

Case Study

Institutional Broker of Feedback

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Subject area: Feedback, Student Engagement, Bioscience

This case study has been developed from observations of the teaching component; data from a university wide survey on how feedback is used by students; interviews with colleagues and the Students' Union; and a tutor interview

Background

This case study brings together the vision and persuasive abilities of one biology tutor's journey with students engaging with feedback. The tutor has made use of his quiet authority and vast expertise with the student experience and the topic of feedback to become a leader in his School of Biological Sciences (SBS). The approaches used from SBS to improve his students' engagement with feedback were then put into practice incrementally in other schools across the University to ultimately bring about institutional change.

In 2006, National Student Survey (NSS) and internal survey results for SBS were reasons for the tutor to begin this journey. As the student experience is at the heart of everything for him (and not in a superficial way) his approach was to bring about long lasting and far reaching improvements to the student learning experience which were informed by his attendance at a Centre workshop on feedback. His approach involved targeting a problem worth attempting to solve, identifying different approaches, carefully articulating its merit to bring about a positive change, and campaigning the importance of the work in order to enlist others first within his own School and then across the University to inform institutional change. To better his students' experiences whilst in SBS he identified and worked on a number of issues, one mainly involving, but not limited to, concerns about how students interacted with the feedback they received.

Specifically this body of work began with students in his SBS module (BS1020: Study & Communication Skills in the Biosciences) to positively improve his own teaching and student learning. But, the tutor did not stop here. He successfully took the message and lessons learnt to share and inform colleagues across his School. Again, he continued to share these collective practices and outcomes more broadly across the University with other schools, relying on his non-threatening, convincing manner and approach. Eventually an institutional transformation across the University occurred which convincingly improved the student learning experience changing how students use and engage with their own feedback as evidenced from 600 student surveys.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

Student dissatisfaction with feedback is a common area of concern across higher education, as highlighted by its prominence in NSS data. As such it has been a topic of discussion and served as a theme for numerous higher education projects, programmes and events to improve both internal and NSS feedback. It was at one such event where this tutor began his journey to improve and increase student engagement with feedback. He understood he was working alongside an institution motivated to improve its NSS scores and alongside academic colleagues sometimes ambivalent on the issue but driven by student satisfaction. Over time his colleagues came to appreciate the practices which do impact on how students experience learning and are successful within the institution. While many students had been asked about satisfaction with the feedback received, this tutor sensed his academic counterparts had an important, different voice and a different set of frustrations to contribute to the feedback dilemma.

With this in mind he captured both the students' and the academics' perceptions on the feedback process to improve the appreciation of both parties interactions with feedback (Bevan et al. 2008; Scott et al. 2009). He shared his experiences first with his own colleagues on ways to improve student engagement with feedback and then more broadly with academic staff across different schools in a series of 'roadshow' sessions. The purpose and intent of the sessions was to share a set of nine 'quick wins' aimed at improving the feedback provided by lecturers e.g. work on the timing of assessments and planned marking time, manage expectation and consistency of practice, and encourage students to reflect on previous feedback. Each school adopted 3-4 of the quick wins, often resulting in less tutor time spent on marking as well as improving the students' experience of feedback. The tutor then successfully trialed, and adopted in his own School, a staff peer observation scheme on the feedback given by lecturers. The scheme was adopted by Senate and implemented university wide with support workshops designed and led by the tutor. The tutor next set out to further improve the student engagement with feedback in a joint project with the Student Union (SU) with an institutional student survey, 'How Do You Use Feedback?'

Lecturer perspective

The tutor realised early on the benefit in bringing on board individuals and groups across the University who best understood the issues for those involved in the feedback process. Once he had the practices identified and tested within his own school and further afield across the university, he began a broader survey of students. The programme's success was in part due to inclusion of the staff and students working within the SU to develop the campaign, targeted and developed at students by students, solicited examples of student experiences with feedback and evaluated how students do indeed interact with the feedback received. The SU colleagues appreciated the tutor's vision and request for help to improve how students engage with feedback across the whole university as he 'came to them to work together not just to ask for their help.' They felt this approach significantly enhanced the impact of his work.

