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Engaging students: Student preferences for feedback

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The provision of effective and high quality feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching, particularly for its role in engaging students. Rowe and Wood (2008b) developed a survey to explore student perceptions and preferences for feedback. The survey was distributed to a large cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate students at two Australian universities. The authors identified two feedback preference dimensions, which appeared to reflect two learning approaches, 'surface' and 'deep' as conceptualised by Biggs (2003) and others. Demographic variables were found to be poor predictors of student preferences for feedback. Surprisingly, one quarter of students surveyed said that they received none or rarely received any feedback. This suggests much improvement is needed in the provision of feedback; however, it may be that students sometimes fail to recognise feedback when they receive it. Results indicate that students want more engagement from teaching staff; specifically they want the provision of feedback to be made more personalised.

Keywords: feedback, student perceptions, student preferences

Introduction

The provision of effective and high quality feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching and this view is well supported by meta-analytic studies (Black & William 1998; Hattie 1987). Currently there is a focus on promoting engagement within higher education, and this forms the core of much educational literature and higher education policies and strategy (Solomonides & Martin 2008). Timely and effective feedback has been identified as one dimension of student engagement (Solomonides & Martin 2008). Engagement is linked to ideas that individual perception is important, and an individual's subjective perception of their own context, including how processes relate to them is most important (Entwistle 1991). A student-participative approach to teaching and learning is thus essential for two reasons: firstly, the way that students perceive the learning context and the way they approach learning affects their learning outcomes, and secondly, student-teacher concepts of what constitutes good teaching often differ (Gijbels & Dochy 2006; Reid & Johnson 1999). A useful definition of engagement is proposed by

Coates (2006, p.5), where student engagement is defined as "an individual's involvement with the educationally relevant activities and conditions that are instrumental to their learning." It will be argued that feedback is an integral part of teaching because of the way in which it involves students in their learning.

Student preferences

The extent to which students are engaged in their studies impacts directly on the quality of their learning and their overall educational experience (see Solomonides & Martin 2008). In recent years, increasing attention has been given to assessment and instruction due largely to a growing trend by higher education institutions to adopt service orientation models (Hill 1995). As Birenbaum (2007) notes, such information not only assists higher education institutes to better serve their customers, but investigation of students' preferences for instruction and assessment is valuable for understanding a variety of other factors that drive the learning process and its outcomes. Few studies regarding student assessment preferences, especially on feedback, are available.

Some studies link student learning and testing preferences to performance differences (Phillips 1999). Others link assessment preferences to learning orientations and styles (Birenbaum 1997; Entwistle & Tait 1990; Gijbels & Dochy 2006). For example 'surface learners' have been found to prefer teaching and assessment procedures which allow them to memorise and reproduce factual contents of study materials, and 'deep learners' found to prefer courses which are intellectually challenging and where assessment procedures allow them to demonstrate their understanding (Biggs 2003; Entwistle & Tait 1990; Gijbels & Dochy 2006). Birenbaum (2007) found that students generally preferred instruction and assessment that was on the teacher-dependency side of the dimension of learning. Other studies point to differences in student and teacher perceptions. Deeprose and Armitage (2004) found that tutors failed to recognise the positive impact that their assessment feedback was having upon students. Reid and Johnston (1999) similarly discovered that perceptions of what constitutes good teaching differ between students and academics. In another study by Solomonides and Martin (2008) on expectations of student engagement, tutors' conceptualisations were found to be based more in cognitive frameworks, whereas students had a strong emotive or affective perspective, that is, they needed to feel that they were engaged in the context of their learning and that it was meaningful in some way.

The previous study

In a study by Rowe and Wood (2008a), undergraduate and postgraduate students were invited to attend focus groups and individual interviews. A thematic approach was used to explore student perceptions of feedback. In line with previous research (Hyland 2000; Weaver 2006), the authors found students valued feedback and were aware of its importance to improved learning outcomes. A survey based on themes identified in the focus groups and literature was distributed to almost one thousand students at two universities. Factor analyses revealed that all feedback measures (Type of Feedback, Perceptions of Feedback, Value of Feedback, Preferences for Feedback) could be summarised by one dimension with the exception of preferences which needed two (Rowe & Wood2008b).

