

Section B: Tutors

Chapter 10

Sustainable feedback and the development of student self-evaluative capacities

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Introduction

The re-conceptualisation of feedback envisaged in this volume takes at its heart a dialogic approach to feedback. Dialogue is more than conversation or exchange of ideas, it involves relationships in which participants think and reason together (Gravett and Petersen 2002). Dialogic feedback is defined as interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified. It seeks to provide opportunities for students to interact around notions of quality and standards in the discipline. Without an evolving understanding of quality, it is difficult for students to make sense of comments on their work and improve performance; and in such cases feedback becomes unproductive and unsustainable. The emphasis on dialogue is an explicit attempt to address the limitations of those forms of feedback that are largely one-way transmissive processes. These uni-directional modes of feedback largely arise because of the institutional constraint of written feedback on end of course assignments. Generating dialogue thus requires some re-engineering of the feedback process.

Within the realities of mass higher education, limited resourcing and multiple demands on teachers, does dialogic feedback appear to be a feasible aspiration? How can we hold meaningful dialogues if faced with a large class of students of widely differing motivations and abilities? The position taken in this chapter is that feedback needs to be 'sustainable'. In other words, it should not and cannot rely solely on the tutor to provide comments, but instead it requires an enhanced student role in generating and using feedback. Sustainability in feedback lies in the ability of students to improve the quality of their work independently of the tutor (Carless *et al.* 2011). Our work as educators is sustainable when students have learnt with us, and are able to continue improving without us. As part of this process, students need to be developing their self-evaluative capacities at increasingly high levels.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define sustainable feedback as:

active student participation in dialogic activities in which students generate and use feedback from peers, self or others as part of an ongoing process of developing capacities as autonomous self-regulating learners.

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The aims of the chapter are to explore sustainable feedback through discussing its theoretical underpinnings and analysing relevant classroom practices. Its significance lies partly in the use of data from a classroom case study of an award-winning teacher to exemplify features of sustainable feedback. The chapter also contributes to the volume as a whole, by its focus on re-conceptualising feedback, not as something that takes place at the end of a course or task, but as embedded within the curriculum. In this way, sustainable feedback practices facilitate efficient use of staff time by re-directing post-task comments towards dialogic interaction within regular classroom activities.

Framework for sustainable feedback

The conceptual origins of sustainable feedback lie in Boud's (2000) notion of sustainable assessment: practices that meet immediate assessment needs whilst not compromising the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to support lifelong learning activities. At the heart of sustainable assessment is the notion of students as active consumers of assessment information, using it to self-regulate their own performance. Drawing on this notion of sustainable assessment, Hounsell (2007) introduces the concept of sustainable feedback and addresses three strands: a focus on the provision of 'high-value' feedback carrying impact beyond the task to which it relates; enhancing the student role to generate, interpret and engage with feedback; and developing congruence between guidance and feedback, by orchestrating teaching and learning environments in which productive dialogue arises from course learning activities.

Sustainable feedback is also consistent with key ideas in other significant literature on feedback: a model of feedback and self-regulated learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006); a dialogic model of feedback (Beaumont *et al.* 2011); and a focus on student engagement with feedback (Price *et al.* 2011). Feedback needs to focus less on providing information to the student, and more on guiding them to understand the nature of quality and develop personal capability in making complex judgements (Sadler 2010). An aspect of students developing their judgement relates to what Sadler (2009: 57) refers to as connoisseurship which he defines as 'a highly developed form of competence in qualitative appraisal'. Sadler's interest, congruent with the development of sustainable feedback practices, is in how students develop expertise in making judgements about their work and that of peers.

Building on this literature, sustainable feedback is viewed as encompassing the following core characteristics (Carless *et al.* 2011):

- involving students in dialogues around learning to raise their understanding of quality work;
- facilitating feedback processes through which students are stimulated to develop capacities in monitoring and evaluating their own learning;

- enhancing student capacities for ongoing lifelong learning and supporting student development of skills for goal-setting and planning their learning.

What are some of the teaching, learning and assessment tasks through which sustainable feedback can be promoted? A key issue is the design of assessment tasks as they impact on how students organise their study time (Gibbs 2006). Here I briefly review a task utilised by the case study teacher featured in this chapter: oral presentations.

