

Staff-student interviews for better feedback literacy

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Introduction

In a recent article, David Carless and David Boud define feedback literacy as ‘the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies’ (Carless & Boud, 2018: 2). They suggest that:

‘Modelling the uptake of feedback is an important but underplayed part of a teacher’s repertoire in supporting and encouraging students to use feedback. Discussing how academics are exposed to feedback from peer review can be used to model responses to critique, share some of the emotional challenges, and illustrate the need for action. Such modelling plays a role in reducing distance between teachers and students by emphasising self-improvement as a core element of academic habits’ (Carless & Boud, 2018: 7).

Taking Carless and Boud’s idea as our point of departure, we ran a small pilot study designed to help students understand how staff use feedback and increase their disposition to engage with comments offered on their work. This article outlines the study’s findings, which indicates that the activity can achieve these aims and that it is logistically feasible.

The activity

The premise of students talking to staff about their research is well established in the literature (early and recent examples being Cosgrove, 1981; Evans, 2018). In ‘Meet the Researcher’ activities students work in groups to interview a researcher, before producing an output about what they learnt from the experience. The activity described here began with the question ‘what would happen if students could use ‘Meet the Researcher’ interviews to talk about the ways that researchers used the peer review process to develop their academic work?’ In particular we were interested to know whether it would support the development of students’ feedback literacy.

The activity ran in two different departments in a research-intensive, London-based university whose education strategy prioritises the enhancement of feedback. Separate guidelines were issued to the participating staff and students (Grindle & Marie 2019a, Grindle & Marie 2019b). The first department (Department H) is part of the Faculty of Social & Historical Sciences. Here, the activity ran as a one-hour personal tutoring¹ activity for twelve first-year undergraduate students during their first term at university. Student participation was entirely voluntary and there was full take-up of it. The students were split into two groups because of timetable clashes. The professor (Professor H) provided the following documents:

- extracts from a draft of a research article (which later became a chapter in one of his books) in the form in which it was first submitted to an academic journal;
- extracts from two anonymous 'readers' reports that he received on that draft;
- his responses to the reviewers' comments;
- extracts from the same article as it was eventually published.

¹ The institution where the pilot occurred describes a personal tutor as someone who supports and advises on academic progress and signposts to other services available at the university.

This is a short account the activity in Professor H's own words:

'I began by asking the students whether they had any general questions about the exercise and about academic publishing. I then asked them to explain what they understood by 'peer review' and whether they could think of links between the scholarly peer review process used to determine the suitability of scholarly texts for publication and experiences they've had themselves of giving and receiving feedback. I asked them to identify key issues raised in the readers' reports and discuss how I had responded to the reviewers' and recommendations'.

The context for the activity in the other department was somewhat different, which allowed us to consider whether the activity is flexible enough to work in different settings. This department (Department S) is in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The lecturer (Dr S) ran the activity as part of one seminar in a module for seven second-year students in the second term. It was therefore a compulsory activity (insofar as it was part of a taught module, although it was not assessed).

This is Dr S's description of the activity:

'For the activity, the students read (in class) a brief encyclopaedia entry (of about 1200 words) on [F], an author featured in the module. They read my draft of the entry, which I submitted for publication, alongside the editor's comments/corrections and the final, published version. The students then discussed their reading in pairs or trios, and fed back to the whole group with free-form questions, observations, and criticisms, to which I responded in the course of discussion'.

Indicators of the activity's success

We asked student participants to respond to the following question by email: 'Say you are meeting up with a friend following the 'Meet the Researcher' activity. What would you tell them about it? Feel free to mention anything at all, for example what you learned, what you enjoyed or didn't enjoy, what was easy or hard, or anything else.' Seven out of twelve students (58%) responded from department H and three out of eight (38%) from department S, giving a response rate of ten students (50%) overall.

The responses from students suggests that they found the activity very engaging. Every student said that the activity was either 'enjoyable', 'interesting' or 'fun' in their response. For example: 'I really enjoyed the fact I was able to engage with the literature of my tutor'. Most said they found it helpful and three said it was motivating or inspiring: 'It put a lot into perspective, and getting to look at the success of the researcher (for example holding the book he had worked very hard to research for, write and got published) was quite motivating.' The majority said that it helped them learn more about what their tutor did, which was identified as enabling them to get to know their tutor better and improving the relationship between students and staff: 'Mentioning having found out a lot about the researcher himself/herself, [more activities of this kind] would also help to make relationships between our teachers and students more friendly.' Three of the students said they would like to do the activity more often, so that they could meet other researchers, and another said they would recommend it. For example:

'When I told my friends that my tutor just let us read his published work they were all so surprised and excited. We should do more of these sessions. I suggest not only in [Professor H's field] but also in any academic discipline with [sic] be helpful for the students.'

