

# Chapter 3

## Assessment Feedback in Higher Education—Cross-cultural Perspective



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**Abstract** Designing assessment is a creative work that relies on academics' knowledge, experiences and availability of time. Similarly, constructing assessment feedback is an art that is acquired with knowledge, experience and ability to be reflective on part of the academic. This chapter presents academic staffs' reflection on experiences and perception on receiving and providing feedback in a cross-cultural higher education context. Faculty involved in teaching social work education to undergraduates in an Asian and Western country is uniquely positioned to reflect upon assessment feedback and draw upon experiences and scholarship across two distinct cultures with a view to advance best practice. The feedback practices of staffs' are presented that are shaped by both negative and positive experiences of students, institutional limitations, demands on teaching and learning and relationship with students and colleagues. Furthermore, constraints and challenges present in the higher education system across two cultures shaping assessment feedback practices are addressed with tools and mechanisms needed to facilitate the change process. Lastly, value of involvement of key stakeholders including students, teachers, academic leaders, policy administrators, family and parents in shaping academics' assessment feedback strategies in higher educational context is emphasized.

**Keywords** Assessment · Feedback · Social work · Higher education · Teaching and learning · Reflexive practice

### Introduction

Globally, the higher education sector is focusing on student engagement with learning as a major aim of the teaching and learning arrangements organized by the Universities (Zepke & Leach, 2010). However, Universities do not confirm to the same standards and practices both globally and nationally. There are variations in academic standards, support and resources to accomplish the desired goal of

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student engagement in learning. Multiple factors interact to enhance student engagement or disengagement with learning. Higher education academics have considered directing student learning and enabling them to meet the course objectives as one of the purposes of their engagement with student learning. Three components interact to influence students' engagement in learning, these are students themselves, teachers and institution. While the interaction of all three elements remains vital, students' willingness and intrinsic motivation is considered high in student engagement (Chapman, 2003; Schuetz, 2008). There are many tasks and activities that need to be fulfilled by teachers to assist students in their learning. Designing assessments and providing feedback on student's performance on academic tasks are regarded as an important task that teachers need to fulfil if they have to help students achieve their goal of learning. While some researchers place students at the centre of learning as who interacts with the course content, internalize and interpret feedback and make sense of the learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), others regard teachers as main influence who design assessment of learning and engage students through assessment feedback (Kuh, 2001). 'The feedback process is to help students develop the ability to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own learning' (Nicol, 2010, p, 504). Besides teachers, institutional support and provision of opportunities both for staff and students form an integral part of student engagement.

## Assessment Feedback

Designing assessment is a creative work and relies on academics' knowledge, experiences and availability of time. Similarly, constructing assessment feedback is an art that is acquired with knowledge, experience and ability to be reflective on part of the academic. The benefits of feedback for students' learning are well recognized in the literature. However, what constitutes good feedback or bad feedback is a matter that can be interpreted differently. There is though a consensus that broadly functions of feedback could be 'evaluative' of performance for a given task and 'educative' facilitating growth and development by highlighting how improvements can be achieved (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Different elements of effective feedback include diagnostic feedback that intends to identify performance gap, constructive or positive remarks to facilitate further development and growth, timely and fair feedback. Thus, 'timing, frequency, quantity and externally judged quality' are not in themselves sufficient to judge the effectiveness of feedback (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010, p. 287). Price et al. (2010) also discuss the importance of relational aspect to feedback, where staff and students' relationship influences how feedback is received. Another component of effective feedback is credibility of staff member giving feedback (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Similarly, both staff and students need to have an understanding of the purpose of feedback for it to remain effective (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2005). Moreover, students' and staffs' perception of 'quality' of work needs to be similar for the effectiveness of feedback (Sadler, 1989). Contrary to good feedback, a number of factors categorize poor feedback such as feedback that

is having negative tone in writing or in oral communication, ambiguous, not given timely and unrelated to the context and set criteria (Huxham, 2007). Poor feedback becomes ineffective and does not contribute to students' engagement with learning. Seminal work of Sadler (2010, p. 537) puts emphasis on 'how students perceive and interpret feedback is consistent with focus on student-centred learning'. Overall an effective feedback does contribute to student learning and engagement with learning.

