'Now that's the feedback I want!' Students' reactions to feedback on graded work and what they do with it

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Since the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, like many other institutions, the university where this study took place has expended substantial effort in improving the quality of feedback to students. However, despite much research, changes in pedagogical approaches and shifts in conceptual understanding related to feedback practice, assessment and feedback still receive the lowest satisfaction ratings in the NSS. Lecturers are discouraged when students fail to take note of their feedback, or sometimes do not collect assignments that have been marked. Understanding why feedback is not always acted upon remains an important area for researchers. This paper reports on an in-depth interview study with 14 final year undergraduates, reflecting on their perceptions of feedback written on marked assignments, by selecting examples of what they considered to be 'good' and 'bad' work. Findings suggested that emotional reactions play a significant part in determining how students will act on the feedback they receive, and the concept of 'emotional backwash' is introduced.

Keywords: feedback; emotional effects of feedback; feedback motivation; students' responses to feedback; students' use of feedback

Introduction

Recent National Student Survey results (NSS 2015) reveal that assessment and feedback, although improving, are still the lowest in terms of satisfaction of all the six groups of questions (73% satisfied). Although this is a high endorsement that most institutions would be happy with, it is still the lowest when compared with the other groups of questions that feature in the NSS. This, coupled with increasing pressure upon lecturers to provide a 'quality learning experience', as well as respond to the effects of market forces (Brown and Carasso 2013), means that understanding the relationship between the feedback that is offered and its subsequent use by students becomes even more important.

Feedback-related research in recent years has indicated that lecturers view feedback as a useful learning tool (Maclellan 2001; Carless 2006). However, a number of studies have suggested that the feedback students are receiving is doing little to improve their learning (Bailey and Garner 2010; Sadler 2010). Part of the difficulty arises from changes in thinking in recent years about what the exact purpose of feedback is, how students engage with feedback and how they use it to improve their future assessed work. A widely accepted view is that its purpose should be to help students close the gap between their actual performance and

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desired performance (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). However, Nicol (2010) has more recently argued that a growth in student numbers has meant that feedback comments appear detached from a supportive tutorial system, which once existed, and thus students have become dissatisfied with the feedback process. This issue of detachment and/or distance calls into question how students actually feel about the feedback they receive, and indeed any opportunities they have for dialogue with their lecturers. How students react to feedback appears to involve a number of contributory factors, such as their preferred types of feedback and what feedback they find to be motivational.

Preferred types of feedback

Currently, there is much in the literature about dialogic feedback (e.g. Ajawi and Boud 2015; Crimmins et al. 2016), but students' preferences differ (Hepplestone and Chikawa 2014), with some students favouring written comments only (Yang and Carless 2013) and others appreciating a combination of written comments alongside one-to-one meetings with their lecturers (Blair and McGinty 2012). One of the barriers to effective feedback in one-to-one meetings is explained by Poulos and Mahony (2008), who suggested that some students do not feel that they can interact with their lecturer due to their own confidence level and a lack of established relationship. Brockbank and McGill (1998) found that what many students want from the feedback process is to engage personally with the marker to discuss feedback, rather than receive written comments alone. With rising student numbers and increased pressure on academics to produce high-quality research this may not always be possible (Brown 2007). However, if one is to agree with Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2001), who stated that a primary issue in higher education is how students understand feedback (how they make sense of it), and therefore how they make sense of their assessments, then clearly some form of personal engagement with students is necessary to ensure such goals are achieved. It could be argued that students' understanding of the feedback received may provide a catalyst for their subsequent behaviour.

Motivational feedback

Early studies reported that students required and even requested positive feedback (Spinks 1998). Generally, the factors affecting a desire for positive feedback related to the increased motivation such instances promoted (Hyland 1998). Motivational feedback is not without its inherent problems, as some researchers have suggested that the feedback at times merely concentrates upon the content of the work rather than developmental areas designed to improve future assessment performance (Orsmond and Merry 2011). Hyland and Hyland (2001) suggest that feedback is more effective if it includes both positive and negative comments, contending that the positive will increase the likelihood of students accepting the negative comments. Similarly, Lizzio et al. (2003) suggest that positive comments (those which offer encouragement) reinforce positive reactions as well as moderate the effect of negative comments. Within the literature there is a consensus that positive feedback is important to foster student learning (Hyland 1998; Spinks 1998). Research has suggested that many students prefer positive comments, which they seem to be able to identify easier than those suggesting negative connotations (Lipnevich and Smith

2009). Negatively phrased feedback appears to cause some students, especially those who are already low in confidence, to react in a negative manner (Weaver 2006; Poulos and Mahony 2008). It does seem though that in order for students to benefit from any form of feedback, comments need to reflect elements of criticality (Holmes and Papageorgiou 2009).

