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Dialogic Feed-Forward in Assessment: Pivotal to Learning but not Unproblematic

ABSTRACT

A key debate in higher education is how assessment and feedback can be constructed to maximize opportunities for meaningful student learning. In this paper, we explore how a learning-focused model of feedback, teacher-student dialogic feed-forward, is enacted in practice, exposing many affordances but also some challenges. Adopting a small-scale intensive approach, we trace the learning journeys of four students through a second-year undergraduate unit at a British university and on into their third and final year of study, accessing verbal testimony, teacher written comments on draft and final summative coursework, and student performance within and beyond the unit. We present in-depth student responses, understanding, behaviours, and achievement with respect to the feed-forward dialogue, revealing the subtleties of their reactions. Our findings evidence the transformative power of assessment dialogue on student learning for a range of achievers. Dialogic feed-forward can act as a pivotal moment in learning, where students reflect on their work, judge their standards against criteria, and co-create positive actions for improvement. Students develop cognitively, meta-cognitively, and affectively, becoming more comfortable with challenge and more productive in their learning. We conclude by widening our frame of reference to problematize dialogic feed-forward within current debates about higher education pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

learning-focused feedback, dialogic feed-forward, feedback literacy, social constructivism, case study

INTRODUCTION

A key debate in higher education is how assessment and feedback can be constructed to maximize opportunities for meaningful student learning, moving beyond certification of performance to assessment *for* and *as* learning (Carless 2019; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012; Winstone and Boud 2019). Adopting this approach requires a shift in perspective from viewing feedback as information given by the teacher about students' performance on a task to valuing it as a process of student meta-cognitive understanding (Carless 2007). This approach necessitates conscious improvement in student assessment and feedback literacies, with learners actively engaging with feedback and assuming increased responsibility for their learning (Deeley and Bovill 2017; Winstone et al. 2017). Winstone and Carless (2020) refer to this approach as a new paradigm of learning-focused feedback.

Dialogue is particularly important in the learning-focused feedback paradigm (Nicol 2010; Steen-Utheim and Wittek 2017). Dialogic feed-forward is an interactive exchange about the quality of student work. It has the potential to reduce the difficulties students encounter in appreciating teacher's written comments on their work. This is because it encourages co-creation of meaning between teacher and student or student-to-student. Through two-way communication, understanding can be shared and confusions clarified (Carless et al. 2011). Dialogic feedback thereby forms part of a social constructivist, participatory approach to assessment, which can generate a safe space for learner contribution and development (Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). As such, feedback requires affective as well as cognitive processing to be received and actioned effectively (Hill et al. 2021b).

A recent large-scale study from Australia, identifying the challenges of feedback as perceived by faculty and students, reported a desire from both groups for rich feedback modes such as face-to-face dialogue (Henderson, Ryan, and Phillips 2019). Likewise, a study of first-year students in the UK, who elected to receive their marks and feedback during a one-to-one meeting with their teacher, found the experience beneficial because of the ability to ask questions and clarify understanding (Chalmers, Mowat, and Chapman 2018). The students believed that quality dialogue about their work afforded them a better idea of how to get higher marks in the future and taught them about the intellectual approaches of higher education.

Learning-focused feedback should also be future-oriented (Carless and Boud 2018; Sadler 2010), aiming to feed-forward either by impacting upon an ongoing assignment or given post-assignment with specific direction about how this can be applied to future work (Boud and Molloy 2013; Carless 2007; Reimann, Sadler, and Sambell 2019). The aforementioned Australian study (Henderson, Ryan, and Phillips 2019) elucidated a desire by students for multiple instances of feedback on single assessments, or for feedback to come earlier in courses, to enable use of feedback on subsequent tasks. Similarly, a longitudinal study of four undergraduate students over the duration of their course in Hong Kong (Carless 2020) demonstrated the students were more appreciative of mid-semester feedback within a two-stage assessment design because there were direct opportunities for them to use teacher comments to improve their work. Such findings have led to the notion of feedback spirals, involving iterative cycles of students' tackling assignments, receiving and reflecting upon feedback, and making ongoing adjustments to their work (Carless 2019).

For feedback to encourage learner responsibility (Winstone et al. 2017), ultimately prompting students to become less reliant on teachers and more empowered to generate productive feedback for themselves, it must support the development of self-regulation (their ability to plan and monitor progress, integrating learning into future performance [Hawe and Dixon 2017]), evaluative judgement (their capacity to appreciate standards and make decisions about the quality of work in relation to these standards [Cowan 2010; Tai et al. 2018]), and student self-efficacy (belief in their capability to accomplish specific tasks [Ritchie 2016]). Dialogic feed-forward can support students to develop all of these competencies (Carless et al. 2011; Nicol 2010).

In this small-scale study, we explore how a learning-focused model of feedback is enacted in higher education practice. We present in-depth student responses, understanding, behaviours, and achievement related to a particular form of undergraduate "feedback" pedagogy: teacher-student dialogic feed-forward, where emphasis is placed on student involvement with learning through conversations with the teacher about developing work. We trace a selected group of students through a

single second-year unit (module) and on into their third and final year of study, accessing their verbal testimony, written comments made by the teacher on draft and final summative coursework, and student performance within and beyond the unit.

Our aim was to uncover the affordances and challenges presented to students by feed-forward dialogue, considering, in particular, their responses to conversations with the teacher. We focused on the students' intellectual engagement, emotions, and learning behaviours, both in-task and with respect to other units, and we considered what this meant for their self-efficacy and performance outcomes.