## Value of Feedback in Engaging Students

Though the literature confirms value of assessment feedback, staff and students may value feedback differently. A study conducted by Goel and Ellis (2011, 2013) draws on the perception of students and staff on feedback in social work program. The study revealed that feedback was something "sought after" by students, however, if it was not of a type valued by students' they were less likely to learn from it. Students mentioned that feedback needed to show how well they were performing, their level of "conceptual clarity" and understanding of the topic, and ability to "apply that theory into practice". The participating faculty members in the study conceptualized feedback as "constructive criticism" and "performance judgement" on a variety of course-related activities and not just assessments. Thus, a broader scope of feedback beyond the written assessment work was recognized and valued by the teaching faculty.

Students' regarded feedback as "information aimed at enhancing learning" which recognizes the 'feedforward' function of feedback emphasized in the literature. Largely, there was an agreement on the following functions of feedback: "correction of errors, identification of gaps in knowledge, guidance to improve academic writing, judges' level of achievement against the marking criteria, encourages me to do better in the future" (Goel & Ellis, 2011, p. 101). Feedback as written comments on assessments was highly valued by students as it fulfilled the above-mentioned functions for them. 'Although verbal feedback was considered good for clarifying things and developing 'in-depth understanding of the subject', written feedback could be referred to when doing the next assignment and so used more easily as a basis for improving performance. Nevertheless, for people with auditory learning preferences, verbal feedback met their needs' (Goel & Ellis, 2011, p. 101). From students' perspective, it is important that they receive constructive feedback as it ascertains growth and development in further learning. It was well depicted in this quote from students.

While I see the value in [negative feedback surrounding improvements], I believe students would have more motivation if tutors would include positive feedback as well as what could be improved. (Goel & Ellis, 2011, p. 101)

Besides negative feedback, incongruence in grade and feedback; inconsistency in marking pointed towards differing standards for marking and conception of criteria in a course.

Universities are employing large number of casual staffs to complete marking and assess students' work. This may leave scope to inconsistency in marking and feedback if not moderated for fairness and consistency. The concept of what constitutes 'quality' may differ across the teaching community. Some of these concerns on 'quality' are addressable by having University wide standards to guide assessment and feedback. This could also be communicated across the teaching community through open channels of communication that are consistent (Rust, 2002, as cited in Rae & Cochrane 2008, p. 227). In spite of the value accorded to feedback and spending time and effort to provide constructive feedback to students, teaching staff also reported being frustrated when they observed that students only looked at the grade and not took feedback onboard to improve future assignments (Goel & Ellis, 2013). This uncertainty about students' engagement with feedback is also reported in other studies (Bevan, Badge, Cann, Willmott, & Scott, 2008; Rust, 2002). Feedback literacy is a term used in the literature to overcome the issue of students' focus on marks and grades only. If students are educated to the purpose of feedback and ways of using it for further learning, then chances are greater that they will engage with the feedback (Sutton, 2012).

## How to Provide Effective Feedback

Incorporating these '**Feedback functions**' (Orsmond & Merry, 2011) in our feedback practice will enhance student engagement with feedback and learning. Teachers can keep a checklist while providing feedback. A suggested checklist is as follows:

1. Identifying errors (diagnostic function) is one way to point out what is against the assessment criteria. Students might not address the assessment question or there might be grammatical errors, lack of logic and coherence in sentence formation, formatting issues, etc. Teachers can identify these in the script so as the student can take corrective action.
2. Correcting errors is another task performed by the teacher. Students need further guidance as how to write sentences logically and coherently. An example as part of feedback will assist students to learn how to overcome the errors that they may continue without having guidance to correct it.
3. Giving praise (setting positive emotional tone): Students deserve to know what they have done well so it could be strengthened. Positive remarks motivate to do better in next assessment. Negative tone can dissuade students from performing and can impact emotionally.
4. Explaining misunderstanding: An answer could be wrong if the question is misunderstood. Clarifying any misunderstanding is a vital function of feedback.
5. Demonstrating correct practice: Students benefit by seeing examples of correct practice/work. This is achievable by providing exemplars in advance to demonstrate correct practices.

6. Engaging student in thinking (questioning): Raising questions in the assessment marking could force students to think beyond what they have considered in their response to question.
7. Suggesting further studies: Teachers can suggest further readings, key authors who have written on that topic and provide links to resources. Students will then appreciate guidance as to support them to learn.
8. Justifying grades wherever necessary: Summary comments on feedback sheet generally put forth a justification of grade/mark.
9. Suggesting approaches to future assignment: Alluding students to how they could achieve higher performance in future assessments.