Students' perspective

In an observed voluntary session of BS1020, approximately 60 students were involved in a very interactive session to discuss student engagement with feedback and examine staff perceptions on the feedback process. Students answered numerous questions using a Personalised Response System (PRS), paired discussions, group discussions and whole class discussions. The majority of students in the class who responded (66%) had participated in the on-going institutional survey on student feedback. Students were asked in class: "how do you use the feedback you receive?", and "how is your engagement with feedback different at university compared to that in the schools setting?" Students suggested the independence required at university led them to become more involved with the feedback they receive. Through a series of such questions students were involved in a lively discussion of their engagement with the feedback process.

At the School level improvements in satisfaction with feedback were seen in NSS returns for Biological Science students (~600) from 58% at the start of the project in 2006 to 74% in the 2010 NSS. Additionally the university wide led campaign, 'How Do You Use Feedback?', was undertaken to inform the level of practice in 2010 by students with the feedback process. Students were asked three questions (responses were on-line & postcards). Over 50% of the 600 responses stated the 5 different types of feedback they received were: written comments on assignments, verbal, coursework marks/grades, and seminar/tutorial/workshop/problem. Students reported the 5 most useful pieces of feedback received were: better structuring of assignments, ways to improve, identification of strengths and weaknesses, advice on referencing, and critical feedback. When asked for one way they have used feedback to improve their learning over 50% of students named: reflecting on feedback (e.g. feedforward), and improved writing skills. In all cases there were variations between different year groups in the responses suggesting an increase in engagement and understanding of feedback as educational experience at university progressed.

Issues

Many staff expressed frustration in finding the time to mark. The tutor had difficulties coming to terms with this. He believed a lecturer knows when the papers/exams will be coming in to be assessed, and it was therefore a matter of setting aside the time just as one does for other aspects of their role. He experienced a lot of resistance with this and felt he might have come across as more patronising than he had intended or wanted. Results from the perceptions survey work found students wanting positive feedback on well received work because the students weren't certain as to why they had received that mark and, more importantly, would not be able to replicate the work again. This showed the importance of providing both positive feedback, as well as negative, and more constructive feedback. Some students revealed misunderstanding of what defines types of feedback and this will form the basis for a new campaign planned for autumn 2011.

Benefits

This lecturer has very successfully brought together both students and colleagues from across his institution to inform university wide adoption of improvements with assessment and feedback. In doing so he increased student engagement with the feedback received to inform future work, decreased lecturers' time marking, helped all parties better understand the connections between feedback and teaching and its importance, and provided a feedback review process for lecturers. He also enhanced the co-operative relationship with the student body. This project work will continue with the production of guidelines and further training sessions for staff and students.

Reflections

Improvements to student engagement with feedback for an entire institution have come as a result of development of strong working partnerships between one lecturer and all levels of university life (students, SU representatives, Heads of Academic Practice, and Pro-Vice Chancellors). The successes outlined in this case study have come about through a dedication and commitment to students by acting as the voice and champion for undergraduate students across a whole university. The successes of the work were widely shared and disseminated through numerous publications (articles, book chapters, books), presentations (national and international), institutional visits, committee memberships and professional development events. It is important to appreciate and capitalise on the opportunities to learn along a similar journey in order to inform changes of practice big or small. In so doing, one tutor can serve as a model for not only his/her own students but also for his/her colleagues. In this case study, improvements to assessment and feedback practices as a part of the learning cycle have led to increased student engagement with the feedback they have received, but along the journey it also led to increased interactions of the tutors with the topic across an entire institution which is phenomenal. To develop a far reaching, long-term programme as outlined here requires a considered approach reflecting on the viewpoints and buy-in of all parties involved. Most importantly the vision and actions of one academic can truly make a difference.

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