What the literature suggests is that, because feedback is multifaceted in nature, an appreciation of more than one singular construct is needed in order to understand students' responses to the feedback they receive and their subsequent behaviour. In more recent years, an emergence of literature considering the impact emotions have upon learning is apparent. Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu (2015) have argued that students' academic motivation is reduced if they feel anxious or fearful. Such anxiety can intensify the student's already low self-efficacy, resulting in academic paralysis (Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu 2015). The impact of grades upon emotions has been studied by Kahu et al. (2015), who suggest that students' grade expectations foster emotions of pride or disappointment. Recent considerations of emotions and learning seem to provide one explanation for the common perception of lecturers that students fail to act on feedback or just ignore it. In the study reported here, the primary concern related to how students process feedback and subsequently use it in their next assessment opportunity. In particular, the focus was on the emotional nature of feedback in relation to motivation, self-confidence and subsequent effort in future assessments. The aim of the research was to analyse how undergraduate students experience and react to feedback given on marked assignments.

Methodology

Through semi-structured interviews a range of undergraduate students were asked to discuss their experiences of 'good' and 'bad' work. Constructs identified within the literature review were explored in relation to how they manifest following students receiving their summative grade, in order to better understand how these constructs interact in relation to when students are performing well and not so well. The qualitative semi-structured interviews afforded the researcher the opportunity to seek clarification in relation to the students' experiences, and more importantly discuss how these are inter-related.

Participants

Forty final year BSc. sport studies undergraduate students at a university in the north-west of England were approached and offered an incentive to participate (£10 HMV voucher) in a one-to-one interview relating to their experiences of feedback. Fourteen final year students agreed to participate (seven males and seven females aged between 20 and 21 years).

Design and procedure

The students were interviewed over a three-month period. Students were provided with a detailed information sheet and all signed an informed consent form. Students were informed prior to the interview that their participation was entirely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, or if they wished at a later date withdraw their data from the study. All interviews were digitally recorded, subsequently transcribed

verbatim and students were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Full ethical approval was obtained from the university.

Students were asked to choose two samples of marked written work from their undergraduate degree to bring to the interview, representing assessments that they perceived as being 'good' and 'bad'. The work would act as a stimulus for discussion during the interview. Interestingly, in deciding on what was good or bad, it quickly became apparent that each student had identified their 'own level' of performance before submitting the assignment. As such, this determined their perception of what constituted good and bad when receiving their summative grade; for example, if a student had expected to get a B and received a C grade from their lecturer, that would be perceived as bad, whereas if they had expected to get a D and received a C that would be perceived as good. In other words, students appeared to have their own measures of academic quality that do not always align with their lecturer's marking judgement.

The piece of work the student had identified as reflecting good work was chosen to begin the interview. Students were asked to summarise the feedback they received, and interpret what the lecturer was asking them to do next time. Students were then asked three specific questions relating to how the feedback they received made them: (i) feel, (ii) react and (iii) use it in their next assessment. The same questions were asked in relation to work they had identified as 'bad'.

Analysis

The interview transcripts yielded a large amount of data and were analysed using in-depth thematic analysis aligned to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher's prior theoretical understanding and knowledge of the literature base meant that the data were interpreted in an analyst-driven manner (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach was taken in an attempt to explain interactions between constructs from the existing feedback-related literature, which were discussed explicitly in the interviews. The researcher initially familiarised himself with the data by re-reading the transcripts. Patterns of meaning within the data at the individual interview level were identified, and coded based upon terminology used in the existing literature. This process allowed the researcher to formulate ideas in relation to what the data meant and, more importantly, enabled him to see commonalities between participants. The coding was related to terminology used in the feedback literature. Subsequently, the data were organised into nine broad dimensions, which again reflected language used in the feedback literature. The term 'dimension' is used rather than 'theme' as it indicates greater inter-connectedness. These were called:

- motivation
- inter-/intra-personal focus
- effort
- competence
- lecturer
- next assessment
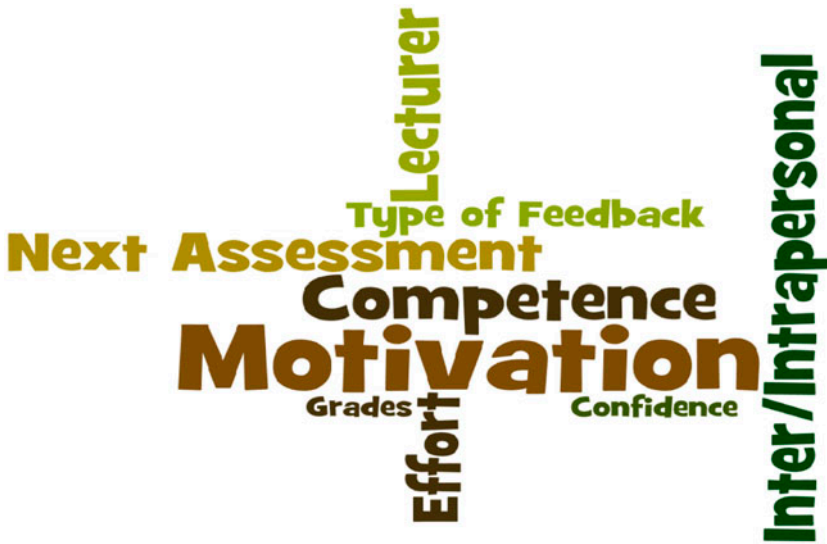- type of feedback
- confidence
- grades

Figure 1.   Broad dimensions wordle.

Figure 1 visually depicts the nine dimensions in a wordle to demonstrate the comparative frequency of responses for each broad dimension. For example, it is clear that, for this particular group of students, motivation seemed to be discussed more than confidence or grades.

While we recognise that thematically analysing interviews into separate but inter-linked dimensions does not capture each student's idiosyncratic perspective, we have presented our findings in this way to demonstrate patterns and commonalities within our interviewees' experience. Accordingly, the dimensions will now be presented in order of frequency by elaborating the second-order themes and associated first-order themes, alongside a selection of participant responses, to further understand how students respond to feedback.

Motivation

The most frequent utterance related to how feedback affected the student's desire and willingness to continue with their studies and engage with the feedback. The student's inner-drive to behave in an adaptive or maladaptive manner interacted with their overall academic achievement goals. More specifically, the following three patterns of feedback and response were identified: motivational positive feedback (i.e. positively worded feedback which had a positive motivating effect); motivational negative feedback (i.e. negatively worded feedback which had a positive motivating effect); de-motivational negative feedback (i.e. negatively worded feedback which had a de-motivational effect). Positive feedback would be expected to be motivational; indeed there were no instances of de-motivational positive feedback in the interviews, but what was interesting was how negative feedback was perceived, indicating how at times it actually had a positive motivational effect. This suggests that some students process what at first sight appears to be negative feedback by being motivated to do better:

Kevin: Saying I didn't do so well makes me feel bad and spurs me onto wanting to get a better mark next time.

Simon: The feedback that I got to some degree was better than the feedback from a good piece of work as it made me more determined to do a good piece of work in the next two pieces of assessment.

For these students, at least, they were able to internally rationalise the feedback they received and interpret it in a positive manner by maintaining and, in some cases, increasing motivation. This would be the goal that most lecturers would hope for when giving negative feedback, but not all students react in the same way:

Ciara: If I get back bad feedback I'm not motivated to do any work for that subject on what I've had the bad feedback on.

Jon: If I see a negative comment I blank it out of my mind instead of maybe looking over it and going right, that's what I needed to actually do. I try and block them, yeah, instead of looking at them and go right, that's getting sorted and that's getting improved.