## Other Useful Strategies

Having a **dialogue** with students on feedback at different points:

- Teach students how to prepare for getting good feedback, by checking the requirements of the assignment and the mark sheet criteria.
- Stress to students that it is essential to read their feedback.
- Use class time explicitly for review of feedback.
- Remind students of how they can learn from feedback.
- Talk about transferability.
- Having a dialogue specially with those who are at lower end grade.
- Providing an opportunity to have discussion on feedback if they desire to.
- Using audio-feedback (preparing MP3 files or using Ech360 to give presentation feedback).

To ensure students **act** on feedback:

1. Sustainable feedback practice through two stage assessment or multistaged tasks—portfolios, projects and integrated tasks (refer Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011).
2. Checking and linking further assessments to see whether they had acted on it or not—strategies—rewarding, appreciating and acknowledging their act on feedback.
3. Combination of formative and summative assessment.
4. Including reflection on learning in either assessment/presentation, class participation.

To ensure students have similar **quality framework**;

- Use exemplars of performance or achievement, for example, excerpts of model answers, self-assessment quiz to be completed by students. Using previous assessments pieces (HD, D, C, P).
- Writing up something on your own.
- Using Web-based resources: such as an example of report, portfolio and essay.

- Explain what critical analysis means and define the terminology used in assessment criteria.

To provide **fast and rapid feedback**:

- Strategy-multiple choice questions test items
- Computer-based practice test before an exam.

## **Educational Context and Practice Across Australia and India**

How feedback is incorporated in an Australian University and in an Indian University will rest on educational context, practices and institutional policies. Australian Universities by and large are federally funded and have had national bodies that promote and enhance development of teaching scholarship. Formerly known as 'Office of the Learning and Teaching' (OLT) led the way to improve teaching and learning practices across Australia. This body is now being incorporated in the Department of education and continues to develop scholarship on teaching through funding. Through national level project funding, it promotes research and dissemination of models and strategies that improve teaching and learning practices within Australia. Moreover, Universities have their own teaching and learning units, academic developers, online designers to assist teaching faculty in designing, conceptualizing and developing current, innovative and creative teaching techniques. A great focus is being lent on digital learning, and there are graduate diplomas for teaching staff to complete on digital learning. Regular workshops, trainings and peer group meetings are held to create the culture of sharing best teaching practices across disciplines in the Universities. With an exemplary support and encouragement through recognition of best teaching practices, staff is encouraged to do research in this arena and improve students' satisfaction by best teaching practices.

The higher education sector has grown tremendously in India and is ranked as the second largest sector in the world. There were 36,000 educational institutions, 30 million students and 0.70 million teachers in 2012–2013 (Varghese, 2015). There are variations in how Universities are regulated and funded, they are either centrally regulated or regulated by state board. Largely, the higher education institutions in India are centrally governed, and State Universities are funded on a state level. There are variations in resources and staffing in state and central Universities. Moreover, 'Curriculum development in the institutions of higher education in India is suffering from intellectual, systemic, ethical and professional integrity. In our experiences, we note that curriculum development is not considered as a serious academic activity and scholastic business but performed as a ritualistic ceremonial practice. A cursory look at the institutional practices and their documentary evidences clearly indicates the unfamiliarity of these institutions about curriculum and the negligence of the curriculum development processes' (Venu & Goel, 2019, p. 116). Assessment of students learning is mainly done by written examination. There are very less chances

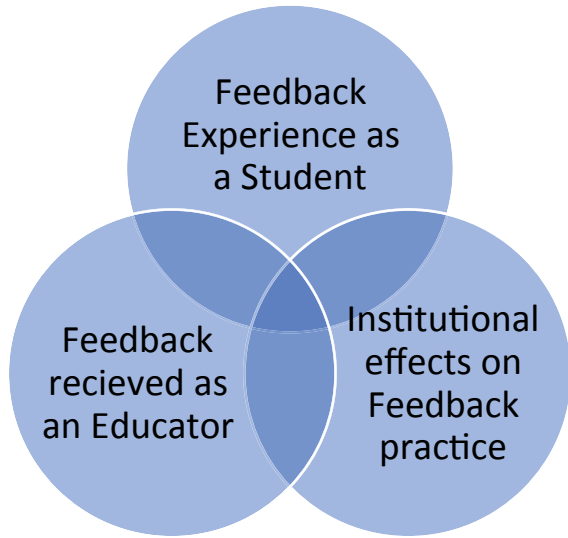
of any formative assessments and continuous assessment. This leaves students with less chances of knowing how they are progressing on a course. The onus is on the student to be proactive and raise questions if they need clarifications.