The characteristics of the two preference dimensions identified (Pref A and Pref B), appeared to reflect two learning approaches (surface and deep) as conceptualised by Biggs (2003) and others (Entwistle & Tait 1990; Gijbels & Dochy 2006). Pref A appears to reflect a 'deep' learning approach where the preferred approach is to engage meaningfully in learning that enhances students understanding of the material (see Table 1). Students who score highly on this dimension prefer feedback that allows them to understand the material and welcome the opportunity to engage with the lecturer. Perhaps this reflects a more self-regulated approach to learning (Birenbaum 2007). The Pref B dimension appears to fit the category of a 'surface' learning approach, where the preferred approach is to meet course requirements with minimum effort. Students with high scores on this dimension prefer positive feedback which gives them the answers and dislike class participation. Perhaps these students could be viewed as falling into the teacher-dependent category (Birenbaum 2007). The findings suggest a link between student feedback preferences and learning approaches, which fits in with previous studies (Birenbaum 1997; Entwistle & Tait 1990; Gijbels & Dochy 2006) that have identified relationships between learning strategies and assessment preferences. It also fits in with theoretical developments suggesting links between engagement and learning orientations (see Solomonides & Martin 2008). Rowe and Wood (2008b) concluded that the provision of good practice was more important than accounting for individual differences, and that clearly communicated feedback should work successfully across all demographic groups.

Feedback

While one of the overall objectives of the current study was to investigate students' perceptions of feedback, a comparison of students' conceptualizations of feedback and research definitions is useful for refining teaching methods. For the purpose of this paper Hattie and Timperley's (2007, p.81) definition will be adopted. Hattie and Timperly (2007) conceptualise feedback as:

> *information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding…feedback is thus a "consequence of performance."*

Few studies have focused on student perceptions or preferences for feedback. Available research suggests that feedback is most effective when provided soon after task performance, is presented in a manner sensitive to the students' learning styles, clearly identifies strengths and weaknesses, has suggestions for improvements, and is constructive and motivating (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Parikh, McReelis & Hodges 2001).

Research questions

This paper will provide analyses on the demographic variables (program of enrolment, student's country of origin and age) to investigate whether they impact on feedback measures. It will also look at the amount and type of feedback that students are receiving. Further exploration will be undertaken to identify other predictors of student preferences, besides demographic ones.

Method

Participants were 883 undergraduate and 83 postgraduate students enrolled in a range of disciplines at Macquarie University and the University of Canberra. A questionnaire was developed using themes extracted from focus groups and individual interviews. Using a randomised block design, the survey was administered to students from weeks two until weeks nine of semester two, 2007. Details of the full procedure and survey are available in Rowe and Wood (2008b).

Results

Reliability

The reliability of each feedback scale in the survey was tested. Most reported good internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha coefficients as follows; α=.76 (Preferences for Feedback), α=.80 (Type of Feedback), α=.75 (Perceptions of Feedback), α=.54 (Value of Feedback). The lower reliability estimate obtained for the Value of Feedback is likely due to the smaller number of items (five) in that scale.

Important items in the questionnaire

The following table presents a list of the items in each feedback subscale which obtained a mean score equal to or greater than four.

Table 1: Important items in the feedback scales

Value of Feedback	Perceptions of Feedback	Preferences for Feedback A	Preferences for Feedback B
I always collect my assignments	Feedback tells me what I need to do to improve my performance	General feedback in class helps me to learn independently	I prefer it when tutors just give us the answers
Feedback is important to me	I deserve feedback when I put so much effort in	I like it when tutors guide us to work out the answers ourselves	The grade is more important to my learning than feedback
I always read the feedback on my assignments	Feedback tells me what the expectations of the tutor are	I learn better when the lecturer encourages me to think deeply about the subject matter	I don't like it when teaching staff encourage questions in class because it wastes time
I use feedback to improve my results		It is more important for me to see the reason why I received a particular grade than to know how other students went	Feedback is only useful when it is positive

Student conceptualisations of feedback were varied, and responses to the open ended question which asked students why feedback was important emphasises this point. While the majority of students commented on the role of feedback in assisting to improve their performance by pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, many highlighted its emotional importance. The following comments were some common responses:

It is the way you communicate with both lecturer and tutor

It motivates and encourages students

[it is] respect

It's integral to the learning process

Such comments reveal conceptual differences between students' understanding of feedback and those proposed by contemporary educational literature (e.g. Hattie and Timperley's definition of feedback). When asked to provide suggestions about how the faculty could improve the provision of feedback, the majority of students requested more face to face individual feedback, although a large proportion also requested additional individual written feedback via the online learning forum. Overall requests were for the provision of feedback to be more personalised, in order to improve communication between students and academics. It is interesting to note that several students linked communication with perceptions of teacher care, as indicated by the following comment made by an international student; "both the lecturers and me [sic] care about the subject [and] that's [feedback] a way of communication between us."