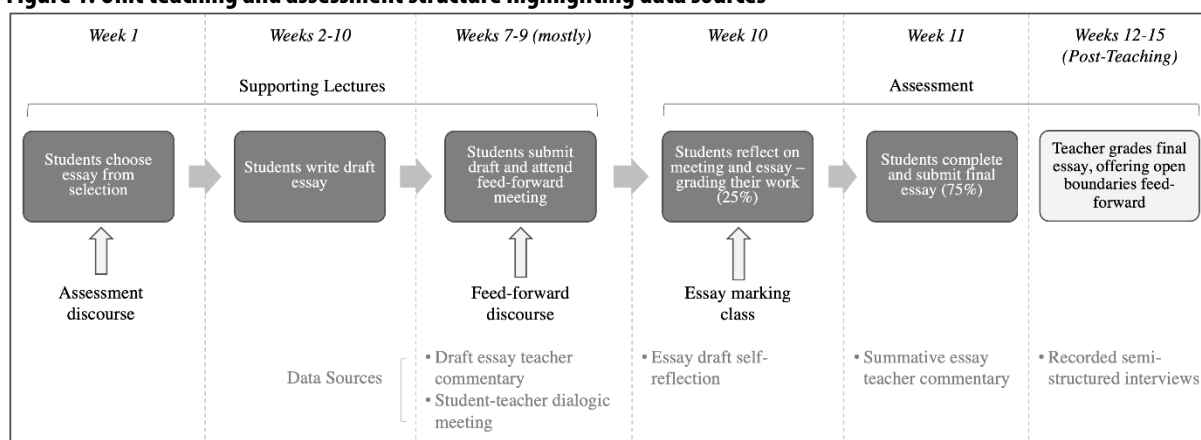
We wished to address the deficit of “comparatively few studies of how students use feedback” (Winstone and Carless 2020, 5) in an attempt to reduce the “invisibility of engagement” (Price, Handley, and Millar 2011, 882). Our narratives reveal the subtleties of students' reactions to and use of teacher feedback. More importantly, they divulge important commonalities, which evidence the transformative power of assessment dialogue on student learning for a range of achievers. In the discussion, we widen our frame of reference to problematize dialogic feed-forward within current debates about higher education pedagogy. This shift in perspective reveals challenges that accompany dialogic feed-forward, and points us towards further relevant developments for assessment and feedback practice.

METHODS

Recognizing the value of looking at individual student responses to assessment (Watson et al. 2017), we adopt a case study approach, undertaking an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project” (Simons 2009, 21). We present the personal learning journeys of four students (the subject of our case study), who engaged with dialogic feed-forward (the object of our case study) in a second-year undergraduate geography unit at a large, teaching-focused British university. We tracked longitudinally the assessment behaviours of these students within and beyond the unit. We build upon recent studies that have explored the emotional responses of a broad range of students to written feedback and their consequent reactions to dialogic feed-forward in-task using internationally diverse datasets (Hill et al. 2021b; Hill et al. 2021c).

Dialogic feed-forward approach

Running over a 12-week semester, the unit provided students with the opportunity to study ecological principles and their application to nature conservation. Students chose an essay to research from a range included in the unit handbook. The nature of the assessment was discussed in the first class. The students wrote a considered draft of their essay, which they were encouraged to discuss in an individual face-to-face meeting with the teacher at a time of their choosing, and they were subsequently able to revise their drafts before submission for summative grading (Figure 1). All students on the unit were taught and assessed by an individual experienced female teacher (20-year history in higher education), who is the first author of this paper.

Figure 1. Unit teaching and assessment structure highlighting data sources

In an effort to promote psychological safety (Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020), the teacher set the scene for honest feedback interactions, outlining the purpose of the meeting (to enable the practices that lie behind effective essay writing), and setting expectations for a dialogue focused on learning. Moreover, she aimed to position herself as an ally alongside her learners, consciously trying to demonstrate respect and empathy. The dialogic feed-forward meetings started by asking students to summarize the strengths/weaknesses of their draft, and to grade their work against the assessment criteria. Although the teacher had made written comments and noted a grade range on each draft, the students did not receive this information prior to the meeting. The teacher and student discussed how to apply appropriate knowledge and skills to the question to produce an effective answer. Students were encouraged to ask questions throughout and each meeting ended with a student-led action plan for improvement. Where key weaknesses were identified, exemplar paragraphs of previous student work were used to offer tangible illustrations of quality (Carless and Chan 2017). The meetings were audio-recorded (with student permission) to allow repeat listening (Brearley and Cullen 2012). For the students referred to here, the meetings lasted around 30 minutes.

During the unit, as students were progressing their drafts, they took part in a class in which they discussed and graded two coursework essays from previous cohorts using the assessment criteria, comparing their judgments with those of the teacher. This exercise illustrated how work demonstrates learning outcomes and standards by developing students' understanding of what quality work looks like, supporting them to self-evaluate their work in progress, and giving them confidence to engage in feed-forward dialogue with the teacher (Handley and Williams 2011).

In terms of summative assessment (Figure 1), students wrote a self-reflection of their essay progress (with a proportion of marks awarded for critical insight and questions asked about essay development during the face-to-face meeting) and graded their essay draft (25% of the unit mark). This element encouraged students to monitor the progress of their essay against the assessment criteria so they might develop it iteratively (Sadler 2010; Tai et al. 2018). A week later, students submitted their revised essays (75% of the unit mark).

