Natasha Alden

Yr Adran Saesneg ac Ysgrifennu Creadigol | Department of English and Creative Writing

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEIDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

Improving the Delivery and Student Use of Feedback

Mae’r Cylch Dysgu hwn o’r portffolio TUAAU wedi’i gyflwyno i CADAIR gyda chaniatâd yr awdur uchod. Adnodd i’w ddefnyddio gan ymgeiswyr y TUAAU yn y dyfodol a staff eraill ydywyw, fel rhan o’u datblygu proffesiynol yn Mrhofysgol Aberystwyth. Erys yn ei ddiolch i’r awdur a Phrifysgol Aberystwyth. Os hoffech dyfynnu’r gwaith hwn neu gyfeirio ato, cysylltwch â’r awdur. Ceir y manylion cyswllt yn http://www.aber.ac.uk/cy/directory/

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useful'. 3 students (9%) felt it had had no impact upon their learning, but no students felt it had been actively unhelpful.

The whole experiment is by no means perfect and I cannot exactly measure the extent to which students follow the second half of Light and Cox's taxonomy, or whether they have transferred their practice in seminar to individual revision, as I believe they will and should. Light and Cox write that in Deep learning 'the primary concern is to make personal meaning with and out of the shared meanings available' (Light and Cox, 2001: 49). For Light and Cox, 'self-directed learning occurs when teaching and learning become the same thing, neither leading nor trailing one another' (Light and Cox, 2001: 60). In this teaching cycle, I achieved my key goal of showing students that despite their misgivings, they are wholly capable of moving beyond the liminal state that many of them hover in during the module; my hope is that the level of confidence reflected in the student feedback feeds into their work across their degree scheme.

**Teaching Cycle Two: Improving the delivery and student use of feedback**

This teaching cycle grew out of my interest in how students used the feedback we provide in the English department. We use a departmental feedback sheet, which allows for around 300 words of commentary on each essay. We mark according to a marking criterion which the students are provided with, and which I always explain to students at the start of a new module. Thus the commentary offers guidance on how students have met each element of the marking criteria and what they can do to fulfil them to a higher standard in the future.
Rowntree (1987) describes assessment and feedback as 'the life blood of learning' (cited in Winter and Dye, 2004). When I taught in the tutorial system at Oxford, I was accustomed to giving detailed feedback on students' work during the tutorial. While some tutors asked students to read their essays out loud in tutorials, and then commented on them, I felt that this wasted time that could be used for academic discussion, so tended to ask for essays in the night before the tutorial, and then to use the students' work as the basis of the tutorial discussion; thus the hour was focussed on the individual's particular interests, strengths and weaknesses. The chief advantage of this is that is allows for tightly focussed attention to be paid to the students' thinking and writing skills; the practise of producing two essays a week also allowed students to hone their skills in composition and constructing an argument. This system of teaching enables tutors to reach the three conditions Sadler (1989) argued effective feedback helped students to reach:

1. develop an understanding of the goal or standard being aimed for
2. compare their "present position" with the goal or standards
3. carry out actions that lead to closure of, or reduction in the gap

Oxford is very lucky in being able to afford the luxury of the tutorial system for each student, which - when it works well- allows students to attain each of Sadler's goals. Working in a different university, I quickly regretted not being able to give my students the same level of individual attention I had had myself and that I had been able to give my students at Oxford. When I was choosing teaching cycles, I was drawn towards interventions that would allow me to replicate some of the best aspects of tutorial teaching, namely the practise of writing frequently, and of giving students individual attention as much as I could in relation to how they could build on their existing skills and grow in confidence. I have
made efforts in these areas outside my teaching cycles – my office hours are well attended, and I tend to have students who I have previously taught or who are in my personal tutor group coming to discuss their academic work and progress, because I have made it clear that they are welcome to do so during my office hours (and at other times by arrangement). I do this partly out of a strong (politicised) sense of the unfairness of a university system where some students, often by dint of having been educated in exceptional privilege, are afforded a highly expensive university education that (in the best case scenario) gives them exceptional levels of close supervision and training, whereas outside those charmed institutions, students cannot access the same level of attention. I cannot fund the introduction of very small group teaching across HE in the UK, but I can attempt to offer the same level of attention to each of my students, should they chose to access it during my office hours.

