concentrate on it. However, it is often the student's means to apply the feedback that is overlooked. Rejection of feedback advice may be due to lack of understanding, or based on identity or self-efficacy issues preventing the student taking action. Even if the student understands the gap in their knowledge or skills, they may not be able to act on the feedback without further help. In many instances feedback can only be diagnostic and not a recipe for development. However, a student who has, over time, used feedback to develop as a critical thinker may be in a position to reflect on the current feedback, critique it and reasonably decide to reject its recommendations. By justifying that decision through reasoned argument to a tutor, the student would be providing evidence of cognitive engagement. Whatever the outcome, it is the culmination of the process that then informs the next cycle of feedback.

### *Context of the engagement process*

Many staff were disillusioned, despite often being highly committed to their students, recognising the problems of disengagement but not fully knowing how to engage students, or not having the resources to do so, being under 'massive time pressure'. Many staff commented on the difficulties of creating engaging feedback or talking to students about their work in the time allotted to them under workload planning frameworks. One could only give 'approximate' feedback comments because he could only spend 20 minutes reading, assessing and feeding back on a script – otherwise he would have to 'wave goodbye to really serious chunks of time'. A clear frustration for staff was a lack of time for dialogue exacerbated by tight timetabling of activities. Concern about the negative impact of resource constraints on student–staff engagement have been identified elsewhere (e.g. Gibbs and Simpson 2004), which suggests that it is a widespread and serious issue. Institutional or discipline-level policies were also influential in shaping the way students engaged with feedback, although sometimes with unanticipated outcomes, which in the longer term diminished their engagement. For example, directly addressing the pressure on staff time, tick box feedback sheets seemed to backfire, as some students felt that staff did not 'care', which led to their disengagement at an early stage of the process.

As the 'tick box' example suggests, institutional policies may inadvertently place obstacles to student engagement with feedback. For example, a formal policy of anonymous marking may diminish engagement with feedback, mainly by breaking the relationship between marker and learner. We echo Crook, Gross, and Dymott's (2006) call for an awareness of tensions between the 'tightly scripted' (95) *proceduralisation* of assessment and, on the other hand, the social *practice* of assessment. The ostensibly 'fairer' policy of anonymous marking disrupts the relational dimension of assessment, which relies not only on tutors knowing the prior educational histories of their students, but also on students knowing how to interpret and evaluate feedback based on their knowledge of the tutor. These examples emphasise the need for decision making based on a holistic view of social practice.

The study also found that significant structural problems appear to compound the problems with engagement. These included the fragmentation of programmes that

lead to a student experience of *discontinuity* of teaching staff, affecting the relational dimension; applicability of feedback and the visibility of the learning resulting from feedback; the use of hourly-paid (contract staff) who are paid to provide written feedback but not to talk to students outside class time; workload planning models based on knowledge delivery rather than student learning.

In addition, such policies reinforce power relations between staff and students, by reducing feedback to a transmission of judgement, restricting opportunities for dialogue and debate, and subjecting students to anonymous and discontinuous scrutiny. As a result, students may choose to resist by refusing to engage with the feedback provided.

### Supporting engagement

We share with Lave and Wenger the understanding that ‘learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived in world’ (1991, 35). As a result, feedback is seen as a social practice in which engagement is influenced by individual and contextual factors. Such an understanding informs our interpretation of the research findings. The data indicate ways in which engagement could be enhanced, using initiatives such as allowing redrafting of work following feedback or using peer review to provide feedback prior to completion of work. While these have the advantage of encouraging engagement with feedback with immediate effect, they may not serve the long-term developmental role of feedback, unless they are carefully structured and implemented within a programme of study. Therefore, each programme team needs to address feedback development and engagement in the same way as they consider other aspects of the course, such as knowledge development. Induction and orientation processes need to clarify expectations of the purpose and processes of feedback, as well as introduce types and methods of feedback to be used. Within a programme, early experiences of feedback practices that support a positive learner identity, as well as engagement and an action-based response, need to be provided. Following on from this, cognitive engagement and pedagogic literacy will be further developed with opportunities for dialogue on feedback: for example by devoting class time to discuss feedback; starting the dialogue with recorded oral feedback and inviting a response from the student; and encouraging dialogue between students through peer review. A common theme in these examples is that students need encouragement and guidance as they learn to navigate the opportunities to follow up their feedback – opportunities which at the moment may be so informal that students interpret them as being unavailable, except to the ‘desperate’ student whom they do not want to identify with.