Oral presentations are common assessment tools in higher education. Through their relationship to professional communication skills, they are a relatively 'authentic' mode of assessment (Doherty *et al.* 2011). When an oral presentation is conceived as a position to be argued, it can facilitate a powerful student learning experience, with students perceiving it as being more demanding than written assignments, more personal, requiring deeper understanding, and leading to better learning (Joughin 2007). Oral presentations also carry opportunities for classroom dialogue through peer assessment or peer feedback. In fact, given that the audience of an oral presentation is usually a group of classmates and a single teacher, a valid assessment of the presentation should take into account its degree of success in communicating to fellow students (Magin and Helmore 2001). Engaging with the communication of peers is also a way in which students develop skills in making informed judgements, and using observation of classmates to enhance their own performance. Such processes are most likely to be productive if there are trusting relationships between all classroom participants (Carless 2009).

In summary, sustainable feedback is co-constructed by tutors and students, with an emphasis on student engagement with feedback as part of their development as self-regulating learners. It can be facilitated through dialogic interaction, which aims to enhance student understandings of quality work. Oral presentations are noted as an example of an assessment task that can facilitate dialogues between peers.

The context of the case study

The chapter uses data from a case study of a teacher in a Faculty of Business who was a recipient of a university teaching excellence award. His potential for implementing practices congruent with sustainable feedback emerged from an interview study of ten winners of teaching awards in the university (Carless *et al.* 2011). The rationale for studying award-winning teachers is not that they necessarily represent 'best practice', but that analysis of their pedagogy has potential to provide meaningful insights into the teaching, learning and assessment process. A single case is sufficient for the purposes of the chapter, as its aim is not to generalise but to theorise and suggest implications for practice.

The research was guided by the following questions:

What sustainable feedback practices were observable in the practice of an award-winning teacher?

What was the teacher's rationale for the practices that he adopted?

What were the student perceptions of the teacher's practices?

The research methods were interviews and classroom observations. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with the teacher to elicit his views of issues relevant to the research focus; and with eleven students, focusing on issues arising from the observations and the teacher interviews. Fifteen hours of classroom observations were conducted and detailed field notes were collected from two different elective courses. The discussion in this chapter draws mainly on a course on Creativity and Business Innovation.

The assessment for the course was through three components with the following weighting:

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Case, class and blog discussion | 40 per cent |
| 2. Individual written case assignment | 30 per cent |
| 3. Final project | 30 per cent |

The first component is essentially an assessment of student participation in the class in three aspects: their contribution to general class interaction; discussions related to business cases, which were a core feature of the module; and the course blog. The second assessment task is a more traditional written task. The third is a group project that involves an oral presentation and a related written report. Some tensions in the assessment design are apparent. Rather than placing a main emphasis on reliability in measuring student performance, there appears to be greater stress on the development of productive student learning experience. For example, the grade for student participation is useful in motivating them to contribute actively to course activities, but is hard to assess reliably.

Key themes

The case study teacher's orientation towards teaching was articulated in terms of providing challenging interactive learning activities for students; and stimulating them to make connections between different elements of their learning and experience. Various classroom activities and assessment tasks created an environment for practices congruent with sustainable feedback. I focus here on two elements: interactive dialogic whole-class teaching and the use of student oral presentations as a site for peer feedback.

Interactive dialogic teaching

The teacher's espoused philosophy is to engage students in various activities that enhance their thinking skills. His view of education is as follows:

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Education is an experience of thinking, feeling and doing. For students to grow intellectually, the idea is to be able to think independently. Independence comes from mastering the art of thinking . . . I put the students at the centre of a dynamic process where they can holistically learn to think, learn to change, and hopefully learn to learn.

His courses prioritise the development of learning to learn and analytic skills over content, which he believes can easily be found through other sources and may also quickly become outdated.

Classroom observations revealed a strong undercurrent of dialogue in his teaching. For example, it was common for him to begin a class with a seemingly mundane question, 'What did you learn in the class last week?' In early observations of the course, students sometimes replied with a recount of the content of the previous class. The teacher used such responses as a stimulus to probe more deeply into what new knowledge had been generated. For example, the teacher responded:

It's better to say I learned . . . What did you learn that you didn't know before? Come on guys, make some connections.

Description is not good enough; it is too easy to forget. You have to go deeper. If you understand why, you usually won't forget. Try to understand things more deeply.