What type of feedback are students receiving?

Students were asked to rate how often they received the following types of feedback; no feedback, grades, individual written comments, group verbal feedback, group written comments, individual verbal feedback, peer feedback and self-assessment on a five point Likert scale with numerical points of reference (0%, 25%, 50%, 75% and 100%). This method was adapted from Parikh et al's (2001) feedback survey of American medical students. The majority of students say they are receiving feedback, although 14% of students said they received none or rarely received any feedback. Group verbal feedback was found to be more common than written feedback (86%), however group written comments (79%) and self-assessment (79%) were also common. Approximately 50% of students reported that they either received none or rarely received individual verbal feedback from tutors, and 45% of students did not or rarely received individual written comments on assignments. Peer feedback (73%) was reported to be the least common feedback provided.

Demographic variables

Although the majority of demographic variables failed to emerge as significant predictors of feedback measures, those variables not previously reported were analysed to see if there were any significant differences with respect to program of enrolment, age and birth country. Program of enrolment was divided into four groups of students: i) accounting, actuarial studies and finance, ii) economics, business, human resource management and management, iii) commerce, iv) statistics, information technology, engineering, arts and science (refer to Table 2 for means and standard deviations). The results indicated that

students enrolled in the fourth group of programs were significantly more satisfied with the amount and type of feedback they were receiving than students enrolled in other programs $F(3,892)=6.34$, $p<.001$. Business, economics and management students were the least satisfied. Program of enrolment was not found to significantly affect any other feedback measures.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for program of enrolment

	Program of Enrolment			
Feedback Scale	**Group 1**	**Group 2**	**Group 3**	**Group 4**
Type of Feedback	3.42 (.544)*	3.31 (.527)*	3.49 (.459)*	3.54 (.483)*
Perceptions of Feedback	3.54 (.456)	3.60 (.374)	3.62 (.399)	3.61 (.399)
Value of Feedback	3.85 (.525)	3.82 (.523)	3.90 (.440)	3.94 (.472)
Preference A	3.74 (.467)	3.73 (.393)	3.78 (.379)	3.80 (.346)
Preference B	3.06 (.537)	3.11 (.467)	3.11 (.490)	3.09 (.496)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.
* Indicates significance at .001 level

Age was divided into two groups; school leavers (17-24 years) and mature age students (25 years and older). An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare all feedback measures for the school leavers and mature age student groups. Mature age students were significantly more satisfied with the type and amount of feedback they were receiving than younger students, $t(955)=-2.23$, $p<.05$ (means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3). Perhaps this is because younger students make up a higher proportion of enrolments in first and second year courses where student:staff ratios are much higher. These two age groups did not differ significantly on any other feedback measures.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations for age

	Age	
Feedback Scale	**School Leavers**	**Mature Age**
Type of Feedback	3.41 (.516)**	3.52 (.521)**
Perceptions of Feedback	3.58 (.427)	3.62 (.416)
Value of Feedback	3.85 (.508)	3.93 (.466)
Preference A	3.75 (.423)	3.77 (.397)
Preference B	3.07 (.501)	3.15 (.528)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.
** Indicates significance at .05 level

Similarly, birth country was divided into three groups; i) Australia, ii) China and Hong Kong and iii) Other, which included all remaining countries. China/HK was included as its own group because of the large number of students with a Chinese background

(almost 21%). A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate differences between the three groups across all feedback measures (refer to Table 4 for means and standard deviations). A statistically significant difference was found between the groups on the following measures: Type of Feedback, $F(2,934)=9.29$, $p<.0001$; the value feedback, $F(2,934)=1.67$, $p<.05$ and preferences for feedback (Pref B only), $F(2, 934)=6.3$, $p<.001$. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that students from the China/Hong Kong group were more satisfied than Australian students with the feedback they were receiving, and students from remaining countries were more satisfied than Australian students. Australian students were found to value feedback more than students from China/Hong Kong; however, students from the remaining countries group obtained a higher rating on the value scale. Australian students were more likely to have higher scores on the Pref B dimension, followed by the remaining countries group and China/Hong Kong. No significant differences were found between countries for any of the other feedback measures. Generally group means only differed by one or two values in a decimal place, so it is likely they emerged as significant because of the large number of subjects.