Of course, one problem with this is that many students chose not to access such help, for a variety of reasons; they may feel shy about coming forward, embarrassed about asking about less than perfect feedback, or simply disengaged from the learning process. Anecdotally, students have told me that they feel hesitant about asking for additional time with lecturers. As Winter and Dye (2004) suggest, students may also not engage fully with feedback because the mode and delivery of assessment drives them to adopt a ‘surface’ rather than a ‘deep’ learning approach (Biggs, 2003). That the use of grading scales, they argue, encourages instrumental motivation in students, where they become grade-driven rather than focussing on the knowledge and/or skills the feedback aims to help them build. However, as (hown (2007) notes, the National Student Satisfaction Surveys of 2005, 2006 and 2007 all showed that the satisfaction rates for the assessment and feedback elements
of their work were considerably lower than they were for teaching in general; in 2007, while 82% of students were satisfied with their teaching overall, only 56% of students agreed that ‘feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand’ (Chown, 1). I therefore decided that, having done a teaching cycle on a seminar activity to engage students, I would try to build my next two cycles around the conceptions of learning posited by Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993). Their work on students’ conceptions of learning extended earlier work by Säljö (1979) which outlines five qualitatively distinctive conceptions of how students define learning as being (Cliff, 1998). According to Säljö, these categories of conception are hierarchical, in that they place more nuanced conceptions of learning (undergoing a transformative shift of perspective, as with a threshold concept) above models of learning that simply emphasise the acquisition of knowledge (of information and of methodology). I saw this model as one around which I could structure the three teaching cycles of the PGCTHE, if I designed my teaching cycles to relate to different stages of the learning process. I thus decided that my next two cycles would focus on the ‘bookends’ of seminar teaching, student preparation and feedback and assessment. At this stage, I came across an article by my colleague Professor Peter Barry on feedback, ‘Margins aren’t meant to be written in’ (Barry, 2008). Barry argues here that “students learn far more about how to craft an essay from a few minutes of face to face dialogue” than they do from ‘scrawled annotations’ (Barry, 38), While resisting the suggestion that my comments sheets amounted to ‘scrawled annotations’, what Barry said was extremely useful; he advocated abandoning comments sheets and instigating ten minute feedback sessions with students after handing work in instead. It is not within my power to do this, and nor would I want to do away with written feedback (as students can use it to refer to in
the future), but Barry's suggestion that face to face interaction, focussed on the individual student's work and performance, could be a more effective way of delivering feedback struck a chord with my own earlier experience of tutorial teaching. Chanock (2007) wrote a particularly useful article in which she argues that lecturers often over-estimate how clear the import of their comments is to students. Chanock describes how

"Students and tutors in selected Humanities subjects were asked what they thought was meant by a common marking comment - 'Too much description; not enough analysis' - to discover how far their understandings coincided. Almost half of the students who responded did not interpret this comment in the way their tutors intended it.... possible reasons for this discrepancy (include) ambiguities in the term 'analysis' and differences in its meaning for different disciplines."

She concludes that 'marking comments need to be carefully explained with examples from the discourse of lectures, tutorials and readings in the disciplines' (Chanock, 2007). I knew that I could not deviate from the standard form of feedback, but found, as Chanock did, that students were not gaining from the detailed written feedback I was giving them. I thus designed an intervention which worked within the parameters of the existing module assessment specification, but which experimented with offering students individual meetings and an oral form of feedback, targeted on the issues they most wanted to focus on.