Between them, the students identified that they had gained an understanding of how projects could be led and what research is, as well as the motivations to research and publish:

‘It is a great experience to get to know your personal tutor better but also a way to understand what a research is and how long and fastidious it can be’.

‘I found it interesting how laborious and thorough the process is ... I found it curious to learn about the selection process, as well as why he/she would want to do it – if there were a financial incentive or perhaps the accolade of having published an entry’.

Another also recommended asking questions about how the researcher chooses their sources: ‘I would tell the friend to ask the Researcher questions regarding the sources he used for the process’, which suggests that they had made a connection between the working processes of the academic and their own written work.

Many students commented that it showed that staff, as well as students, benefited from receiving feedback, with one writing about how it had improved her own disposition towards feedback:

‘It shows that even experts can benefit from detailed feedback’.

‘it was a lovely change to see that everyone, even the professionals who are teaching us students, make mistakes and receive criticism, even on the level of sentence structure and grammar’.

‘made me realize that academics cooperate and support each other’s work through constructive criticism’.

‘put a lot into perspective ...[and] honestly improved my attitude towards my own work and the criticism I’ve received.’

Another student observed:

‘What I have learned is the type of feedback you can expect as a researcher and that even experts in their field need a second opinion. It was interesting to see how the feedback was addressed, even though the author did not agree completely with the editor’.

This suggests that the student thought the process the academic had gone through could serve as a model for their own use of feedback and recognised that there is room for differences of opinion about academic work. However, it is important to note that student feedback is rarely iterative, and that students seeking feedback from one another might be construed as collusion in some settings. This therefore raises wider questions about the extent to which the process of producing work at student and professional level is and should be similar. As we show below, Professor H discussed these differences with his students and how they could nevertheless make use of the feedback they received to enhance future work.

The element of group-work was commented upon by two of the students. One said this was helpful because others asked questions that they would not have done and afterwards the group discussed what they had learnt and ‘what we would use in our essays and during our year more broadly.’ While the other student did not say what was useful about it, they recommended that the activity continued to be done in small groups of about 5 people.

Description of activity	Number of students who described it this way
Enjoyable/interesting/fun	10
Very/really enjoyable/interesting/fun	7
Helpful/meaningful/informative	5
Motivating/inspiring	3
Gained a sense of what lecturers do	6
Recognition that staff gain from receiving feedback	4

Table 1: The number of students describing the activity in different ways.

The two members of staff who took part in the pilot activity responded to a questionnaire in which they gave information about the activity, the participants and how successful they felt it had been.

Professor H thought that his discussion with the students highlighted the fact that dialogic feedback (both written and oral) had been crucial as he wrote his book:

‘One discussion point was the length of time it takes to publish a scholarly text and the multiple drafts it goes through (including orally delivered versions) before it gets to the stage where it is deemed publishable. Another was the extent to which academic research takes place within a scholarly community and develops through a process of debate and dialogue’.

Similar questions about the revision process were raised in the discussion between Dr S and his students:

‘I was highly impressed by the questions the students raised regarding the editing and publishing process. They asked, for instance, how free I was to reject the editor's changes and suggestions, and if there would be opportunity for further editing of this entry now that it is published online’.

Professor H stated that he was able to use these topics as a bridge to discussing the students’ own struggles with feedback:

We also discussed different ways in which students can respond to feedback on their assignments. Unlike in academic publishing, students do not normally have opportunities to revise and resubmit a piece of assessed work. However, we talked about how they can refer back to the feedback they have received on one essay when preparing for the next one, perhaps even building up a 'library' of feedback over time’.

A second theme in the conversations dwelt on the writing process. Dr S’s students raised a question which will be familiar to many lecturers: ‘They asked how 'personal' I could be in the tone and content of the draft ... this led to a helpful discussion regarding the students' own approach to writing essays on literary matters’. Professor H’s students raised similar points:

'We also discussed other informal forms of peer support, such as sharing essays ... how to respond to feedback and use it to develop writing and research skills; and how to view academic writing as taking place within a research community, which includes students'.

