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Developing Effective Assessment Feedback: Academic buoyancy and the relational dimensions of feedback

Abstract

This research reports on the second phase of a project exploring the effectiveness of tutor to student assessment feedback. It highlights the dynamic interaction of interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts in effective feedback processes. It proposes a holistic conceptualisation of feedback that considers the academic buoyancy and attributes of the recipient, and the relationships and opportunities for dialogue with the provider and the ramifications for practice.

To explore the impact of the implementation of changes to practice suggested from phase one of the research, qualitative data were collected and analysed from student focus groups and individual interviews within a UK undergraduate education course.

Links from this phase between feedback processes, affect, tutor input and the 'Key 5' indicators of academic buoyancy emerge, revealing the importance of reciprocal relationships and dialogic interactions. This demonstrates the need to acknowledge the individuals involved and the nature of the relationships between them.

Keywords: Assessment Feedback; Assessment Literacy; Academic Buoyancy, Relationships, Dialogic interactions.

Introduction

An important and integral aspect of many education courses is the assessment process. Assessments provide a measure and judgement of performance and, as a consequence, have the likelihood of evoking an emotional impact. Alongside the assessment, feedback is often given to provide context, justification and detail of the judgement made.

With a focus on their own teaching context, an earlier phase of this research (Authors 2017), explores the way their BA Education students use tutor feedback in response to submitted assessment pieces. It indicates that the students refer to and use feedback more than tutors expected and reveals that, while the assessment process can have a profound emotional impact on students, some recover quickly whilst others find recovery more difficult. This suggests differing levels of resilience and, in particular, academic buoyancy - the ability to cope with everyday setbacks in academic life (Bouteyre, Maurel & Bernaud 2007) - and that tutors and feedback have a part to play in supporting students during these setbacks and helping them to develop their buoyancy.

Findings from this first phase study reveal five key indicators of academic buoyancy (referred to in phase 1 as 'the Big 5' but now re-labelled as 'the Key 5'¹): i) an internal locus of control; ii) understanding the grade; iii) being forward thinking; iv) being improvement focused; and v) being action oriented. There were three implications for course practice: i) explicit teaching input during taught modules on the nature and practical use of the five indicators – the 'Key 5', ii) revision of the feedback sheet to support these facets of academic buoyancy by having clear grade descriptors; including comments that focus on strengths and areas for development; and by having a space in which students reflect and formulate action points, iii) revision of personal tutor meetings to further develop buoyancy by asking students to bring their action points and be ready to discuss them.

This second phase of the research explores these changes to practice to see if they help make feedback more useful. The enhanced feedback practices were trialled over an academic year and then focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with each student year group guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Do students find input on academic buoyancy and the Key 5 indicators useful?
- 2) Do students find the following features of feedback sheets useful?
 - a. Shaded grade descriptors
 - b. Comments on strengths and areas for development
 - c. Space for student formulated action points
- 3) Do students find it helpful to discuss their action points in personal tutor meetings?

¹ To avoid confusion with the Big 5 in personality research

The paper presents the findings which support and extend previous research on academic buoyancy and feedback. Insights emerge around the influence of relationships between students and tutors and the need for dialogic interactions. Further implications for practice and course ethos are suggested that involve an acceptance and understanding of the individuals involved.

Literature Review

This section begins by exploring the notion of feedback and how, to be effective, students need to be able to understand it. It highlights the fact that it has the potential to evoke an emotional response and therefore requires a level of academic buoyancy in order to deal with these emotions in a positive manner. This underpins the first phase of the action research, the results of which are then summarised before discussing the role of student-tutor relations and opportunities for dialogue.

The Notion of Feedback

Assessment feedback may be defined as comments and grades given to students on work submitted as part of course requirements (Li & De Luca 2014) with the ultimate goal of closing the gap between actual performance and potential (Evans 2013). Despite efforts to make feedback effective, student survey results focusing on the lack of utility of feedback is illustrated by Dawson et al. (2019) and typifies the ongoing discussion in this area of research. O'Donovan, Rust & Price (2016) remind us that it is feedback *only* if it helps bridge the gap between assessed learning and the learning goal.