Recently, University departments in India have introduced internal assessments of 30% weightage to assess students' performance internally. Students' performance for internal assessment varies across programs. The professional educational programs plan group projects, class presentations to be assessed for internal grading whereas other disciplines might just focus on students' attendance and assign internal grades worth 30%. The remaining 70% worth of learning assessment is done by having a written exam at the completion of year or semester. The exam papers are either marked by the same teacher who taught the course, or it could be distributed across the departmental faculty to overcome the issue of bias. A mark or combination of mark and grade is given with generally ticks and cross to show what is right or wrong. Generally, no comments are provided on the written exam. The students do not get exam copy back. They can only see the marks released by the university administration. In the overall teaching and assessment regime, there is limited or no scope for feedback on performance or for future growth and development. The social work program in India has a robust field education system that has a provision of individual conference or group conference with students on field placement. This system provides an opportunity to teachers to consult, review their progress on work and guide them to apply knowledge to practice. The assessment of field education is performed by the individual teacher supervising the student. Although the field placement assessment is based on assessment of learning on a continuous basis, however, it does lack standard processes, parameters on which students' progress is measured or assessed. The relational aspect with teacher also plays an important role. Student can be awarded less marks if not having a good relationship with the teacher. The assessment system lacks transparency and puts student in a disadvantageous position. 'Positive teacher-taught relationship is a must for any healthy assessment practice, as it will help the students to stay motivated to learn more and more' (Dawson & Jha, 2019). A culture of 'distrust' is largely prevailing in Indian higher education system (Dawson & Jha, 2019). Teachers have less autonomy in making decisions about how assessment and feedback should be embedded in the curriculum, exam system is centralized as there is lack of trust on individual institutions in conducting exam processes and release of grades. Similarly, there is distrust between teacher and the student where open communication regarding performance and areas of improvement is limited and largely ignored to avoid conflicts.

## **Cross-cultural Experience on Assessment Feedback**

Feedback giving is a developmental process. Initially, teachers have practised what they had experienced as a student whether it was an undergraduate or postgraduate study experience. Gradually, their practice changed as they became experienced teachers/lectures. The institutional policies and strategic frameworks also influence

**Fig. 3.1** Feedback development as a process



how feedback practice is developed for a teaching faculty. The development of feedback process for a teaching faculty is depicted in Fig. 3.1.

### **Reflections as an Educator: Experiences from Teaching in India and in Australia**

My academic career started 24 years ago in India. My first teaching position was in a college funded by the Delhi State Government; however, for academic regulations, it was under the Delhi University. It was for the first time when a social work program at undergraduate level was started in the University of Delhi. The program itself was in its infancy with both teaching faculty including myself who was new to the teaching role. I could only draw upon my experience as a student of social work at postgraduate and M.Phil. level. The courses were taught in didactic mode with few skill labs. Field placement formed an integral part of the program from the first year. In earlier days, there were only written exams at the completion of one year. There was no internal assessment. Gradually, internal assessments were introduced giving an opportunity to assess student performance in class. However, there was not much scope to provide feedback on either performance or for development. Assessment feedback was non-existent, and it was largely a justification for marks if asked by student concerned. Power imbalance in the relationship between the teacher and the student developed fear of asking or questioning among student community.