Data sources

We adopted an interpretive approach as it affords an opportunity to understand emergent meanings articulated by study participants as they interact socially with subject matter (Denzin and

Lincoln 2011). In total, we accessed six sources of data for each student. We had already conducted 44 individual semi-structured interviews with students across two consecutive cohorts (2015–2017) on completion of the unit as part of a multi-year project exploring dialogic feed-forward. Student participation in these interviews was not incentivized and the response rate was 61%. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes in duration and was conducted by a research assistant who had not taught on the unit (the second author of this paper). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and manually coded and themed separately by both authors.

Thematic findings from the full set of student interviews have been reported elsewhere (Hill and West 2020). For this study, we undertook an intensive analysis of four of the 44 post-unit interview transcripts (data source 1). We purposely selected the four students based on their unit grade trajectory and final degree classification to examine the responses of learners of differing abilities and trajectories to dialogic feed-forward (Table 1). Whilst we acknowledge that using grades to define our selection simplifies a complex situation (Pitt, Bearman, and Esterhazy 2020), such data nevertheless allow us to situate the responses and performance of our selected students within the broader context of their course achievement. Our selection was also guided by including students who had undertaken a follow-up group interview at the end of their third and final year of studies, such that we could track their assessment behaviours and attitudes following the second-year dialogic intervention (see below). This left us with a small number of students to report on, who had performed to different standards on the unit and for whom we had verbal testimony about their feedback experiences during the unit and over their final year of study.

Table 1. Sample student biographies

Name	Academic disposition	Unit trajectory	Final degree classification
Jane	Motivated and confident. Attended and engaged well.	Draft essay mark mid- to high-50s. Final essay mark 78%.	First-class
Sally-Anne	Lacked confidence as she had come through a foundation degree. Attended well.	Draft essay mark low 40s. Final essay mark 66%.	First-class
Melanie	An engaged student who attended well.	Draft essay incomplete so no grade offered. Final essay mark 66%.	Upper second-class
Carolyn	Motivated but reticent to share ideas openly in class. Attended well.	Draft essay mark mid-40s. Final essay mark 60%.	Lower second-class

Notes: 1. Grades are based on the UK percentage system, which relates to degree classifications: 40% and above is a third-class pass; 50% and above is a lower second-class pass; 60% and above is an upper second-class pass; and 70% and above is a first-class pass. 2. Academic disposition is a description offered by the teacher rather than the students.

The semi-structured interview questions prompted students to evaluate the assessment and feedback approach at the end of the unit after summative grades had been returned (Figure 1). We present responses here for questions pertaining to: what the students learnt from the dialogic feed-forward process; what they subsequently did to improve their work; whether the dialogic feed-forward

changed their way of working as a student; whether they felt more confident tackling essays in future; and whether they believed they could monitor their learning better in future.

The interview transcripts were analysed deductively using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013). The two authors independently coded in relation to the students' intellectual engagement, emotions and learning behaviours, as identified in the aims. They then collaboratively agreed pertinent sub-themes.

We add depth to the interview data by referring to the recorded one-to-one student-teacher dialogic meetings that took place during the module, and the draft and final essays of the four students, with their associated teacher comments (data sources 2–4) (Figure 1). The fifth data source is the essay draft self-reflections (with self-assessed grades) submitted by these students for summative assessment shortly after the dialogic meetings as further evidence of their behaviours and actions in response to the dialogic feed-forward.

Finally, we undertook two semi-structured group interviews with the two cohorts of students at the end of their third and final year (one each in academic year 2016–2017 and 2017–2018) (not represented on Figure 1). These group interviews captured the voices of seven students who had undertaken the unit in their second year to elucidate their self-avowed final year assessment behaviours, as well as skills of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Hill and West 2020). These interviews included three of the four students examined in this study and their comments have been extracted as the sixth data source for the research. They were coded as per the individual interviews.

The project passed through institutional ethical review. In accordance with standard procedures, the students volunteered to take part, offering informed consent. They were aware that they could withdraw from the project at any time or withdraw their data from the study at a later date, without penalty, and they were assured their comments would be reported anonymously. As such, we use pseudonyms for our students throughout this manuscript.

Data limitations

The students' experiences with dialogic feed-forward were self-reported and their veracity depends on the reflective capacity and ability of the respondents to convey their experiences in an accurate and true manner. Equally, although students' own words are used to convey the meanings they subscribe to their experiences, these words are interpreted by the researchers, adding a layer of subjective filtering. The first author of this paper was also the teacher on the unit and while this allowed first-hand insight into the dialogic feed-forward process, it might have introduced unconscious bias into data interpretation. Coding and analysing with a second author (the research assistant who undertook the interviews) should have removed any strong bias (Mays and Pope 2000). Students who took part in all elements of the research were self-selecting, suggesting they were interested in exploring feedback, and drawn from a single discipline. Notably, when we cross-checked our selected respondents with the gender of the students, they were all female (from 55% total sample representation). In terms of age (18–21 years) and full-time mode of study, the students were characteristic of the cohorts. However, in the spirit of case studies, we are not presenting the experiences of our four students as proof of any research hypotheses, but rather to learn in-depth about their lived experiences (Eysenck 1976).