Table 4: Means and standard deviations for birth country

	Birth Country		
Feedback Scale	**Australia**	**China & Hong Kong**	**Other**
Type of Feedback	3.34 (.513)*	3.56 (.525)*	3.50 (.451)*
Perceptions of Feedback	3.59 (.409)	3.57 (.422)	3.60 (.423)
Value of Feedback	3.88 (.514)**	3.80 (.509)**	3.90 (.468)**
Preference A	3.75 (.424)	3.75 (.408)	3.75 (.431)
Preference B	3.15 (.496)*	2.96 (.506)*	3.07 (.510)*

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.
* Indicates significance at .001
** Indicates significance at .05 level

Predictors of feedback preference

Preference group data were analysed by multiple regression, using demographic variables, value of feedback and perceptions of feedback as regressors. The regression was a better fit than that of the previous study, particularly for Pref A ($R^2 = 46.9\%$). The variables again failed to explain much of the variance for Pref B ($R^2 = 6.2\%$). The extent to which students value feedback and their perceptions of feedback (each with $p<.001$) were found to be the best predictors of Pref A. For Pref B, both the value of feedback ($p<.05$) and preferences for feedback ($p<.001$) were again found to be the best predictors. It is interesting to note that for this preference group, gender, enrolment type, and language ($p=.01$, .0007, .02 respectively) also emerged as significant predictors. Overall these results suggest that student perceptions and the extent to which student's value feedback are much stronger predictors of feedback preferences (particularly for the first preference dimension) than are the demographic variables.

Discussion

Summary of findings and previous literature

All of the feedback measures, developed from themes identified in focus groups and from the literature, were found to have good internal reliability, with the exception of one which had a smaller number of items. Surprisingly, one quarter of students surveyed said that they received none or rarely received any feedback. This suggests much improvement is needed in the provision of feedback; however, given that student conceptualisations of feedback were so varied, it may be that students sometimes fail to recognise feedback when they receive it. Deeprose and Armitage (2004) found differences in student and teacher perceptions of feedback, although they did not specifically look at perceptions of the amount of feedback being provided. Group verbal feedback was perceived to be more common than written feedback; however, group written comments and self-assessment were also common types of feedback provided. Approximately fifty percent of students perceived that they either received none or rarely received individual verbal feedback from tutors, and nearly the same proportion of students reported they did not or rarely received individual written comments on assignments. The wide variety of perceptions of feedback held by students was not explained well by demographic variables.

Using the two preference dimensions, a combination of statistical analyses were used to determine which, if any, relationships were present between demographic variables and the feedback measures. Very few significant differences were found within any of the demographic variables; those identified were small, and possibly present because of the large sample size. It is interesting that feedback preferences for Australian students are more characteristic of a surface approach to learning than are those for international students. This finding went against expectations.

Our results both from focus groups and the survey indicate that students want more engagement from teaching staff. A large proportion of students are either not receiving any feedback or at the very least perceive that they are not receiving any individual feedback (verbal or written). These results are likely explanations of why feedback results are the lowest in the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). As noted previously, there have been reported differences in conceptualisations of engagement between lecturers and students, the provision of assessment feedback, and ideas about what constitutes good teaching. Such studies demonstrate the importance of considering the viewpoints of both students and academics. Students' perceptions and preferences for feedback reflect their ideas about engagement, and as Solomonides and Martin (2008) note, are important because many academics often place too much emphasis on students' background, when it is students' perceptions that will have the greatest influence on their learning outcomes. A limitation of the study was that only student perceptions and preferences were surveyed. Perceptions of teaching staff would need to be considered to build a complete picture of the learning context.

Conclusions

Our study investigated students' perceptions of feedback, and they were given an opportunity to reflect on the importance of feedback in their learning. Responses obtained clearly showed that improvements in the way feedback is communicated by academic staff would increase quality of the student experience. With resource constraints on staff it may never be possible to enact this suggestion, nevertheless as Hyland (2000) notes, exploring ways to improve the quality and effectiveness of feedback highlights the need to develop a much deeper dialogue with students about their learning. Feedback forms one dimension of engagement, and is integral to the learning process; the way students perceive the learning context and the way they approach learning affects their learning outcomes.

The role of staff in facilitating engagement is crucial. The results from both the focus groups and survey indicate that students want more engagement from teaching staff; specifically they want the provision of feedback to be made more personalised. The emotional component of engagement may be a factor that explains some of the variability in the preference dimensions. Future research could explore this dimension of student learning, particularly in the context of learning orientations, as well as student/teacher conceptualisations of engagement. Results of the study raise questions about the influence of type and quality of feedback on variables such as the extent to which it encourages students to reflect on their performance. A question to ask would be whether they engage with their course content in a deep or surface way depending on the type of feedback provided. It may be conjectured that lack of personalised critical individual feedback is encouraging a surface approach. The importance of feedback may be crucial in helping students reflect on their own learning.

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