After twelve years of teaching experience in India, I joined an Australian University on an academic position in social work in a regional campus. 'In the initial phase of my career in Australia, I realised that the teaching and learning environment was



different, challenging and equally exciting. There was more autonomy to plan and design teaching practice with a lot of support available to guide the lecturer on how to teach and assess students. I felt that there were striking differences in the teaching practices in Australia and India which warranted my attention, to areas such as transforming teaching practices from teacher-focused to student-focused, learning from the student's perspective and shifting control from teachers to students. I was asked by the University's Learning and Teaching Unit to enrol for the Graduate Certificate in Education (University Teaching) as a requirement of my service contract. This is now called the Graduate Certificate in Digital Learning. My unit head also suggested that I should do this as it would help me have better ideas on teaching practice and student learning. Although I wanted to improve my engagement with students and become a student-focused teacher, I must admit that I reluctantly enrolled in the graduate certificate in teaching as I thought it was unnecessary, time consuming and could keep me away from my own research agenda. I had never thought of how scholarship in teaching could change my teaching practice or help me become more student-focused' (Goel, 2012).

I read Boyer's seminal work on the "scholarship of teaching" (Boyer, 1997) and Ramsden's description of the "nature of good teaching" (Ramsden, 2003). A quote from Ramsden explains this: "Good teaching is open to change; it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying the instruction in the light of the evidence collected" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 98), as do Biggs and Tang, who describe "Transformative reflection" as that "which is to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be" (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 43)' (Goel, 2012).

I realized that answers to these questions were not straightforward and it required me to engage with "scholarly teaching which impacts the activity of teaching and the resulting learning" (Richlin, 2001); where I could question my teaching pedagogy, evaluate it from students' perspective and implement new strategies that are underpinned by theories of teaching and learning.

My reflections and deeper insights that came from the literature on assessment feedback affirmed that I needed to change my teaching pedagogy and make it student-focused to engage them in learning and that feedback was important in engaging students with learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Hattie, 1997; Ramaprasad, 1983; Ramsden, 2003); students could be engaged by providing effective feedback on their learning progress (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

I decided to use this opportunity for my self-growth and professional development and applied for a teaching and learning grant. The project involved all the social work faculty; the project proposed on developing effective feedback strategies in social work education. The questions to which I wanted to seek answers were students' perception of feedback and what they saw as needed changes in feedback practice; also, staff views on feedback and their practice and how they could learn from each other (Goel, 2012).

Throughout the life of this project, through my active engagement with the research process, while reflecting on my past experience with receiving feedback as a student and now as a teacher with providing feedback, I learnt more about feedback

and gained knowledge about effective feedback strategies underpinned by theories of student learning. The research process also gave voice to students' experiences with feedback. It provided not only myself but all staff members involved in this project a better understanding of the role feedback can play in student engagement. Everyone felt more valued for what have they offered to students by providing constructive feedback and they have learnt different strategies from each other. These strategies have been underpinned by theories of learning that can be implemented depending upon their course requirements. The social work team together has made a decision to incorporate a framework that includes feedback functions classification (Orsmond & Merry, 2011), having dialogue with students (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and creating sustainable feedback strategies (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011). The action research approach has given an evidence-based grounding for implementing changes in the right direction so that both teachers and students are able to benefit from research outcomes (Goel, 2012).

Recognizing the need to engage with students and engage them with learning, and my curiosity to find ways to do that, helped me focus on scholarly teaching. The graduate certificate in teaching became my platform to learn that the scholarship of teaching and learning is all about sharing, demonstrating, implementing, evaluating and learning from experience—a cycle of action research. I enjoyed becoming a teacher-researcher and gained valuable insights drawn from this process, and I knew there is much more to follow.

This further supports Ramsden's call for teaching practices to be geared towards student engagement. I also consider that not all teaching strategies will be perfect and bring desirable outcomes. It requires scholarship of teaching where a teacher can share, discuss and improve upon teaching strategies by making teaching open for peer scrutiny, students' feedback and make it more widely published (Andresen, 2000; Goel, 2012; Ramsden, 2003).

## Conclusion

Key aspects influencing feedback effectiveness incorporate involvement of all the key stakeholders in the feedback process. Institutional mechanisms, policies and investment in resources to train staff and educate students are needed to build consistent, transparent and standardized practices for feedback provision. Students' motivation, education about value of feedback and dialogue with teachers enhance its acceptability and utility. Having an opportunity to debrief or deal with emotions upon receiving feedback should be given to students through open communication and dialogue. Institutional policies could allocate hours in staff workloads not just for marking but also for a dialogue. Both academic staff and students' having similar perspective on feedback have a potential to enhance student engagement with learning.

## Note

Reflections as an educator section include authors reflection that were first published in 2012. The original article was distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](#) licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

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