FINDINGS

Student 1: Jane

Teacher feedback on Jane's draft essay highlighted weaknesses at the local and global levels. Her answer was descriptive rather than evaluative and demonstrated generic knowledge. Her grade at the time was around 57%. During the face-to-face meeting, Jane acknowledged her struggle to write clearly and when she was asked to verbally explain some of the confusing statements in the draft she did so effectively. There was a disjunction at this stage between intent and execution.

In her interview with the research assistant, Jane commented that the personalized meeting, tailored to her needs and capacities, helped her to manage her emotions positively. She observed, "First of all, when I was trying to plan my essay, it was stressful. But after the one-to-one meeting, when I could see where I could make improvements, I started to enjoy it."

Jane said that producing the draft essay prompted sustained engagement with her work. She noted with respect to her research:

It was little and often over a couple of weeks ... I read literature and brought my knowledge together. Then I sent in my draft. After the meeting I spent a good day revising my work and then asked the tutor further questions before it was ready to hand in.

Jane was able to decode the teacher's written comments through active questioning, which she did well in the one-to-one meeting. She co-constructed understanding, noting in her interview, "That was the best aspect, being able to work with the lecturer. The whole discussing what's written, what it means...I can question until I understand." Key weaknesses highlighted during the meeting were taken up by Jane in her work in progress. Given the opportunity to act, she revised her work successfully. Her self-reflection highlighted her understanding of the generative process of essay production. She wrote, "Self-identification of the essay strengths and weaknesses helped me to diagnose errors and gradually improve the essay quality." She correctly identified the "large amount of descriptive text" in the draft "limiting space for in-depth case studies." She noted that she overcame this by returning to the literature and exploring the positives and negatives of her case studies.

Jane further commented in the interview with the research assistant that the reflective exercise encouraged her to judge her work against the marking criteria: "After considering the feedback conversation, and then relating it to the marking criteria, I looked at my draft another two or three times, whereas usually I just skim over it once and hand it in." She explained that she learnt in particular about higher-level cognitive processing:

What I have got out of the module is critical thinking ... I actually understand what it means now. Before, when I read it in the marking criteria, I was like oh I'm sure I've done that somewhere but didn't actually know what was being asked.

Jane asserted that she transferred this learning to other second-year units:

I approached my other courses differently. Usually in essays I just write what I learnt and add case studies, but now I bring in other people's views from the literature, and then it's not just a straight-forward answer. It's back to critical thinking.

In her self-reflection, Jane judged her near final essay as just below the first-class threshold (70%). She speculated that she might push to a first-class mark using her self-reflection as a guide. The teacher awarded a mark of 78% (high first-class pass) for Jane's final essay, referring to a "well-crafted" narrative that was "measured, cautionary and progressive," covering all aspects of the question, "with excellent conceptual grounding."

In her third-year group interview, Jane said she learnt from the feed-forward dialogue that "time really correlates with grade" and "you realize how much work has to go in to get a first-class mark." As a consequence, she commented that she managed her time in the final year in order to draft, seek feedback, and amend her work. At 76%, Jane's final year grade was the highest of her three years of study and she graduated with a first-class degree.

Student 2: Sally-Anne

The draft essay submitted by Sally-Anne was weak and close to the pass/fail boundary (40%). It was over the word limit and poorly communicated. Sally-Anne needed to reconsider her examples to focus on the question from different perspectives (building evaluative content) and to be more precise with her writing. The one-to-one meeting was very emotional as Sally-Anne was visibly upset by the teacher's comments. As a consequence, the teacher spent a lot of time empathising with Sally-Anne, sharing her emotions related to feedback. It was important in this dialogic interchange to demonstrate care and belief in Sally-Anne's capability to execute a positive course of action. To aid this process, the teacher and student jointly created an action plan, enabling Sally-Anne to feel confident about making revisions.

Unsurprisingly, in the interview with the research assistant at the end of the module, Sally-Anne noted that the dialogic feed-forward meeting had "brought her down" emotionally and she felt initially as though "there was no point in carrying on." These feelings endured and she commented that "it was a mentally challenging week." But she demonstrated resilience as she continued by saying, "but then, I couldn't really let it get to me ... you get it all out and just get on with it." She commented that she listened back to the recording of the meeting and then took each paragraph one at a time, and considered how to make the changes necessary to improve. She started with what she considered to be easier changes and then progressed to those that required substantial re-working to develop depth of argument.

In her self-reflection Sally-Anne summarized the meeting well: "After the meeting it was evident that I did not retrieve and apply sufficient information to exemplify my argument, thus the essay lacked ecological detail ... My writing style was also unclear making it difficult to follow." She delineated the steps to overcome these weaknesses in her self-reflection as: "Reconsidering my selection of examples to ensure they highlight multiple viewpoints ... the area focusing on fragmentation requires more precise ecological analysis, which I will achieve by returning to journals." These changes were enacted successfully as the teacher's comments on the final submitted draft (awarded 66%) concluded: "This is much more clear and detailed, and you link back to the question critically. Very good selection of impacts, very good range of sources giving you sound conceptual grounding, very good critical application to the question."

Sally-Anne self-assessed her essay a week before submission at 63%, citing its refined structure and more deeply exemplified ecological processes. She was able to judge her performance holistically against a set of standards similarly to the teacher.