Although often issued to students at the same time, it is important to distinguish between the summative nature of grades and the formative potential of feedback. Grades represent a statement of the standard of work against an institution's internally published criteria. Feedback, however, is a personalised interaction between the student's work and the marker and serves several functions: commenting on what has been done well; indicating how to improve; and justifying and explaining the grade. Some studies (Mutch 2002; Orsmond, Merry & Reilling 2005; Carless 2006) find that students tend to neglect feedback and focus on the grade, with Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Parker (2017) finding that there are a number of specific barriers that inhibit students' use of feedback such as complexity of language, cognisance of how to use it, and agency. However, others (e.g. Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Authors 2017) find that students do utilise feedback and in a variety of ways. Given this formative potential of feedback, some argue that it is perhaps more pertinent to refer to it as *feedforward* (Wheatley, McInch, Fleming & Lord 2015). This idea of *feedforward* has resonance with the conclusions reached by Dawson et al. (2019) where they argue that academics need to focus students' attention on *their* action related to feedback, advocating for increased agency in students where they consider what changes *they* need to make to their learning and assignments in response to comments made.

However, in order to take action as a result of feedback, they first need to understand it and Li & De Luca (2014) note that how feedback is interpreted by students has not received much research attention and point to the need for a focus on the process of assessment and feedback with the aim of improvement for both learner and marker. Previous research by Authors (2017) highlights the need for students to be able to understand the grade, a factor of 'assessment literacy', in order to enhance engagement with feedback and its feedforward potential.

Assessment Literacy

This notion of 'assessment literacy' has been receiving attention within recent literature (Price, Rust, O'Donovan & Handley 2012; O'Donovan, Rust and Price 2016; Carless 2016; Ajjawi & Boud 2017; Denton & McIlroy 2017) and refers to students' ability to interpret assessment and feedback within the context of its purpose, assessment criteria and grading (Price, Handley and Millar 2013). This idea of 'assessment literacy' has been further developed with Carless and Boud (2018) suggesting the term student feedback literacy advocating for an increased focus on this skill which needs to be taken into account within both teaching and course design.

However, regardless of the need to focus more specifically on student feedback literacy, Authors (2017) identify that assessment and/or feedback literacy is, in itself, insufficient as emotional responses to grading and feedback can have a significant impact on a learner's ability to utilise the assessment process as a formative experience.

The Significance of Emotions

Pitt & Norton (2017), Rand (2017) and Fong et al. (2018) suggest that students' emotional response to feedback is significant as it affects how they act on assessment feedback and whether or not it leads to learning development, or is detrimental to their motivation. Sadler (2010) argues that to optimise the potential developmental aspect, learners' self-regulation of emotions needs to be supported through the use of feedback mechanisms by lecturers. Thoutenhoofd & Pirrie (2015) claim that both metacognitive and affective factors contribute to this self-regulatory development and Hattie (2012) notes that as self-regulation skills develop, motivation to engage in further learning will subsequently increase. Pitt & Norton (2017) found that emotional maturity, self-efficacy and motivation interlink and contribute to the 'internal dynamics of the feedback process' that in turn impact on how the student deals with their emotional reaction and responds to the feedback.

To help students deal with their emotional response, Allan, McKenna & Dominey (2014) argue that there needs to be a drive to develop resilience through a focus on 'resources within and surrounding the individual', citing self-efficacy and relationships with others as factors. An example of these 'resources' is explored in Carless & Boud's (2018) discussion about the potential of relationships with teaching staff to help with students' regulation of their emotional response and thus their ability to engage with the feedback. To (2016) suggests that future research should focus on an exploration of the various factors that interact to shape students' emotional response to feedback.

Academic Buoyancy

Given the centrality of emotions within the feedback process and the need to self-regulate and deal with emotional responses, academic buoyancy is a helpful construct as it refers to how learners respond to every day (low-level) setbacks and challenges within the academic environment, such as anxiety during assessments or disappointment in a grade (Martin & Marsh 2009; Martin 2013). This seems more useful and nuanced than academic resilience (Martin & Marsh 2009; Martin 2013; Collie et al. 2015) which refers to more substantial adversity and challenge that students might face, for example bereavement or more structural factors such as socioeconomic status.