Ciara and Jon both appear to find it difficult to process the feedback they receive in an adaptive manner. Ciara seems to experience debilitating motivation to the point whereby she withdraws from engaging in further work for that particular module, which may possibly be a case of cognitive bias (Tversky and Kahneman (1974) suggested that human beings use heuristics or shortcuts when making judgments in uncertain situations when not all the evidence is there; such shortcuts can lead to systematic biases and errors in given situations). In Ciara's case, there is an indication that her reaction is a pattern of behaviour, and may well be an error of judgment at the time of receiving the grade, as from the interview it was clear that she does not normally get lower grades. In Jon's case, he seems to be self-aware but not adaptive to negative feedback. Interestingly, neither student suggested that the feedback was overly negative; indeed, Jon's comment suggests that he does realise the feedback is designed to be helpful for his future performance. What seems to be dominating is their inability to positively process this.

The third pattern was, as to be expected, with students highlighting how receiving positive feedback improves their motivation; for some the power of positive feedback helped them to feel less negatively about their own abilities:

Jack: It's good motivation to know that I can write quite well.

Joseph: It boosted my motivation a lot because, like I said, I didn't really think I could do it.

Further, such feedback seemed to foster positive motivational feelings for the student's next assessment:

Mark: If you get a good pat on the back it's like brilliant, you're doing well, go out and do some more.

Jon: From then it gave me a lot of motivation to do well in the last assignment we had for him.

The constructs identified in this motivation dimension suggest that the feedback does have a large effect upon the students in terms of their intentions, and hopefully their future assessment related behaviours.

Inter- and intra-personal focus

This dimension represents how some of the students reacted not only to the feedback they were given by the lecturer, but also whether or not they sought other information about how they were doing by comparing themselves to their peers (inter-personal), or ignored such comparisons (intra-personal). Students reported both positive and negative effects of an inter-personal focus in relation to competition:

> Lorna: It's kind of like a competition. I always want to do the best if not one of the best. Because I'm very competitive so I always want to be the best.
> Joseph: I always want to be better than the guy sitting next to me in whatever I do.

The concept of competitiveness amongst the student population is an interesting dynamic to consider, but this may be a characteristic of the sample who were all Sports Studies students. Data protection means that students can, if they wish, not disclose their performance outcome to others. The students received their grades either via an online information portal or on the essay script itself. Therefore, what Lorna and Joseph are describing suggests they actively attempt to ascertain others' grades for comparison purposes. The work discussed by students in the interviews had been criterion marked (i.e. every student could receive maximum marks regardless of what other students achieved). Achieving a higher grade than another student does not directly benefit a student in terms of their final degree classification. It is perhaps the students' psychological need to perform better than others which affects their responses. This seems to be particularly the case for Lorna who also avoids inter-personal comparison when she is not doing well:

> Lorna: I say I always want to be the best, so if I don't do so well I kind of like shy away from others and not generally talk about it.

Lorna appears to have internally set herself an achievement level for each assessment, and when this is not achieved (inferred as she is discussing work that she perceived as 'bad'), her coping mechanism is initiated and withdraws from discussing the grades with significant others. This provides an insight into the thought processes the students interviewed were going through when making their decisions relating to what constituted 'good' and 'bad' work for them.

Intra-personal focus marginally featured, suggesting that some of the students were not concerned with how they were doing in relation to significant others:

> Ciara: I just try and focus on my own work than other people. I'm not jealous, I'm glad they've done well.
> Emma: As long as I've done good enough for me. I'm not really competitive that way. I don't mind when they get good scores.

The students are talking about what they need to do for themselves, not comparison with their peers as a competition. This dimension has again showed how very differently students react to their feedback, suggesting that different types of students seem to coexist within one cohort of students.

Effort

The dimension of effort is closely related to motivation, but it also tells us something important about self-regulation (Zimmerman 1990). Students talked about expending high volumes of effort in relation to their subsequent performance outcome. The dimension overwhelmingly was represented by high-effort utterances, and its effect upon the final outcome (i.e. successful outcome due to high deployment of effort, unsuccessful outcome despite high deployment of effort):

> Joseph: I think obviously the more effort you put in sometimes the better grade you get.
> Sean: I think 'cause I've put a lot of effort in I'm quite happy to see that the effort I've put in has paid off in this one.

These comments were typical of most of the students interviewed, but poses the question that, if effort was not rewarded by improved grades, how do students handle this disappointment. This is illustrated in the following remarks:

> Jon: You do sort of feel like what a waste of time that was. I don't know why I even bothered.
> Lynsey: Last year in psychology I did a lot of work in it and I didn't get the mark that I was looking for … I might put all the effort into it and it might not be great.