In the research meeting it emerged that Sally-Anne had failed her A-Levels (university entry qualifications) and had taken them a second time to allow her access to the institution via a foundation degree. She therefore lacked confidence in her abilities, believing she was below the standard of her peers. She viewed the draft mark as a reminder of her struggle to truly belong at university. Yet despite the set-back of a poor draft, Sally-Anne evaluated the feedback as high quality, allowing her to “learn without penalty.” She commented further in her third-year group interview that the dialogic feed-forward process was a turning point, where she understood that learning as a process is non-linear and iterative. She realized that undertaking an active path through learning, drafting, seeking feedback, and being resilient enough to act on it, would gain her success. Sally-Anne went on to get a final-year mark of 71.3%, the highest across her learning journey. She was awarded a first-class degree at the end of her studies.

Student 3: Melanie

Melanie submitted her draft for comment when it was half written (with the second half as a plan), admitting poor time management. The teacher commented that the draft was progressing well as Melanie was making relevant points, generally exemplifying them, and linking them broadly to the question. Key points for improvement were substantiating the choice and ordering of information selected for inclusion, and surfacing the nuances hidden within the question. In the meeting, the teacher prompted Melanie to consider how to develop a clear argument supported with carefully selected case studies.

In her self-reflection, Melanie noted that she tried to adopt a methodical approach to the production of her draft; making a point and exemplifying it. Indeed, her individual paragraphs were well structured; it was the sequencing of her material in her draft that was unhelpful. Melanie also commented in her self-reflection that after the meeting she spent time revising the structure of the essay “considering in more depth which points are the most fundamental and justifying these choices.” She self-assessed her near final draft at 65%, noting that relevance of content and structure were stronger than her grounding in the literature and depth of argument.

The teacher awarded a summative mark of 66%, commenting:

You cover key factors and build up to how these interact, addressing the question head on ...

You do try to cover some of the nuances inherent in the question ... but you could go further to push into the higher critical grades.

In the interview with the research assistant, Melanie noted that the discussion in the one-to-one meeting put her “on the right path,” helping her to understand her weaknesses, and supporting her to take her draft forward with confidence and in a timely manner. She explained that the meeting engaged her actively with the teacher’s written comments: “I felt like I understood a lot more having the feedback face-to-face ... if I’m talking in person then I’m way more likely to ask questions and think about different threads of thought.”

After the meeting, Melanie recounted that she listened to the recording with her essay in front of her and took one point at a time to improve it. She said that the exemplar paragraph was “really helpful,” demonstrating how to lead into and out of a point to build a fluent argument. After making corrections

she listened back to the recording once more and compared her revised work with the assessment criteria to ascertain if she was achieving the standard she desired.

In the research interview, Melanie said that she thought the timing of the dialogue with the teacher, before summative grading, was important in prompting her to engage with her learning: “It made me engage with the module ... I saw this as like my biggest part of learning on the module.” She also recognized the transferability of her learning to other units and assessment formats, saying she had “more confidence in writing essays generally” and that “I actually did better in my exams in second semester than first semester because I understood what was expected.” Melanie additionally rated the feedback meeting positively because the one-to-one relational discussion made her feel personally valued. She noted, “it was about me and my development,” and that guided her precisely and motivated her through feeling cared about.

In her third-year group interview Melanie noted that the dialogic feed-forward process:

Absolutely helped me to realize how important feedback is...and I really used that to my advantage in the third year ... I actively sought out feedback and I think that’s the reason why I improved my work so much.

Melanie improved her average grade over the three years of her degree from 57% in year one to 64.5% in year three, completing her studies with an upper second-class degree.

Student 4: Carolyn

Carolyn’s draft essay was poor, falling within the third-class band (40–49%). The teacher’s written comments highlighted a need to cover basic content more succinctly in order to allow further critical depth. In the face-to-face meeting Carolyn acknowledged that her draft was not fully formed and that she wanted feedback to gain direction. She commented that she had planned a structure but believed she had “lost her way” during the writing. She recognized that sections needed expansion and she was able to highlight correctly some extracts of text where this was the case. She said that she had re-read the draft ahead of the meeting and had made notes for improvement. The dialogue focused on generating Carolyn’s insight into developing a good structure for her essay and enhancing its critical depth.

Teacher feedback on Carolyn’s final submitted essay (awarded 60%) noted that she had built on her first draft by including a wider range of case studies, applied more effectively to the question. The teacher wrote:

Covering a number of models and showing broad understanding of their nature, in a coherent structure linked to conservation, has gained you a bulk of marks. So, what depresses your grade? This is still somewhat descriptive and generalized ... you do not always demonstrate a depth of understanding/application.

In her self-reflection, Carolyn reported that she had worked to make her essay “more factual” and to “remove irrelevant content,” which are quite superficial changes. She additionally noted that she had compared her work against the assessment criteria (more than usual) in an effort to “think more critically,” saying:

Re-drafting multiple times is not something I usually do ... the process has resulted in me gaining a deeper understanding of the topic. Looking at the marking criteria my judgement of the final essay is that it would get a mark of 60%. I think most of the important aspects of the question have been answered and I show good selection of content.

Carolyn was able to judge the standard of her work accurately against the quality descriptors of the assessment criteria, although she also noted that “sometimes it’s quite difficult to take them into ongoing work.” There is a process of translation to be undertaken to move from understanding to application.

In the interview with the research assistant, Carolyn observed that the one-to-one meeting encouraged her to undertake more research than usual, in readiness for active conversation. She commented: “I was trying to make sure everything was there to be looked at, so I didn’t waste the meeting.”