Findings from phase 1 of this current piece of research reinforce the role of academic buoyancy in helping students deal with their emotional responses to feedback and identify five indicators of buoyant behaviour (The Key 5) (Authors 2017):

- (i) an internal locus of control;
- (ii) an understanding of the grade;
- (iii) being forward looking;
- (iv) being improvement focused and;
- (v) being action orientated.

They suggest that these contribute to the managing of emotions (self-regulation) and the ability to deal with and use feedback effectively.

There are synergies between these findings and Orsmond et al.'s (2013) GOALS framework which strengthens the evidence base for them, however the Key 5 are expressed as a consistent set of within-student indicators to emphasise the student's agency in the process.

Dialogic Feedback

A recent addition to the literature on the developmental nature of feedback has been around its communicative function and its potential to be part of an on-going conversation between tutor and student. Thus feedback can be viewed as contextualised dialogue (Ajjawi & Boud 2017) or a communication process (Carless 2006; Goel & Ellis 2013). This represents a shift from perceiving it as input to ‘interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified’ (Carless et al. 2011, p.397) and is situated within a socio-constructivist paradigm. It involves an awareness of the context of the feedback and a consideration of its impact on the learner (Ajjawi & Boud 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018) and is an opportunity for improved students’ understanding (Orsmond et al. 2013). Dialogic feedback has been described as a formative process of ‘feedback for learning rather than feedback on assessment’ (Hayes & Fulton 2017, p.296) and reinforces the need for students to take more of an action-orientated stance to responding to feedback advocated by Dawson et al. (2019).

The work of Yang & Carless (2013, p.293) and Steen-Utheim & Wittek (2017) also identifies the socio-affective dimension and how relationships are an important aspect of dialogic feedback. This reinforces the link between metacognitive and affective responses and the need to engage in dialogue to support the student and to help facilitate the developmental potential of feedback.

The importance of an awareness of contextual factors and their potential influence on both the practice and impact of feedback is also highlighted by Ajjawi, Molloy, Bearman & Rees (2017). Using Bronfenbrenner’s Systems model, they argue that there is a complex interplay between the different systems around the learner thus reinforcing the assertion that there is a need to recognise the individuals involved, the relationships between them and their affective state. They suggest that both marker and student awareness of these interacting factors, combined with student assessment literacy, helps to optimise the effectiveness of feedback practice.

The literature cited has highlighted that, due to the judgemental nature of assessments and feedback, they have potential to evoke an emotional response. This can affect the ability of the recipient to use it developmentally unless they are academically buoyant and able to deal with their emotions. It has also noted that feedback can more usefully be seen as part of an on-going conversation between student and tutor which is situated within the context of a relationship between them.

Aim of Research

Phase one of this practitioner research highlighted links between academic buoyancy and the ability to use feedback in a formative manner. It also revealed five indicators of academically buoyant behaviour. Given that the purpose of the research was to look for ways of making written feedback on a range of assessment types (e.g. essays, presentations and portfolios) more useful, these findings led to changes in our practice as outlined earlier.

The current phase of the research explores the impact of these changes designed to support development of academic buoyancy and improve the usefulness of feedback. In particular, we were interested in determining whether explicit input on the five indicators of academic buoyancy supported students’ use of feedback; whether the revision of feedback sheets with explicit comments on strengths and recommendations was helpful; and whether student devised action points brought to personal tutor meetings were perceived to be useful practice.

Method

Data Collection

As phase 2 of an ongoing piece of action research the study explores the impact of changes to practice by focusing on students’ reactions to them and on whether students perceive the changes affect their ability to manage disappointing feedback and grades.

Participants were all volunteers from across the three undergraduate year-groups, from a cohort of 132 BA Education Studies students, at a UK university. This cohort were all students from the UK and of mixed gender

and age, including mature. Data were collected in two stages in order to initially understand perceptions from a group perspective (Coe, Waring, Hedges & Arthur 2017) and to then gain deeper understanding from individual perspectives. Students from each year group were invited to attend one of four focus group interviews (Mason 2018) with peers at the same level and route of study. Fifteen students participated and interviews, lasting 45 minutes to 1 hour, were semi-structured, using prompts which addressed each of the areas in which changes to practice had been implemented (Appendix 1). Students from the whole cohort were then invited to individual 30 minute interviews for which eight students volunteered. Two sets of question-prompts were used to address the different experiences of students: one set for students in their second (level 5) and final year (level 6) of study, (Appendix 2) who had experienced the course both before and following the changes to practice, the other set for students in their first year of study (level 4) (Appendix 3) who had only experienced the course with the changes implemented. All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Data were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998), grounded in familiarisation by reading and re-reading the data (Taylor, DeVault & Bogdan 2015), using the framework of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). A combination of guided and open coding was included to enable the capture of aspects of the data which may not have been possible in the case of a very structured coding system. This resulted in identifying themes related to the research questions and also allowed additional themes to emerge.