Jon and Lynsey describe their disappointment at not achieving the grade they had hoped for despite their high-effort expenditure. Jon's response is negative, suggesting his effort expenditure was a waste of time. However, Lynsey does seem to demonstrate a level of appreciation that perhaps at times effort does not always equate to success. Effort is a complex issue, with the level of expenditure and outcome that the student is expecting, as the deciding factor, suggesting that some students are extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated (Brown 2007).

Competence

The broad dimension of competence revealed an interesting insight into students' preconceived ability conceptions. Within this dimension, three second-order themes were evident: (i) negative effect of low perceived competence, (ii) high perceived competence and (iii) perceived competence affected by feedback received. The first two second-order themes highlight the students' conception of their own ability, that is, many students reported low competence within certain types of assessment (examinations, for example) and high competence particularly in work they regard as 'good'. The students reported that the feedback affects their perceived competence level. For example, Ciara reported that when she receives 'bad' (negative) feedback it adversely affects her own perceived competence in the subject:

> Ciara: If I've got bad feedback I think I'm obviously not good at the subject. Basically if the tutor's saying I'm not good at it then obviously I think I'm not.

Ciara interprets this isolated example of feedback in a very negative manner resulting in a lower conception of ability, which may be connected to feelings of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) described this as 'people's judgments of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required for attaining designated types

of performances' (391). This is concerning as it suggests her ability conceptions override thoughts related to improvement in future assessments.

Conversely, it appears that positive feedback can increase a student's conception of their own ability and affirms self-belief:

> Sean: It's actually made me think 'actually I can do this', instead of thinking 'I did all right'. I need good support, someone to tell me 'yes you actually can do it'. They obviously believe that I can do it, which is kind of pleasing for me.

Both Sean and Ciara's comments suggest that a lecturer's opinion of their work carries a huge amount of weight, affecting their feelings of academic competence.

Lecturer

This dimension highlights the importance the students attached to their lecturer and/ or lecturers. Students talked about how the lecturer interacted with the students, and how they were responsible for generating and giving feedback to them. The students seemed to either 'use' the lecturer for assistance or ignore this source of support. Secondly, students also reported utterances related to their understanding of the lecturer's feedback.

Students talked about the lecturer as a support mechanism that they access mainly for advice and clarification of the feedback they have received:

> Ciara: You could make an appointment and go and see him and he'd give you your work back and he'd go through it with you. I think I've made more appointments to speak to tutors this year than I have in the whole of last year.
> Lorna: Especially with the feedback as well, 'cause a lot of time I make appointments to go back and ask why I did do so well. If you go back and ask for advice on it they'll go into more detail and explain where you could do better.

Students discussed seeing the lecturer as a matter of course once they had received their work back. They would seek clarification of feedback and, in some circumstances, seek further feedback from the lecturer about how to improve next time. Some students though, such as Laura, indicated that they would seek out their lecturer to query their mark. This seemed to focus mainly upon times where students felt they had not been awarded the grade they were expecting:

> Laura: If I am unhappy with the mark then I probably would go and see them. I guess if I had got below a C I would have wanted to see him as I would have been gutted.

Interestingly, some of the students did not routinely use the lecturer for assistance even though, as Jon suggests, they know that they would benefit if they did:

> Jon: I should really go and speak to the tutor but I don't tend to speak to the tutors about it, I try and do it myself really, which I shouldn't. I just think it's a lot of time and stuff, especially 'cause I work outside of university as well.

Jon appears to be very aware of the support network, but for his own reasons (which may be due to his other commitments) does not make use of it. Of course, if the student feels they are doing well enough, they may not feel they need to bother:

Laura: I don't really, as if I have been to see them with a draft and then I am happy
         with the mark I don't tend to bother. If I have got a high B or and A, I
         wouldn't be like 'ahh why have I got that?' I suppose I wouldn't go and see
         the tutor and say like 'ooh what did I do right kind of thing?'

Laura appears to think if she is doing well further feedback cannot be offered by
the lecturer. This seems to conflict with what some of the students expressed,
especially with regard to improvement-related feedback on good work.

Students' understanding of the lecturer's feedback was also discussed. In the
case of Jon, a further reason why he doesn't go to see the lecturer relates to not
understanding the language that the lecturer has used, this is especially the case if he
has done well:

Jon: Sometimes I'm thinking 'hang on, I've done that right. Some of the words
         I'm like oh my God, I don't know what that means I'm just going to leave
         that'.