Meeting the feedback needs of students in relation to their stage in the learning process/programme requires the effective targeting of limited resources at identified crucial ‘feedback moments’ that will have long-term effect. These would use feedback methods and processes – particularly dialogue – which support the relational dimension of feedback, and create scope for developing understanding and reworking staff–student relations. Such a structured and strategic approach should engender a higher level of engagement.

### Conclusions

Responding to student dissatisfaction with feedback by providing ‘more of the same’ is extremely unlikely to increase levels of satisfaction. Although students have shown resilience in their willingness to engage despite an array of obstacles, they do eventually

reach a point of disengagement. Expectations about what feedback is for, what it can achieve and how the process works need to be addressed to enable and maintain engagement. To mirror Laurillard (1993), feedback without engagement is completely unproductive.

Effective feedback must be seen as part of an ongoing socially-embedded process rather than a one-off product; and engagement with feedback needs to be supported to reinforce that process. Initial stages of engagement in each feedback cycle appear to be mechanistic, but student participation in them is largely dependent on previous feedback experience. Consequently, stages of engagement that will give students real value from feedback need to be improved to ensure continued engagement. Further, the nature of the engagement that is fostered is critical to the type of learning that will take place. Even if we can address all students' wishes – for clear, individualised, directly-actionable, instructive feedback – student engagement may nevertheless be short-lived or superficial unless the feedback is seen to be well integrated within broader learning processes. Providing only this type of feedback may limit student expectations of the purpose of feedback and its temporal dimension, so there is a balance to be struck between satisfying immediate wants and encouraging students to engage with their feedback to enable them to become self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Enabling students must involve dialogue to help them to understand and use complex feedback designed to support their learning, with the wider aim of developing students' *self-evaluative* skills, so they can reduce their reliance on the judgement of others, as well as developing their *self-regulating* skills and pedagogic literacy, including an ability to seek advice and ask questions where appropriate. What is needed is a more nuanced appreciation of the aims of assessment: it is not about staff and students having to devote *more* of their limited time and resources to do *more* assessment, but instead about a stronger focus on using assessment practices to enhance engagement, and develop staff and student pedagogic literacy to increase effectiveness. Sometimes less is more.

Supportive dialogue is a key part of the social practice of assessment, and is dependent upon trust and the perception of a joint enterprise involving students and staff. Students recognise their need for dialogue to enable them to fully work with their feedback and to induct them into the disciplinary community but they are frequently frustrated by lack of opportunity and by the social structures that obstruct dialogue. The process of engagement needs staff and students to share and develop a greater understanding of the complexity of feedback processes, and of what can be expected from all parties in this process. Furthermore, institutions must recognise the importance of facets of the broad educational process and environment that support student engagement, and convey to students that they are valued.

## References

- Blair, B. 2006. At the end of a huge crit in the summer, it was 'crap' – I'd worked really hard but all she said was 'fine' and I was gutted. *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* 5, no. 2: 83–95.
- Bryson, C., and L. Hand. 2007. The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Teaching and Education International* 44, no. 4: 349–62.
- Carless, D. 2006. Differing perceptions in the feedback process. *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 2: 219–33.
- Chickering, A.W., and Z.F. Gamson. 1987. Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin* 39, no. 7: 3–7.