An ethical approach was used ensuring participants provided informed consent within the framework of an understanding of research contribution, relationship and impact (Bradbury-Jones & Alcock 2010). This approach included an exploration with the participants of concerns about tutor authority and relationships of power, which were mitigated through a research approach of respectful practice (O’Grady 2016).

Key Findings

Data from the focus groups and the interviews were analysed together and led to the identification of six main themes. Table 1 labels these themes A – F for ease of discussion. Themes A-C referred to the research questions and themes D-F were emergent.

Table 1: Themes emerging from the qualitative responses around the notion of academic buoyancy:

<i>A</i>	<i>Impact of teaching around Big 5 indicators of academic buoyancy</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Revised Assessment Format</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Meeting with Personal Tutor</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Relationships with lecturers</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Personal Attributes</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>Suggestions for Improvement</i>

Theme A: The Impact of the Key 5

The student response indicates impact around the explicit input on the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy. Level 4 students feel that understanding the Key 5 acts as a frame of reference in appreciating processes around feedback and its potential formative use. Students at levels 5 and 6 (who had received more guidance through reading and opportunities to engage with findings from the first phase of the research) indicate greater clarity around what they need to do to develop constructive use of their feedback.

‘with the lessons about academic buoyancy, it made me a little bit more aware...’ (L4 focus group)

'I focus on.... in regards to the internal locus of control and understanding the grade in terms of... you understand why you've got that grade and then you are forward looking to improve. That's almost the process that I think I'm now going through every single time I get feedback.' (L6 interview)

'I think you should be taught how they are marked at the start of university because...it would be interesting to know how the actual individual grade is given.' (L6 focus group)

Theme B: Impact of the Revised Assessment Format

The majority of the students seem to find the revised format helps with their forward planning and provides them with a focus on improvement.

'with the format ... you understand what you need to do to improve.' (L4 focus group)

'it's very ... supportive and very forward-looking which is really good.' (L4 focus group)

'I find the sheets ... really do make it clear how your grading is worked out and what elements of your assignment you need to focus on ...' (L6 interview)

Some responses reflect the complexity of factors influencing students' responses to feedback and the significance of emotions. This highlights the importance of including positive, strengths-based comments as well as developmental ones

'this year I got a bad grade, I couldn't do any work for two days because I was just like well that was rubbish, what's the point of doing another one, but it was because the feedback was so disheartening. But after you've got through that I think it's easier to look forward and see where you need to improve on and take some steps of proofreading, steps like that so you can actually look forward ...' (L6 interview)

Theme C: Focused Meeting with Personal Tutor

Results also suggest that the majority of the respondents find the identification and discussion of action points from their feedback with their personal tutor useful for future learning. Students report that the discussions and contextualised dialogue (Ajjawi & Boud 2017) within the personal tutor meeting enable them to utilise the feedback in a more formative manner.

'I find them really helpful... talking to my tutor about it, actually discussing it ... I came away actually feeling really elated from it ... I felt really positive about it when usually I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't spoken to somebody about it.' (L4 focus group)

'the PT tutor meetings are key for getting you to be proactive, because you come out of that meeting and you think 'right, I'm going to...' (L5 focus group)

Theme D: Relationships with Lecturers

A component of the discussion around support which emerges, particularly from students at level 6, was the importance of the relationship with their tutors. The students highlight a need for the teaching team to be approachable and 'know their students' in order to facilitate maximum impact of feedback and support networks.