Why is it that some students access the help that is made available and some do
not? Perhaps one reason may lie in students' perceptions of variation between
lecturers:

Wilma: It makes me realise what they like and therefore keep that in my next essay
         and don't change my style of writing if they like it. It is important to know
         what each lecturer wants.

Wilma suggests that understanding what certain lecturers like and dislike is a
strategy for success for some students. This may have links with the strategic
approach to learning identified by Entwistle (2000), where the aim is to do what is
necessary to get as high a grade as possible. Overall, it was not clear why students
might be reluctant to see the lecturer as an important resource to help them with
their assignments, but it confirms our earlier work (Norton and Pitt 2009), and may
well be a complex interaction between this and other dimensions, which in turn may
possibly be idiosyncratic to individual students.

Next assessment

The next assessment was discussed in relation to: (i) taking a positive from a nega-
tive, (ii) focus of improvement in the next assessment. Taking a positive from a neg-
ative demonstrated how overtly negative feedback could be used in a productive
manner for the students' next assessment. This relates to what students said about
motivation, particularly those who were able to react positively to negative feed-
back:

Jack: The feedback made me realise my weakness but also the fact that with the
         right preparation I could do it right.
Wilma: I was disheartened but at the same time I decided I'm taking more time and
         starting everything a lot earlier to make sure I'm not getting another D.

Both Jack and Wilma highlight positive responses to feedback that they initially
found discouraging by planning to take quite specific action (for Jack, this was bet-
ter preparation; for Wilma, it was to start work earlier). Both students are thinking

about not making the same mistakes again, and almost making up for the disappointment of the previous assessment in the next assessment.

Focus of improvement in the next assessment appeared to be rather individualised. Students reported directly what they were planning upon taking from the feedback they had received in both the 'good' and 'bad' work, and most crucially how they would act upon it in the next assessment. Simon and Emma both discuss their strategies for utilising feedback in the next assessment:

Simon: It made me think about the other future assessments that I had and sort of gave me guidelines of the direction that I needed to work towards.
Emma: I always read over my last essay before I start a new essay so that I know where I went wrong before.

The next assessment is at the forefront of their minds when they are processing the feedback. However, what is not clear is exactly how they will use it.

Type of feedback

This dimension relates to the students' views on the varied types of feedback experienced. The scope of the discussion was wider than the written feedback they brought with them. Two types of feedback were discussed; one-to-one verbal feedback (usually in the lecturer's office) and written feedback (usually on the script itself).

One-to-one verbal feedback constituted a face-to-face meeting with the lecturer to discuss the written feedback. The merits of this split the interviewees, with some students preferring one-to-one feedback to purely written feedback:

Mark: For me having one-to-ones with tutors is a lot better than having a piece of paper because there could be something the tutor writes, I don't understand. I can go away with a clear mind knowing what I've got to do.

Verbal feedback is valued as it enables the students to clarify misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge, instead of potentially misinterpreting the written feedback in isolation. Written feedback was perceived both positively and negatively. Many students indicated they preferred this method over a one-to-one meeting, as the feedback is always there and they may forget the meeting:

Wilma: But sometimes you forget what they say for the next assessment and then you're stuck … 'cause then I can look at the feedback. Where I'm going wrong and on assessments seeing the actual essay that you've done and then with their comments. If you had their comments throughout the essay you'd realise them more. I want to see my actual work, where it is I went wrong so I can improve.

Wilma feels the written form of feedback allows her to access the feedback to specifically related points within her work where she has 'gone wrong'. This terminology is interesting in itself, as it suggests a student perhaps with an inchoate conception of learning, where knowledge and understanding are seen as polarities of right and wrong (Saljo 1979). When feedback was written, some felt it was insufficient leading to a feeling of disheartenment:

Ciara: It's just the lack of feedback, you just think they're not bothered, why should I be bothered type of thing.

Within this dimension the usability of feedback, when their work had been 'good', was discussed. Kathy reported that for 'bad' work she receives a comprehensive list of improvement-related points but for 'good' work this was not the case:

Kathy: For the bad you've got a list of bad points so they really are highlighted. Whereas if they're good you just have maybe one or two, in the bad you've got maybe six, seven, eight.