The meeting empowered Carolyn by clarifying her progress and helping her to find direction to move forward. She noted in the interview that this process took her deeper into her work than was the case with preparing for exams: “With exam revision I spend ages trying to just remember stuff rather than getting deep into it and understanding it like I did with the essay ... with this I was learning whilst doing the assessment.”

Emotionally, Carolyn observed that receiving feedback was “hard but helpful.” She said:

I don’t always get my feedback because I’m too nervous to go and see the lecturer. But with this you’re encouraged to and that’s good ... rather than hiding from your grade, and what went well and what went wrong, you actually discuss it.

After the dialogic feed-forward meeting Carolyn revisited the audio recording and sequentially worked through her draft: “I listened to the meeting multiple times, and then went through my draft essay and made changes...” She believed that she understood the process of essay writing better because of the assessment and feedback process, and this gave her confidence with other second-year essays: “I know what I’m doing. I know how to structure better and where to go with the research ... I will make sure I do a detailed draft and then go through it with the marking scheme.” She also referred to changed behaviour with respect to alternative types of work: “For other assessments ... rather than just looking at the reading list, I go to their references and read around the subject.” These altered assessment behaviours seemed to bring some success. Her final-year mark of 55.5% was slightly higher than her second-year mark (53.9%).

REFLECTIONS

Intellectual and emotional responses of students to dialogic feed-forward

Our findings revealed the enactment of learning-focused assessment and feedback practice, where students were encouraged to seek, process, and use feedback to improve their work within task, and alter their assessment behaviours beyond task (Winstone and Carless 2020). The process of dialogic feed-forward promoted all elements of student feedback literacy to some extent; appreciating the purpose and value of feedback, making evaluative judgments, managing affect, and demonstrating volition and agency to act (Carless and Boud 2018). The students demonstrated willingness to seek out

feedback and make improvements given the opportunity to do so prior to summative grading (Sadler 2010). Importantly, there were multiple instances of the students exercising evaluative judgement, diagnosing and rectifying weaknesses in their ongoing work by comparing it against the quality descriptors in the rubric, often iteratively, supported by dialogue with the teacher. Rubrics have been highlighted as being particularly effective in supporting students to enhance their evaluative judgement of complex work (Boud, Lawson, and Thompson 2013; Tai et al. 2018). The developmental nature of drafting work, engaging in particular with teachers in dialogue, and subsequently undertaking re-drafting, was perceived by students as an active process of learning through assessment. This was contrasted by some students with high-stakes exams, which were considered as divorced from learning.

Written feedback was sometimes challenging for the students to receive, especially those with more vulnerable academic dispositions, and their emotions influenced their intellectual engagement (Ryan and Henderson 2018). Face-to-face dialogue with the teacher helped the students to manage their emotions, stimulating them to act upon the teacher's written comments. The teacher worked consciously to establish a personalized and caring learning environment, offering dialogue that was well-intentioned, receptive of student emotions, and provided guidance as to how work could be improved. She tried to demonstrate that she had her students' best interests at heart, offering them encouragement in a conscious effort to maintain or enhance their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Fong et al. 2019). Feeding forward in this low-stakes environment eased stress for students, helping some to overcome their fear of critique, because they could make good their work and learn from their weaknesses before formal grading. This renders assessment more enjoyable and ultimately successful. The emotional impact of dialogic feed-forward on students, supporting positive cognitive and affective outcomes, is detailed in Hill et al. (2021c).

Students' actions to improve work within and beyond task

Engaging in dialogic feed-forward helped the students to clarify the task requirements in terms of aims and content (e.g., ideas and analysis) and form (e.g., the structure and coherence of the text) (Vardi 2012). Students reported an improved ability to decode feedback through questioning, discussion, and verification of their revised understanding, jointly appraising the work with the teacher and identifying actions for improvement (Winstone et al. 2017). Students commented that the face-to-face dialogue engaged them actively in the feedback process, developing their skills of critical thinking, and empowering them in their learning.

The assessment dialogue prompted changes to longer term learning strategies as students transferred their positive behaviours and understanding to other units (Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). There was evidence of closing feedback loops, as teacher-student dialogue improved work and enhanced outcomes in terms of short-term actions (single-loop feedback processes) and more complex longer-term adjustments to learning strategies (double-loop feedback processes) (Carless 2019).

Impacts on students' self-efficacy, self-regulation, and performance

The teacher initiated meta-dialogue about the purpose and process of feedback. It was evident that the students were able to reflect upon and internalize the teacher's written and verbal comments. The students incorporated the comments into ongoing ways of thinking and acted productively to improve their drafts (Winstone and Carless 2020). Students self-evaluated their work by monitoring their performance against criteria (Steen-Uthheim and Wittek 2017; Tai et al. 2018). This process is part

of self-regulation (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006), and it assists students in understanding and applying feedback within and beyond individual tasks.

As a process, the teacher-student dialogue generated feedback about current understanding and task-related progress, exemplars provided insights into what was expected and what constituted quality work, and goals helped students to know where they were going. The students self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to seek out teacher feedback and accomplish similar assignments over their second and third years of study (Ritchie 2016). They were thus equipped with the self-regulatory tools and strategies that sustained their motivation and led to improved performance outcomes. Dialogic feed-forward appeared to improve the students' grades in-task and into their final year of study. Statistical examination across the full cohort has demonstrated that these changes are significant (Hill and West 2020).