'you are quite approachable, all of you, so even if there was something I wasn't sure about on the feedback, I knew that I could go to my personal tutor or any of you and just say, 'Look, can you clear it up?' (L4 focus group)

'I was really upset but by having that relationship with the tutor, if you didn't have that relationship that would have disheartened me more...' (L6 focus group)

'I think that [having relationships with tutors] massively helps in terms of taking action when you get feedback' (L6 focus group)

These findings suggest that the relationship with the tutors is very important and that the students need to feel safe to go and talk to the teaching team when they need support with their feedback. The findings also indicate that because of these relationships, students are more likely to be able to manage their disappointment and engage in action orientated behaviour.

Theme E: Personal Attributes

In addition, respondents identify individual attributes of the student as having impact.

'I feel that you can only improve if you want to improve. You can be encouraged a little bit but you've got to have the determination yourself' (L4 interview)

'my feedback doesn't really help me, like if I'm disappointed, I'm disappointed. Reading my strengths and stuff, it's not going to make me feel any better...' (L4 focus group)

'when you get poor results back and there's an extensive amount of feedback on what you need to improve on, for me, personally, sometimes it can be a bit disheartening to know that there's so many things I have to look into for my next essay' (L6 focus group)

This suggests that students' own characteristics play an important role in how they respond to feedback.

Theme F: Suggestions for improvement.

As this is an action research project, ideas were invited as to how to further develop and improve practice around assessment feedback and support for academic buoyancy. A range of ideas were identified including:

- Revisit the effectiveness of the approach to teaching and learning in relation to the students' understanding of the Key 5. In discussions within focus groups and interviews they asked clarification questions such as:

'is that classed as academic buoyancy as well or is that a separate thing?' (L4 focus group)

And agreed that more support in developing buoyancy would be useful:

'I feel like when you have more support....it makes it a lot easier...' (L6 interview)

However, pointing to the need to be aware of individual context and attributes, one student stated that:

'I think support would be good, but I don't think trying to develop [teaching around the Key 5] should be a

priority. I think that it's whatever that individual wants or needs...' (L5 interview)

- Increased focus on the positives,

'it would almost be nice to have just like a bit of a one-liner at the bottom that kind of puts you back into a positive, if that makes sense, because I do dwell a little bit on the things that I've not done well.' (L6 interview)

- More dialogue around assessment and feedback,

'I didn't know whether there's potentially a way that you could make that feedback slightly two-way maybe...so that they get more of an instant like live feedback' (L6 interview)

'to have more PT meetings where we can talk about feedback... It would be better to have perhaps one, I don't know, every month because then you can actually talk about your feedback and find out what you need to improve on.' (L6 interview)

The importance of dialogue is highlighted in students' responses and a number report the need to have a discussion to help their understanding of why they got the grade. This supports a more action-orientated response alongside developing an internal locus of control.

- An increase in awareness around the assessment and marking process.

'I think this year it's more of an internal locus of control....just because of my experience in second year when I was a student rep, because I learnt a lot about the feedback process and actually how long lecturers have to mark work, whereas I would say I did blame some markers probably in first and second year, whereas this year I know that it's my work, there's nothing else anyone can do.' (L6 interview)

In summary, these findings suggest that students have responded positively to the changes in practice. Students who have experienced the input, the revised feedback sheets and the tutorial support around the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy report that they are developing academically buoyant behaviours which are helping them manage their response to feedback.

However, in addition findings indicate that students appreciate the more dialogic style (albeit still in written form, but with follow up face-to-face tutorial meetings) of the feedback process and value the relationship with their tutor. They also indicate the need to be aware of individual attributes and context and how they can affect attitude towards, and response to, assessment feedback.

This suggests that the changes made to practice alongside relationships with personal tutors and opportunities for dialogue have made a difference to student perception and action relating to academically buoyant behaviour and their subsequent ability to deal with their emotional responses to grading and feedback.

Discussion

The importance of relationships and the role of individual attributes

The findings highlight the importance of academic buoyancy in helping students understand and use feedback constructively (Winstone et al. 2017). The findings also point to relationships with tutors and the role of personal attributes of the student as being important elements in the feedback process.

While emotions were not the specific focus of this research in the same way as in the previous phase, (Authors 2017), they continue to emerge as having impact on how students react to feedback. Fong et al. (2016) indicate that it is important for tutors to understand the emotional impact of feedback and how they can endeavour to

ensure it is constructive (Pitt & Norton 2017) and it appears that the changes to practice implemented may contribute to students developing greater self-regulatory measures (Carless 2016) and thereby developing academic buoyancy (Authors 2017).