Maclellan (2001) has demonstrated that students do not habitually use feedback given as part of assessment to improve their work. I have found the experience of seeing students make the same mistakes that I have identified in previous pieces frustrating, and wanted this teaching cycle to allow me to intervene and make them use this feedback more effectively. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) have shown that changes to assessment that
transform summative feedback into feedback that can operate as formative prompting can have a dramatic effect on students’ learning, and I found their work particularly useful, given that I was not able, within the constraints of the module, to create a piece of non-summative feedback. I discussed attempting this with my mentor and other colleagues, who warned me of the dangers of putting too much pressure on students within an already tight schedule of assessed work, and also suggested that student take up of non-assessed work is often poor (given time constraints and the different motivation they often bring to non-assessed work). I thus decided to build the cycle into formative assessment but to make it ‘feed-forward’ into broadly transferable essays skills as much as possible, so that while still being summative, it was also as formative as it could be.

I began the intervention by discussing reflective learning with the students, and explaining what the teaching cycle was designed to do, in terms of preventing them from repeating mistakes made in the past and building on their strengths. I explained this to them in terms of the theory of change. (Although this cycle does not so much change the teaching model as adapt it as it already stands; given the opportunity, I hope in the future to build this kind of oral feedback session into my teaching in the future, an idea which has had a cautious welcome from my departmental Learning and Teaching committee.) The intervention itself was to offer voluntary (but heavily trailed and clearly explained) meetings of ten minutes with each student, two days after they had been given their first assignment (a 2500 word essay) back with my written commentary. I encouraged the students to think of the feedback session in terms of Boud’s model of reflection (Boud, 1985), and followed this model in my oral feedback. Boud outlines four stages through which an individual may move in order to gain the most positive progress from any given experience:
Stage 1: Return to experience

- Describe the experience, recollect what happened
- Notice what happened/how you felt/what you did

Stage 2: Attend to feelings

- Acknowledge negative feelings but don't let them form a barrier
- Work with positive outcomes

Stage 3: Re-evaluate the experience

- Connect ideas and feelings of the experience to those you had on reflection
- Consider options and choices

Johns (1995) adds a further and extremely important stage:

Stage 4: Learning

- How do I feel about this experience?
- Could I have dealt better with the situation?
- What have I learnt from this experience?

Boud's later work on feedback also proved useful; similarly emphasises the need for feedback to identify how future performance can be improved (sometimes referred to as 'feedforward') and for students to have opportunities to act on this: "Unless students are able to use the feedback to produce improved work, through for example, re-doing the same assignment, neither they nor those giving the feedback will know that it has been effective" (Boud, 2000: 158)

The module I ran this intervention on was my second year option module, 'Contemporary Queer Theory'. This module recruited 17 students, 12 of whom attended the feedback session, and 13 of whom filled in the student feedback sheets for me. I agreed a period of
time when the students could come and see me in my office (which seemed an appropriate, private but friendly space) to go through the comments sheet. I did not arrange individual times for students to come as I wanted to maintain a relatively informal (and unintimidating) environment for the students; as the feedback sheets indicted, some students liked the informality of this, and some liked waiting outside with their friends, while others felt self-conscious; because of this, I now operate this system on a timetable. The relatively high take up of this activity owed something, I suspect to the fact that this is an option module, and thus students have already made a commitment to the module, and are more likely to want to take up additional opportunities. It was gratifying that all the students who attended the sessions felt it had been a particularly useful and constructive activity, and that many of them commented that what they had learned in the session would stand them in good stead for improving their writing skills and their deep learning in future academic work in general (see student feedback sheets provided in the appendix). I had intended these sessions to become learning cycles for the students themselves, and anecdotal evidence gathered since the semester ended has suggested that this has been the case; the feedback I gathered at the time certainly indicated this.

The questionnaire I circulated at the end of the module (three weeks after the session, when the students had had a chance to reflect on their written and oral feedback and to act on any advice I had given in terms of accessing learning support) consisted of the following questions:

1. Did you come to the feedback session? Yes/no
2. Why?
3. Did you find the extra time useful? Why?
4. Was there anything you felt you wanted to ask but couldn’t?
5. Would you use an appointment system?
6. Would you like to see other tutors do this?
7. Is there anything you’d change about how the session was run?
8. Anything else you’d like to add?