Problematising dialogic feed-forward

We have highlighted numerous affordances deriving from dialogic feed-forward, as learners have engaged with and actioned the guidance given by teachers, increasing their self-efficacy and self-regulation, and securing positive outcomes. But if we adopt a broader frame of reference, we can recognise some important challenges.

We start by situating our selected students within the wider cohorts. It is noteworthy that only three students gained third-class marks (40%–49%) over the two academic years and none of these students attended a dialogic feed-forward meeting, despite encouragement. Each year, around two or three of the 36 students on the unit did not attend a meeting with the teacher. As such, it must be acknowledged that the dialogic process failed to help these reluctant (predominantly white male) students who were not prepared to engage fully with taught classes or feedback opportunities. Equally, students who presented an excellent, first-class draft (over 70%) often improved their draft only minimally. These students tended to undertake cosmetic changes to the draft (concerning presentation, spelling, grammar, and minor inaccuracies) or make token changes in response to more substantive comments (such as deepening aspects of evaluation). This was due largely to the predicted grade meeting their expectations and them not wanting to make changes that might lower the final grade. We therefore witness a ceiling to proactive improvement once grades align with aspirations and when requested changes also concern the highest standards for the assessment criteria.

We also recognize that teacher-student dialogic feed-forward is resource-intensive in terms of time. To offer practical and impactful feedback strategies, the approach needs to be designed strategically into the curriculum (Boud and Molloy 2013), possibly in the first year of study when students need to build confidence in their ability to work at degree level and come to understand their responsibility in seeking out and implementing feedback. This might mean dividing larger numbers of students amongst a greater number of teachers to undertake assessment (e.g., a ratio of 20:1). For a compulsory unit, a single staged assignment with student-teacher dialogic feed-forward might replace multiple high-stakes summative assignments, allowing students the space and time to take responsibility for their learning (Pitt, Bearman, and Esterhazy 2020), but essentially requiring comparable resource. Careful attention must be paid to resource, profiling workload across course teams, and ensuring labour-intensive dialogic feed-forward activities are used strategically early in curricula and individual teaching units. Curriculum design can then shift towards more specific guidance from the teacher, student-generated dialogue, and peer-to-peer feedback (Pitt, Bearman, and Esterhazy 2020). Examples of how to

scale up assessment and feedback dialogue within courses, while protecting teacher wellbeing, can be found in Hill et al. (2021c).

Dialogic feed-forward is a relational process, where positive and negative emotions affect students' active participation and engagement in the process (Steen-Utheim and Wittek 2017). To facilitate student learning, it is important for teachers to establish a psychologically safe learning environment (Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020), characterized by empathy and trust. This is difficult to achieve and may be why some of the students who were less engaged in the unit did not attend a meeting. They might have felt alienated from meeting with a teacher who presented a different identity to them. Such a barrier might fall beyond the scope of individual action, requiring a change in institutional culture to overcome. Once in a meeting, teachers need to be sensitive to the efforts and achievement of each of their students, using supportive words that open up possibilities for improvement of work going forward (Hill et al. 2021b). Teachers might expose their own limitations and attendant feelings to build trust through reciprocal vulnerability (Bearman and Molloy 2017). Attending to emotions is demanding and requires an additional suite of skills for teachers. As such, teachers might welcome training from educational developers to build expertise and confidence in this feedback approach.

A dialogic feed-forward approach can take students and teachers into “borderland” spaces of learning (Hill et al. 2016). In these spaces, students' traditional roles are disrupted as they are invited to move from being passive recipients of feedback to active negotiators and evaluators of their work. Moving into these spaces can be emotionally demanding, often taking students beyond their comfort zone and initiating feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and discomfort (Hill et al. 2021a). For dialogic feed-forward to work effectively in these environments, it must be prepared for carefully, such as students' marking and discussing exemplars, helping them to internalize task requirements and assessment standards. Teachers should support students to take part confidently in conversations, enabling them to question and challenge, and not feel their self-esteem is threatened (Blair and McGinty 2013).