In addition, the findings also suggest that students value relationships with tutors. These relationships can be developed through dialogue relating to feedback and a more transparent assessment process (Carless & Boud, 2018). The changes to practice went some way to achieving this. However, students point to the need for these changes to be embedded further through support systems such as personal tutor meetings to increase opportunity for dialogue and trust.

It was also found that individual student attributes have a part to play in how they respond to feedback which adds to the work of Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) and Pitt & Norton (2017) who emphasise the complex interplay of self-efficacy, emotional maturity and motivation. The findings suggest that student attributes can shape how they respond to feedback, positioning the learner as a central feature in how assessment feedback is interpreted and responded to. This reinforces and extends the notion of dialogic feedback pointing to the need for personalisation where students and tutors interact through the feedback process.

The findings highlight how individual aspects of the feedback process should not be considered in isolation and that it should be recognised that relationships with tutors, clarity of the assessment process and the support structures surrounding feedback are all intertwined. This supports Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement being a psycho-social process with socio-cultural contexts and the work of Ajjawi et al. (2017) who illustrate how the assessment process needs to be considered in terms of the ecological context of the learner for it to be meaningful and effective in terms of feedforward.

Reflecting on our findings and situating them in the context of others, as mentioned above, we suggest theory surrounding assessment feedback is moving forward to include broader contextual factors in addition to assessment literacy. How students interact with their assessment and its feedback is by no means an isolated and predictable event, but personal and socially situated (Price, Handley, & Millar 2011). This clearly has implications for practice and leads to a proposed new model of academic buoyancy that incorporates these various factors.

A revised model of academic buoyancy

The findings from this phase of the research build on those from the first phase (Authors 2017), and makes two proposals as we seek to develop a model that helps us conceptualise our feedback practice.

The first is to reinterpret indicator (ii) of the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy (*understanding the grade*) as 'assessment literacy' (Price et al. 2013; O'Donovan, Rust and Price 2016; Carless 2016; Ajjawi & Boud 2017; Denton & McIlroy 2017). Reflecting further on the data from phase 1 in the light of literature, we feel that it is more apt to term this indicator assessment literacy. This more accurately and comprehensively captures the broader aspects of understanding the grade to include interpreting assessment and feedback within the context of its purpose, the assessment criteria *and* the grading.

The second is, given our findings around student attributes and the need for relationships and dialogue that build on the work of Ajjawi et al. (2017), Steen-Utheim & Wittek (2017) and Yang & Carless (2013), we propose that the 5 (revised) indicators of academic buoyancy should be underpinned by a course ethos that values and nurtures the relationship between student and tutor, provides opportunities for dialogue about work in general and feedback in particular and treats the learners as individuals, recognising their attributes. This leads to an adapted model of the 'Key 5' (revised) indicators of academic buoyancy plus 2' referring to students showing: i) an internal locus of control, ii) assessment literacy, iii) forward thinking, iv) an improvement focus, v) action orientation **plus** being situated within a course ethos that 1) values *relationships* between student and tutor and 2) provides *opportunities for dialogue* about feedback and academic progress which recognise the students' attributes and personalises the process. This should, as Ajjawi & Boud (2018) suggest, take account of the cognitive, socio-affective and structural dimensions and shift feedback from being *hopefully* useful to something that *is* useful.

The diagram below illustrates the relationship between these factors by visualising the learner remaining buoyant in the 'sea of assessments' on a 'raft' they have constructed from the Key 5 (revised) indicators of academic buoyancy, with a mast of their attributes supported by relationships and opportunities for dialogue and steered by the course ethos as they sail towards academic success.