This is also the case for Sean whose expectations for feedback were not met, as he regards feedback as something which is designed to help him improve regardless of the grade awarded:

Sean: I was expecting maybe half a page saying what I could do to improve on. A bit more feedback from them to improve to maybe get a higher mark.

This dimension shows that students may favour one type of feedback over another, and not all of them agree on the most effective type. What tends to unify them is a desire to receive feedback, which helps them to improve, regardless of the grade they are receiving.

Confidence

Confidence reflected how the feedback received either reduced or increased the student's confidence level. Negative feedback (which may be the mark itself rather than any written comment) tended to decrease confidence which then might continue forward to the next piece of work:

Lynsey: If I didn't do well in it, then I would have been you know, lower in confidence. If I didn't do well in that I wouldn't have been confident going into doing the next piece of work. I do psychology now and I'm not loving it! I think that is from that mark, that it annoys me.

Lynsey's experience suggests a certain degree of longevity being attached to one instance of poor work. She feels that her confidence has been reduced, impacting upon her approach to the next assessment and her enjoyment of the subject.

The other side of the coin is that positive feedback tends to increase confidence level:

Jon: I felt the feedback I got was quite positive and it gave me a bit of confidence. It made me think 'hang on, if I've done well in this there's no reason why I can't do well in the last thing'. It spurred me on to do more revision and be confident about it and overall it paid off. A good bit of feedback does improve it quite a lot because I'm like oh God I've done something right for a change.

Jon relates his confidence level to current assessment performance. Jon is not used to doing well, the feedback affirms good performance and perhaps this confidence boost could help him in the next assessment. However, what is not clear from

this study is how exactly confidence mediates or even mitigates a student's processing and subsequent utilisation of the feedback they have received.

Grades

The analysis within this study suggests that students have differing approaches to interpreting grades alongside the feedback they receive. The data suggested three separate areas: (i) feedback taken on board (whilst received alongside the grade), (ii) grade more important than feedback and (iii) negative effect of low grades.

The area of 'feedback taken on board', regardless of the grade awarded, suggested that some students were able to disassociate themselves from emotional reactions relating to the grade outcome positively act upon the feedback:

> Simon: The feedback I suppose because the grade is just the grade, it's what comes with it. Knowing what you have done well can make you feel better than the actual grade awarded. Obviously the grade was good but it was the feedback that showed me why it was good.

Joseph further revealed that even within a good piece of work the feedback can explain how to improve further still next time:

> Joseph: Even doing so well you still want to know where you have gone wrong.

The term 'going wrong' is again expressed here, which suggests that more than one student in this small sample has an undeveloped conception of learning. This is surprising given that they were all third year students at the time of their interviews, but perhaps it is indicating something about the tone and content of the feedback messages themselves, and a model which sees feedback as a one-way message from lecturer to student (Sadler 2010).

However, some students did report that the grade was more important than feedback itself:

> Ciara: If I've done well then I don't pay as much attention than if I've done really bad on it.

Ciara suggests that the grade outcome might mitigate how the feedback is interpreted and, more importantly, acted upon in the future.

Receiving low grades had a negative emotional effect upon the students:

> Simon: The grade itself was disheartening.
> Kevin: I was disappointed as I have never got a grade that low before.

It is important to note here that this was not a common reaction, even though all the students did bring along to the interview work which they regarded as 'bad'. This in itself is an interesting finding, as it suggests that low grades are not as de-motivating as would be expected, which leads us back to the power and influence of the accompanying feedback comments.

Discussion

This interview study was designed to find out how students understand and respond to feedback, by asking them to reflect on self-selected pieces of work that

represented examples of what they identified as 'good' and 'bad' written work. This approach had three main advantages. Firstly, it enabled students to reflect in a structured way on feedback they had been given in the past, so they were able to consider their reactions from a more dispassionate perspective than had they been asked at the time they got their marked work returned. Secondly, asking the interviewees to select an example of work they identified as good and bad meant that they had further time to reflect, not only on feedback but on their written work in general. Thirdly, that the students who took part were self-selecting suggested that they were interested in exploring feedback further. It is within this context that we discuss our findings.