Both classroom observation and interview data suggested that this opening gambit was impacting on student learning behaviours. In later observations, it was noticeable that students were becoming better prepared to reflect on their learning from previous classes. A student referred specifically to this aspect as follows:

Before taking this course, I do not have the habit of reviewing the previous lesson. But in this course, he always asks us what we learnt from the previous lesson. So before I go to class, I always review what I have learnt and I am starting to do this now in my other courses.

The teacher also devotes some class time to focus explicitly on how students learn. For example, he concluded one classroom segment by saying: 'Learning requires a little bit of repetition. Remember things you want to learn, make connections and then some re-organisation of your understandings. That's how you learn'.

In terms of feedback, the teacher intersperses within the classroom dialogue encouraging comments – 'This is really good, fantastic . . . that's a beautiful idea' – with more critical comments. An example of the latter occurred when a student gave a rather long-winded comment, and before its conclusion the

teacher interrupted and said, 'We didn't understand what you just said. Summarise it one short sentence.' This kind of direct feedback also exemplifies challenges of class participation at both cognitive and social-affective levels.

From the interview data, some student comments on the dialogic interaction are as follows:

He challenges us to bring our thinking to a higher level. He wants to know whether you can apply your knowledge at a sophisticated level. So if I want to answer his question, I would need to think in depth because he would ask challenging follow-up questions.

His way of interacting is that there is not one right answer, but many good answers. So you can mention an idea and then we will discuss how to improve it and that's one of the reasons why students want to speak more.

In order to participate willingly in such dialogues, students need to invest a certain amount of trust in their teacher's and peers' willingness to respond sincerely to their contributions.

The amount of class time devoted to dialogic interaction also leads to a tension in relation to the balance between process and content. Some critical student comments on this aspect:

The course is good for critical and creative thinking but we did not get much practical knowledge from it. He has a free style and we explore some ideas further and we may forget what we are talking about in the course . . . and then time is up. It's a kind of paradox. Do we have to learn some practical knowledge in every course?

Sometimes I don't know what we are learning because he is talking about very psychological or philosophical things. Sometimes I don't really know what that has to do with the topic of the course.

These comments relate to a common dilemma experienced by teachers, in terms of achieving a balance between the process of learning and delivering disciplinary content.

An issue I raised with the teacher was how participation is assessed in the course, and the extent to which this is articulated explicitly to students. He responded as follows:

It's intentional that I don't articulate in detail how the mark for class participation is awarded. In the course outline, it states that success in the course depends on *effective* participation in class. It's not the quantity of participation. I would say good students know exactly what a good contribution is. Part of education is for them to become assessors themselves to know what good learning is.

My interpretation from the classroom observations is that he uses various techniques to try to model and encourage high quality-participation by guiding the students to improve their contributions to discussions. He is not explicit about how participation is graded, but he is showing during class what good contributions are like. He seems to be trying to resolve the tension between being so explicit as to constrain student creativity and impede emergent outcomes, whilst supporting students to understand what quality participation involves. This focus on interaction around the notion of quality is at the heart of sustainable feedback.

Oral presentations

One of the features of the classes was that students are regularly required to present their thoughts verbally at the front of the class through oral presentations. The teacher believes that developing the ability to carry out a convincing oral presentation is a key tool of business personnel. The presentations are always done in groups, usually involving three to five participants. They can vary from short informal sharing involving just a few minutes per group, to longer more structured presentations of fifteen to twenty minutes. The former were often related to the cases which were central to course content, whereas the latter were as part of the assessed final project, involving an oral presentation and a related written report handed in two weeks later. In other words, the oral presentations feed in to both the course participation grade and the final project grade.

I have suggested earlier that a key element of sustainable feedback is that it involves students in dialogues that raise awareness of quality performance. A major way in which the teacher does this is through one of his favoured activities involving a structured process of oral presentations and feedback. Students are video-taped when presenting in groups. Immediately after the presentation, the teacher shows one or two short extracts from each presentation. He first invites the presenter to self-evaluate their performance and then opens up the floor to suggestions and interactive discussion. His stated rationale for this activity is to use the reality of the video to heighten student awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their own presentations, and by commenting on other students' talks developing a stronger sense of characteristics of good business presentations. He comments on the role of student peer- and self-evaluation in this activity as follows:

Self-assessment is a big part of learning. I think every course should encourage the students to assess other students so that they know the meaning of quality. You increase their sense of empathy because you break the artificial barriers between teacher and students by reversing the roles; they do the assessing and see how tough it is. Some of them are struggling to decide which oral presentation project is good because they are learning how to assess.