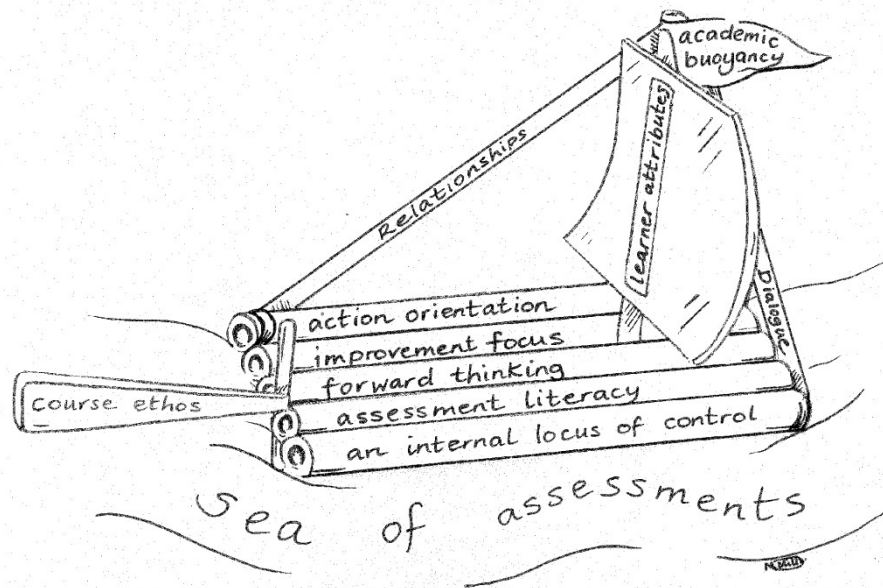


Figure 1

Academic buoyancy as a theoretical framework enables us to capture the combined importance of assessment and emotional response, the individual attributes of the student and the need for supportive structures for them around assessment feedback. The use of the concept has led to awareness of the complexity of the issues in what may have been originally considered as the everyday setbacks and hassles experienced by students which in turn has led to a more nuanced understanding of the nature and structure of the assessment and feedback process. This research, along with the first phase, serves to extend and broaden the theory of academic buoyancy to encapsulate more than perhaps its original intention as set out by Martin & Marsh (2013).

Areas for development and future research

Future research needs to explore the longitudinal impact of the introduction to the changes in practice and examine how, particularly, development of the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy may shape students' ability to manage responses to disappointing assessment results throughout their degree course. Ways to develop relationships between marker and student with a focus on the dialogic nature of the assessment process need further exploration, as does the importance and impact of individual student attributes and ways to remain mindful of the person involved.

In terms of theory in this area, this research brings together several strands of the research agenda to suggest a more complex interaction of assessment and feedback with the students and the systems designed to support them. This complex interaction should form the focus of further research to ensure that the dynamic and interactive nature of assessment and feedback is not lost.

Summary

This research highlights how changes to feedback practice in our context contribute to developing students' awareness of their own responses to feedback and how they may begin to regulate these in order to optimise the feedback for feedforward purposes. The research also highlights how the feedback process needs to be considered as a whole with attention paid to the contextual and individual factors which shape the interpretation of these processes. What results is a more sophisticated, nuanced analysis and understanding of assessment and feedback in order to ensure that feedback does indeed work towards its goal of closing the gap between actual and potential performance (Evans 2013; O'Donovan, Rust and Price 2016).

Conclusion

Given that assessments are a regular feature of higher education programmes and that the inexorable judgemental nature of them means that they can lead to disappointment and upset, it is incumbent upon educationists to explore ways that might mitigate against such distress being damaging to students' academic journeys and wellbeing. Previous research (Authors 2017), reveals the role of academic buoyancy in helping students cope with the assessment process and identifies five indicators of such buoyancy (the Key 5) with suggestions as to how tutors can help its development.

The current study finds that students find input on the indicators of academically buoyant behaviour useful. The revised feedback sheets contain clear grade descriptors against each criterion, which help students understand the grade, and include comments on strengths followed by 'recommendations' to support future actions and this was also found to be of value. Further, the students are positive about the idea of devising action points from the feedback and discussing them in personal tutor meetings. The components combined seem to support the development of academic buoyancy and thereby help students deal with disappointments that might arise.

In addition, the research leads to a further dimension which is the influence of relationships and opportunities for dialogue. It identifies how the course ethos and culture can affect attitudes and individual practices and responses to feedback. It indicates that, given the individual nature of students, each with their own attributes, the relationship between tutor and student is important as this can be nurturing and supportive and can help to personalise feedback and subsequent discussions. Thus, a recognition of the human in the system in developing academic buoyancy and exploiting the learning opportunity provided by feedback has emerged as an important aspect.