Our main finding is that the students in this study seemed to be at differing levels of emotional maturity. This is particularly interesting given all the students were in their third year as undergraduates. While some reported adaptive skills in reacting to and using feedback, many reported maladaptive behaviour when things did not go well. For example, it appeared that, in some aspects, such as receiving negative feedback and/or low grades, students can react either positively or negatively. What makes a student react in either way is less easy to ascertain from the interview data, but there are suggestions from the literature that it may be a combination of factors such as emotional maturity, self-efficacy and motivation interacting in a complex way. Such findings seem to corroborate with those of Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu (2015) and Kahu et al. (2015). This may be underpinned by the students' pre-conceived conception of achievement level, which then affects their feedback processing capability (Kahu et al. 2015). These findings support the notion that in feedback situations a student can experience positive feelings such as appreciation, gratitude, happiness and even pride; however, equally such situations can produce negative emotional reactions such as anger, frustration and fear (Rowe 2011).

Our findings also appear to suggest that emotional maturity underpins the processing of grades, coupled with a student's pre-conceived concept of what constitutes a good grade or a bad grade for them internally. This again is a complex relationship and, although inferred in this study, it does require further research to understand what impact the pre-determined conception of achievement level has upon the student's feedback processing capability. The concept of emotional maturity, or the ability to control one's own emotions in times of disappointment, also needs to be factored into any potential understanding. The students within this study seem to be at differing levels; some reported adaptive skills, but in the main many reported maladaptive behaviour when things did not go well for them. More interestingly, the findings in this study corroborate with Boud and Falchikov's (2007) suggestion that students' cognitive processing could be impaired by their emotions. In this regard, this seems very apparent with regard to feedback cognitions in particular. The role that emotions play within this complex situation needs to be further explored, especially with regard to the impact that emotional processing has upon the students' ability to process, comprehend and utilise feedback. What initially seems to be emerging from this study's findings is an interaction between grade expectation and emotional maturity.

Finally, in an effort to minimise what we have termed as 'emotional backwash', lecturers might wish to follow principles such as those put forward by Mandhane et al. (2015), for example, who suggest that for feedback to be effective it needs to focus on the performance and not on the individual; should be clear and specific;

delivered in non-judgmental language; should emphasise positive aspects; be descriptive rather than evaluative; and should suggest measures for improvement. Our findings, however, suggest that such principles may be too simplistic and what is needed is a deeper consideration of how cognitive, emotional and behavioural characteristics interact to present individual differences in students' reactions to and subsequent use of feedback. In particular, we would argue that emotional reactions are particularly powerful mediators of behavioural responses and future intentions, a conclusion that supports recent research (Harrison et al. 2015).

Conclusion

The main finding of this study is that it highlights the complex and inter-relatedness of constructs within the assessment and feedback realm. However, the study has certain limitations; it was carried out with a small sample restricted to pre-determined questions the authors had constructed relating to the literature. The material on which the interview was based was determined by the work that the student chose to bring with them, which might have had a biasing effect. Nevertheless, the implications of the findings are of value for both research and practice. In terms of research, understanding more about the details of how positive feedback works to positively motivate students' subsequent assessment approaches would provide knowledge that could be used to shape how feedback is constructed by academic staff. The dichotomous nature of the interviewees' responses, with respect to the importance of grades, indicates that it is not simply a matter of the grade influencing how, or even whether, the student will pay attention to the feedback, but there is a more nuanced process whereby the students' predetermined grade expectations also seem to affect their subsequent processing of feedback. This is an important finding given that previous literature has reported that some students are only concerned with the grade outcome rather than any improvement in the next assessment-related feedback (e.g. Carless 2006; Weaver 2006).

The research reported here adds to the recent literature that considers emotional reactions to feedback (e.g. Harrison et al. 2015; Shields 2015; Small and Attree 2015), and suggests that emotional maturity appears to underpin the processing of grades, coupled with a student's pre-conceived concept of what constitutes a good grade or a bad grade for them internally. Again, this is a complex relationship and, although inferred in this study, it does require further research to understand how these different elements impact the student's feedback processing capability. Individual differences are difficult to take account of when practicalities mean that lecturers are often faced with giving feedback to large numbers of scripts in fast turnaround times. This qualitative interview study suggests, however, that when thinking about how to encourage students to act on feedback, we need to consider carefully the effects of students' emotional maturity and any unwanted 'emotional backwash'. This may mean encouraging students to be more feedback literate from the beginning of their studies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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