Some student viewpoints on this oral presentation activity now follow:

The video activity was really useful. I have been videoed before, but this was the first time I got feedback. It gives me more confidence because I think my presentation looked okay. I could also look closely at others presenting and I know some things to avoid, like some annoying gestures. The only problem is that the presentations and discussions are quite time-consuming

I think the course kept on being interesting because we had the presentations, and so at each class, we had something new to do or something different to learn. But then there is less course content, so maybe the content could be expanded

The oral presentations stimulated 'time on task' often identified as a feature of productive learning. The students were involved in a lot of discussion, preparation and planning for the presentations. For example, one student reported to me that his group spent around six hours preparing for a presentation that only lasted a few minutes. They brainstormed and debated the topic of their presentation for around four hours, and then they focused more directly on the content and the roles of participants. My inference was that students were engaged in potentially valuable out of class dialogues about content through this active involvement in preparation of the oral presentation.

Oral presentations seem to be a particularly promising site for peer feedback and this was facilitated in the case under discussion by the positive classroom atmosphere and trusting relationships between classmates. Peer interaction around what makes a quality oral presentation may be even more promising than peer assessment involving marks, as the latter can carry unwanted side-effects of concerns about awarding grades to friends, and distract from the collaborative learning climate that is being established (Liu and Carless 2006).

Conclusions and implications

Feedback is too often based on what the teacher wants to say rather than on what the student is interested in hearing. This is one of the contributing factors to students' expressions of dissatisfaction with feedback, and one of the reasons why it needs re-engineering. Dialogic interaction can bridge this gap in student-staff preferences by involving participants in exchanging insights on topics of shared interest. Dialogue is central to sustainable feedback in that it emphasises the students' role in making sense of feedback and using it to develop their own self-evaluative capacities. Sustainable feedback also reconfigures the teacher role from someone who mainly provides comments on student progress, to a position of supporting students to make their own professional judgements. The example from the case study of reflective discussion of oral presentations

has illustrated how peer feedback can assist students in developing a better understanding of the nature of quality.

I suggest that a facilitating factor for the development of sustainable feedback is trust of students in their teacher and classmates (see also Carless 2013). Trust is an important dimension in assessment and feedback, yet something that is often in short supply (Carless 2009). The development of trusting relationships among participants has particular implications for developing sustainable feedback. Relevant dimensions include 'competence trust' or confidence in teachers' and classmates' capacities to provide useful feedback; and 'communication trust' as evidenced by qualities of openness, empathy and genuine interest in the ideas of others. We are clearly more likely to engage with feedback from an individual who possesses 'trusting virtues': transparency, integrity and our best interests at heart (Carless 2013).

Finally, I turn briefly to the institutional level to discuss wider prospects for the promotion of sustainable feedback practices. The teacher featured in this chapter viewed the primary purpose of teaching as facilitation of learning so as to develop students' capabilities of critical thinking, self-reflection and self-improvement. He was less concerned with transmission of subject matter. This was part of the rationale for both his pedagogy and his design of assessment tasks; and a facilitating factor for sustainable feedback practices. Research shows that teachers holding beliefs focused on facilitating learning, rather than delivering disciplinary content, are but a small minority among academics (Prosser *et al.* 2005). Following from this, an issue for further exploration is the prospect of scaling up the implementation of sustainable feedback at an institutional level, so that rather than being a minority pursuit it becomes part of the pedagogic repertoire of a greater number of teachers. As noted elsewhere (Carless *et al.* 2011), incentives and resourced commitments at institutional and department levels would be useful ways of encouraging the development of sustainable feedback practices. A key challenge is the belief systems of teachers, which are obviously difficult to change. Two ways forward emerge. The first is the dissemination of good practices, and hopefully this is a contribution of the current chapter. The second is to engage teachers in critical open discussions of tacit beliefs and approaches to assessment and teaching. For feedback to be re-engineered on a wide scale, it needs to engage with or even confront the belief systems and existing practices of staff.

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