However, although the research advocates a dialogic and personal relationship between tutor and student (assessor and assessed), tensions are also present. Whilst the personalisation of feedback and ensuing discussions means it can be individually targeted, this prevents the process from being anonymised and standardised. A consequence of this is the need for students to have a clear understanding of the assessment process - accepting the professional judgements that take place and appreciating that measures are taken to ensure rigour, and for both tutors and students to be mindful of the humans involved.

As the second phase of an action research project, these results have led to further planned changes to practice: developing student understanding of academic buoyancy more regularly across the levels; highlighting the distinction between the non-personal, summative, process of grading of assessments and the personal, formative nature of feedback that takes account of individual attributes; explaining the rigour behind the grade; providing additional opportunities for dialogue around the feedback; and building relationships between tutor and student. These will be introduced in the next academic year.

This research took a small scale, action research approach and students participated on a self-selection basis. As such no claims are made as to the generalisability of the results. However, it is intended that the findings and ensuing discussion may increase understanding of assessment and feedback processes and aid reflection on current practices in other contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Focus Group Interview Prompts

L4s only

In ES4001, you have been introduced to the Big 5 Indicators of Academic Buoyancy which can help you manage your feelings when, for example, you receive a disappointing grade or are struggling in class.

Prompt: May need to have a slide up to remind students of the Big 5 during the focus group

1. What does academic buoyancy mean to you?
2. Do you think the 5 indicators of academic buoyancy are helpful in any way?
3. When you have received feedback from your recent assignments, have you reflected upon/used elements from the 5 indicators to help manage your response?

The 5 Indicators of Academic Buoyancy include:

1. Demonstrating an internal locus of control
2. Understanding the grade
3. Looking forward
4. Looking to improve
5. Being action-orientated

L4, L5 & L6s

We have revised our assessment feedback sheets this year in response to our research findings on academic buoyancy.

4. What are your thoughts about the design of the feedback sheets?
Prompt: May need to show them a sample and changes made.
5. Would you say that your feedback has helped you manage your disappointment?
6. Would you say that your feedback helped you in understanding your grade? If so, how?
7. As a result of the feedback you received did you take any action?
Prompt: did you make an appointment with the marker or your tutor? See Helpzone?
8. If you received a grade that you were disappointed with, have you thought about why that might be?
Prompt: Do you blame yourself eg didn't spend enough time on it or perhaps the lecturer was not clear, you could not get hold of the books etc.
9. To what extent do you think the revised assessment feedback helps you in planning your next assignment?

We have also been asking you to bring your feedback sheet to tutorials with you to shape the tutorial discussion

10. If you have been doing this, how have you found this to be? For example, did it help in understanding your grade? Did it help you manage how you felt?
11. Has the feedback sheet with the accompanying tutorial made any difference in terms of how you might improve next

time?

12. After your feedback and a tutorial, do you find yourself looking forward in terms of planning the next assignment or is it quite difficult to move on from the disappointing grade.

Appendix 2

Level 5 and Level 6 individual interview prompts

1. How well do you understand the grading process and the new format of feedback sheets?
2. Is the new format more helpful?
3. How do you feel about being explicitly taught about how to use your feedback so it helps you with the next assignment?
4. How equipped do you feel about actions you might take to help you improve?

We have identified the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy which are:

- 1) Demonstrating an internal locus of control
 - 2) Understanding the grade
 - 3) Looking forward
 - 4) Looking to improve
 - 5) Being action-orientated
5. How well do you think you display aspects of these?
 6. How helpful do you think it would be to receive more support in developing the above?
 7. Do you think the revised feedback sheet helps you to develop them?

Appendix 3

Level 4 individual interview prompts

This year in ES4001 Personal Development, we have introduced the concept of academic buoyancy as a way to support you in your academic development at university.

1. In what ways do you feel the introduction of this has made you aware of how you respond to setbacks and challenge eg having a disappointing grade?
2. Would you say knowledge about the Key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy have changed how you deal with such setbacks and challenge? If so, then how? If not, why not?
3. Have you reflected on the Key 5 when you received feedback from assignments?
4. If not, do you think you will in the future?

If the Key 5 have not had any impact on the student, ask:

5. How do you think we could improve how we explain academic buoyancy to help you manage setbacks and challenge?
6. What form do you think this support should take?