The answers to these questions were revealing, and suggested that I had been successful in trying to shift this summative assessment into a formative mode of usage. All of the students who attended the seminar on 28/4/10 filled in a questionnaire sheet. 12 had attended the feedback session, one had not because they had a pre-existing appointment (a further three students who had attended the feedback sessions were absent through illness). 100% of the students who had attended the feedback session said that it had been useful, and added narrative comments as to why:

"Yes. I keep getting the same marks in my essays and I’m not improving. Tasha suggested I book an appointment with the RFL people which I have done."

"It helped point me in the right direction for future essays."

"Yes, it helped me to see the problems with how I structure essays and improve it for other modules"

(original student forms supplied in appendix).

These comments suggest that my aim of helping students develop generic skills (as well as skills specific to this module) had been met. In addition, students commented:

"Yes - more personal than just the notes on the essay"

"It assured me that Tasha sincerely was happy with elements of my essay and gave me a confidence boost"
One of my aims in this cycle had been to develop a good student/lecturer relationship, and this feedback illustrates that it had been successful, as do these comments by students as to why they chose to come to the optional feedback meeting:

"it enables me to ask any questions which I need to ask. The tutor encouraged us to do this, which made me feel good, and that she was interested in offering more help"

"This sort of feedback really helps in developing a trusting and good working teacher/pupil relationship"

100% of students responding said they had not had any questions they had wanted to ask but had felt unable to, which also suggests that the good working relationship I had tried to foster during seminars had been extended through these sessions. In terms of less positive feedback, 92% of the students said that they would prefer alter the structure of the feedback sessions and use an appointment system, as opposed to the less formal 'drop in' session I ran. Students suggested that waiting outside my room had been somewhat nerve wracking, and that there was confusion as to who should go in, in what order; I will adopt this change in future teaching. I chose not to use an appointment system so as to promote an informal atmosphere, which I felt would be less intimidating, but accept the students' argument that to wait outside the room was intimidating in itself, so a structured session with reduced waiting times would be preferable.

The students appreciated that by discussing the specific points raised in each feedback sheet, and expanding on areas they asked about, we could ascertain, together, how best to monitor their own performance in order to make effective use of the feedback they were already getting, which, as Maclellan (2001) argues, generates improvement in learning. This is supported by Carless (2006) who suggested that students should be proVided with the
'means to distinguish accurately their achievements in different assignments'; this teaching cycle offers the student feedback appointment as one way of providing these means within the limitations of the existing system. One action for the future, then, will be further exploration of innovative forms of assessment. Reflecting on this teaching cycle, I decided that I would continue to build this kind of feedback into my teaching. There may be difficulties with larger modules, especially in terms of the amount of time this activity takes. There may also be difficulties with the large core modules, where the tutor/student relationship may not be as established because students have not made an active choice to take the module. I will continue learning about different methods of delivering feedback, focussed on this cycle's aim of helping students to bridge the gap between what the mark tells them about where they stand in relation to the marking criteria, and what their feedback can tell them to improve. I also need to consider methods of engaging the students who are perhaps most in need of thorough feedback and guidance, those who do not attend feedback sessions or indeed seminars. The student who missed the feedback session had also missed a large number of the seminars, and was receiving marks on the 2.2/3'd border. My, and the department's, attempts to contact this student about their attendance failed. If I apply this feedback method more broadly, I will have to find ways to engage students with similar patterns of attendance. Without being able to make attendance compulsory, one option might be to use these sessions to release marks before they are released in other media, so students who are more grade-driven are motivated to attend and thus engage with this summative-formative feedback style. Were I to start using this method from the first year onwards, I would hope to get students 'into the habit' of attending these sessions because they perceive them as being rewarding in terms of
improving their grades. Even if their initial response is a surface-learning driven one, it should thus be possible to move them into a deep-learning model that would then inform their attitude to learning more generally.