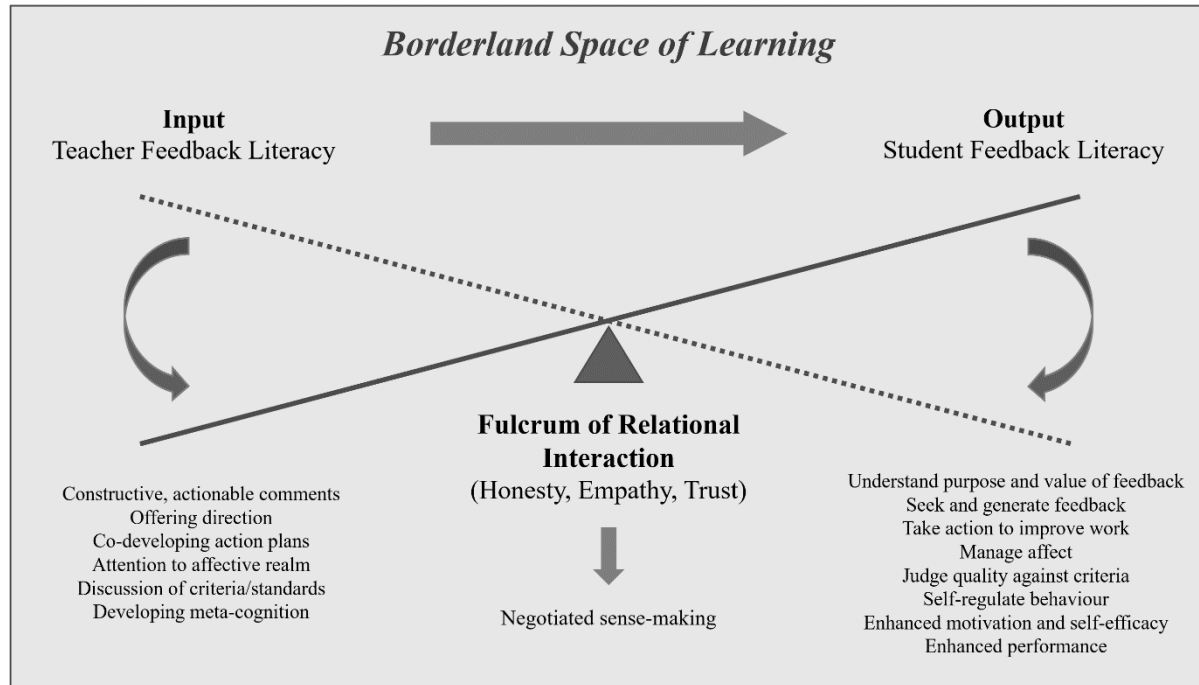
The veracity of student responses in answer to sensitive questions about assessment can be challenged. We have no mechanism to ascertain if students were responding genuinely in the dialogic feed-forward meetings with the teacher and in their self-reflections, or simply repeating what they believed the teacher wanted to hear to gain credit. To try and elicit “true” responses the individual interviews with students at the close of the unit were undertaken by a research assistant and the self-reflections were marked by the teacher after the essays were graded. Nevertheless, this leads to the more searching question of whether we are truly enabling our students to become autonomous and independent thinkers through our dialogic feed-forward process or whether we are, in fact, socializing the students into a particular way of thinking and being (Ball 2012). Is the teacher establishing personal aspects of quality through the definition and shared interpretation of assessment criteria, with the students working obediently to reflect back what the teacher values? It can be argued that we are not fostering autonomous development in students as much as we are encouraging their conformity and compliance to deliver what the teacher expects through codified assessment rubrics (Torrance 2007).

CONCLUSION

Adopting a narrow frame of reference, our results evidence that personalised dialogic feed-forward can act as a fulcrum, changing passive teacher comments, via a process of negotiated sense-

making, into outputs of active intellectual engagement, better regulated emotions, and positive student motivation, learning behaviours, and performance (Figure 2). Such meaningful connections can act as pivotal moments in learning, where students reflect on their work, judge their standards against criteria, and co-create action plans for improvement.

Figure 2. Pivotal moments in learning generated through teacher-student dialogic feed-forward



The teacher meets with a student in a safe relational space where they talk openly and honestly (Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020). Each student is met wherever they are on their journey, and they are motivated and supported to travel as far as they can. An important part of this process is the teacher giving students permission to fail, clarifying that they are not letting the teacher or themselves down by trying and falling short. As a result, students begin to work positively with productive failure (Kapur 2008). They become less afraid of admitting weaknesses as work progresses, realising there is no such thing as effortless perfection. Rather, they come to view failure as a natural and effective part of learning. This open acknowledgment of unfinishedness (Freire 1998), of the messiness that lies behind the finished draft, supports development of a growth mindset (Dweck 2006). Students come to see their assignments as work in progress, not a definitive statement of their worth. Process praise and dialogue help them to progress from a position of “stuckness” (Ellsworth 1997), unsure about what or how to improve, to come “unstuck.” Through dialogic intervention students learn to seek out teacher guidance, seeing it as a fulcrum for progress rather than a chock that arrests development due to a perception that it is too critical, emotionally challenging, or irrelevant as it comes after grading.

But we have also noted, through broadening our frame of reference, that dialogic feed-forward intervention might lead students towards intellectual mimicry, striving to satisfy the requirements of the teacher who, in turn, is working under hegemonic norms of higher education (Torrance 2017). To remain true to developing students’ independent critical consciousness, teachers might establish assessment dialogue in a manner that allows students to develop their own understanding. Teachers

might additionally allow students to create assessment rubrics through dialogue with themselves and other students (Fraile, Panadero, and Pardo 2017; Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2000) and, in later years of undergraduate study, to select the assessment type from a variety on offer within a unit, all of which meet the learning outcomes whilst supporting a diversity of learning styles. Teachers might also introduce indicators of quality that are relevant beyond easily quantifiable metrics such as emotional resilience, curiosity, and collective outcomes. Changed attitudes and behaviours in students brought about by assessment dialogue might then be transformational on a higher plane, delivering authentic intellectual enquiry and self-knowledge.

Adopting a new paradigm of learning-focused feedback might necessitate some changes to often deeply embedded beliefs and practices that characterize learning and teaching in higher education. Learning-focused feedback might call for courageous and compassionate pedagogies, which acknowledge students and teachers as whole people with emotional as well as intellectual agendas. Yet, if we adopt this approach, with a genuine desire to support student autonomy, we might provide opportunities for learning and teaching that are meaningful for students and teachers, ultimately nurturing graduates who are able to think for themselves within and beyond the higher education sector.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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