- Chinn, C., and W. Brewer. 1993. The role of anomalous data in knowledge acquisition: A theoretical framework and implications for science instruction. *Review of Educational Research* 63, no. 1: 1–49.
- Crook, C., H. Gross, and R. Dymott. 2006. Assessment relationships in higher education: The tension of process and practice. *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 1: 95–114.
- Firestone, W.A. 1993. Alternative arguments for generalizing from data as applied to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 4: 16–23.
- Fredericks, J., P. Blumenfeld, and A. Paris. 2004. School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1: 59–109.
- Gardner, H. 1993. *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gibbs, G., and C. Simpson. 2004. Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 1, no. 1: 1–31.
- Hand, L., and C. Bryson. 2008. *Student engagement*. Staff and Educational Development Association Special 22, London.
- Handley, K., M. Price, J. Millar, and B. den Outer. 2009. Engaging students with assessment feedback. Report. <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf>.
- Hattie, J., and H. Timperley. 2007. The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 1: 81–112.
- Higgins, R., P. Hartley, and A. Skelton. 2001. Getting the message across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education* 6, no. 2: 269–74.
- Higgins, R., P. Hartley, and A. Skelton. 2002. The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education* 27, no. 1: 53–64.
- Huber, T., and P. Hutchings. 2005. *The advancement of learning: Building the teaching commons*. Stanford, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hyatt, D. 2005. Yes, a very good point! A critical genre analysis of a corpus of feedback commentaries on master of education assignments. *Teaching in Higher Education* 10, no. 3: 339–53.
- Hyland, P. 2000. Learning from feedback on assessment. In *The practice of university history teaching*, ed. P. Hyland and A. Booth, 233–47. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kember, D. 1997. The reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching. *Learning and Instruction* 7: 255–75.
- Laurillard, D. 1993. *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.
- Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M., and B. Street. 1998. Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education* 23, no. 2: 157–72.
- McFadden, M., and G. Munns. 2002. Student engagement and the social relations of pedagogy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 3: 357–66.
- McInnis, C. 2005. Reinventing student engagement and the learning community: Strategic directions for policy, research and practice. Keynote presented at the Higher Education Academy Conference, Edinburgh.
- Meyer, J.H.F., and R. Land. 2005. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education* 49, no. 3: 373–88.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. 2009. *Assessment for improvement: Tracking student engagement over time – Annual results 2009*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Nicol, D.J., and D. Macfarlane-Dick. 2006. Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 2: 199–218.
- O'Donovan, B., M. Price, and C. Rust. 2001. The student experience of criterion-referenced assessment. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 38, no. 1: 74–85.
- O'Donovan, B., M. Price, and C. Rust. 2008. Developing student understanding of assessment standards: A nested hierarchy of approaches. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no. 2: 205–16.

- Parikh, A., K. McReelis, and B. Hodges. 2001. Student feedback in problem based learning: A survey of 103 final year students across five Ontario medical schools. *Medical Education* 35, no. 7: 632–36.
- Price, M., and B. O'Donovan. 2007. Making meaning out of assessment feedback – Getting more than the message. Paper presented at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Annual Conference – Enhancing higher education, theory and Scholarship, July 8–11, in Adelaide, Australia.
- Richardson, J.T.E., and R. Edmunds. 2007. A cognitive-developmental model of university learning. Working paper 4 – The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL) Project. <http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/pages/CHERI-Projects-SOMUL-Outputs.shtml> (accessed December 22, 2009).
- Rust, C., B. O'Donovan, and M. Price. 2005. A social constructivist assessment process model: How the research literature shows us this could be best practice, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 30, no. 3: 231–40.
- Rust, C., M. Price, and B. O'Donovan. 2003. Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 28: 147–64.
- Sadler, R. 1989. Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science* 18, no. 2: 119–44.
- Sadler, D.R. 1998. Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory, *Assessment in Education* 5, no. 1: 77–84.
- Shute, V. 2008. Focus on formative feedback. *Review of Educational Research* 78, no. 1: 153–89.
- Wotjas, O. 1998. Feedback? No, just give us the answers. *Times Higher Education Supplement*. September 25.
- Yorke, M. 2003. Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education* 45, no. 4: 477–501.