Professor H concluded that the activity:

'did highlight how working practices and conventions within academic research such as peer review can be used to open up a discussion with students about their own writing assignments'.

On a more logistical note, Professor H also noted: 'Compiling the dossier of materials required some time and forethought. I was conscious of not over-loading the students with too much advance reading material'. But he acknowledged that 'it should be easy to run a similar activity again in future now I have the material to hand'.

Discussion

Our findings are based on a small sample, but notwithstanding this and other limitations discussed below we think that they furnish some useful indications about the ways that the activity can help develop feedback literacy among students. In particular, our pilot suggests that the activity creates a space for dialogue, whereby students can gain a better understanding of the purpose of feedback, and it also helps to demystify the process of academic writing. In addition, the findings show that students and staff genuinely enjoy getting to know each other in this way.

The activity described above provides the opportunity for students and staff to engage in a dialogue about feedback practices and the production of academic work. This creates an environment for students to reflect upon the purposes of feedback, reinterpret it more positively, and consider how they can act upon it more productively. The activity also enables students and staff to discuss academic writing issues in relation to feedback received on work. This is important because students often see feedback as divorced from the process of producing work, either because feedback is perceived as too specific to one assignment or because their university has a deficit model of academic writing (Carless, 2006; Wingate, 2010). It is clear from the students' comments that the activity helped them understand that feedback was necessary for researchers to produce their work, and normalised the idea that feedback enhances academic writing.

The insight that academics receive and use feedback on their academic work improved students' disposition towards receiving and acting upon feedback. The fact that academics use feedback may normally be obscured to students by the language of 'peer review'. When reviewing the students' reports and staff reflections, we noticed that both groups used 'feedback' when talking about opinions delivered on student work, but used 'peer review' when discussing comments given on work produced by staff. Notwithstanding the differences between student and professional work mentioned in the previous section, a big step towards improving student dispositions towards feedback could be taken by breaking down this language distinction.

If this activity was repeated we think it would consolidate the development of students' feedback literacy and provide opportunity for deeper and further exploration of related issues (Carless & Boud, 2018). The pilot student comments indicate that this would be welcomed by students, particularly if it allowed investigation of academic production in different subjects.

Colleagues have suggested that asking staff to share how feedback has made them feel would stimulate productive discussion on other aspects of receiving and using feedback. Studies (Carless,

2006; Sutton, 2012) show that developing students' sense of educational self can be a challenging and anxiety-provoking experience but it can also be very affirming. We think it would be interesting for students to see how true this is for staff, and how resilience can be developed through a process of internalising standards that allows an expert to make key judgments about quality (Sadler, 2010). One way to achieve this would be to encourage discussion about experiences of receiving feedback on live presentations of work, as there is a danger that if the review and discussion focuses solely on peer review the activity could reinforce student perceptions that feedback is only written (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011) or part of a formalised process. Doing so, may have the effect of changing student dispositions towards a wider range of interactions than feedback given on coursework, particularly if students are asked to think about what other forms of information proffered by others could help to inform and enhance their work.

Our findings are limited by the small size of the pilot and the fact that it was conducted within a single research-intensive UK university, which has promoted 'Meet the Researcher' as a research-based education activity over recent years. The activity was only used to discuss the production of academic work (academic paper/book chapter and encyclopaedia article). It would be worth exploring how well the activity works for considering feedback on other forms of professional work.

Conclusion

Carless and Boud (2018) define feedback literacy as a student's understanding of what feedback is and how it can be used effectively; their capacity to use it effectively; and their disposition to do so. Our pilot indicates that as a result of taking part in this activity, students came to realise that receiving and responding to feedback is fundamental to professional activity and that feedback was not simply used to correct mistakes and errors.

One of the activity's strengths is that it creates an open space for students and staff to discuss feedback, research and academic writing. Where the author has disagreed with the reviewer's comments there is also the opportunity to discuss the contested nature of knowledge. The exercise also appears to be beneficial for students' understanding of what staff do, and was generally found to be enjoyable and motivating for students.

We recommend that the activity is embedded throughout a curriculum. Some of the students in our study were in their first term and such early first use will help students understand from the start of their university careers that using feedback is an important part of producing academic work. In order to develop the other aspects of feedback literacy Carless and Boud (2018) identify, the activity could be followed by formative peer review activities, which would enable students to develop their capacity to make academic judgements and apply feedback they receive.

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