

## Book Review

**Boud, D. & Molloy, E. (eds.) (2013) *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education: Understanding it and Doing it Well*. London: Routledge.**

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This is one of few books devoted entirely to feedback in higher education (HE). Its interest in feedback in professional, especially clinical, education also makes it distinctive. While many books have been written about HE assessment practices, the scarcity of HE feedback texts contrasts markedly with the attention currently devoted to the subject within the university sector where student surveys indicate dissatisfaction with feedback, many academics perceive providing feedback as time-consuming, and managers may be tasked with reducing turnaround times for the provision of feedback on students' submitted work.

The book starts from the premise that the problems stated above result from current misperceptions of feedback as being simply the comments written by tutors concerning assessed work. Feedback should be viewed as a learning process rather than an academic product. Furthermore, since the current misperceptions of feedback are not helpful to students' learning, how feedback is viewed by students, academic staff and university management teams needs to change. This is powerfully argued within the book by its contributors who are well respected educational researchers. The book is timely and well-written. It is certainly not a 'how to provide good feedback' teaching guide, but the authors do provide useful ideas that can be used to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of feedback practices.

Chapters 1-6 of the book largely concern factors which influence students' and tutors' perceptions and usage of feedback events. The authors subscribe to a holistic concept of feedback encompassing students' prior preparation, the provision of feedback comments and the subsequent implementation by students of that information. If feedback is envisaged as a broader component of a learning process where the student has volition and agency, questions concerning the type and positioning of feedback comments within the curriculum, and how feedback usage is monitored take on renewed importance. Furthermore, the quality of feedback should be judged on the basis of the subsequent actions of students rather than, as it often is, on the nature of the feedback comments themselves. These initial chapters respond to the stated questions and also place the responses in the context of confounding factors such as differences in power, confidence, empathy, culture, linguistic preferences and emotion between the feedback provider and recipient; confounding factors that often lead to feedback being an unsettling experience for both parties because it challenges self-beliefs. Key outcomes from these chapters are, firstly, that there is no single recipe for feedback best practice, secondly, that we should not assume that all feedback is helpful and, thirdly, that feedback in the form of questioning leading to dialogue is likely to be more beneficial to learning than an evaluation expressed in closed final language.

Chapters 7-9 explore the different vehicles available to tutors for the provision of feedback comments. The vehicles are considered in the general context that feedback can be directed at the particular task being undertaken, the student's learning processes or the student's personal attributes. The point is made that different forms of communication are suited to the provision of particular types of feedback. Within these chapters the usage of written, internet-based and practical scenario-based feedback is unpicked and compared with verbal dialogic feedback which often occurs in the workplace. A key characteristic of traditional written feedback, be it hard copy or electronic, is that it is tangible and enduring. It benefits students because it can be easily revisited before a response is made and it is attractive to many HE and professional quality assurance schemes because it can be easily archived. It has the further advantage of being made easily confidential if required, but, it often lacks immediacy, tends in practice to be didactic rather than dialogic and, without additional dialogue, there is a relatively high chance that it will be misunderstood. Some of these obstacles can be circumvented by the use of internet-based synchronous feedback using, for example, social media or videoconferencing. In such environments misunderstandings can be swiftly rectified in dialogic exchanges and the use of the internet may also encourage students to collect additional feedback from diverse sources in a way which is reminiscent of the workplace. A less positive aspect of internet-based feedback is that it is received in settings which are largely outside the control of the tutor and this lack of control makes it more difficult for tutors to prepare students to receive the feedback messages. Practical scenario-based feedback may occur in a controlled setting and can be dialogic, but this educational approach does have the disadvantage that some highly focussed scenarios, such as those involving manikins and bench top simulators for clinical skills training, can lead to fragmentary rather than overall understanding. Scenarios involving actors are more authentic, can lead to better overall understanding and provide additional sources of feedback, but they are more challenging to organise because the actors will require training and electronic content management systems may be required to integrate the different feedback sources.

Chapters 10-12 consider sources of feedback in more detail including their value in particular situations and integration into overall messages. The chapters emphasise that in addition to tutors, peers, professional practitioners and, in some cases, patients or customers can provide valuable feedback to students. The result can be rich, multilayered information from a variety of perspectives which is reminiscent of that which occurs in the workplace. Furthermore, the multisource and authentic nature of the information makes it particularly powerful tool for challenging inappropriate or unhelpful attitudes and behaviours that are observable to different individuals. However, as with all feedback, whether recipients implement multisource information will depend on their view of its credibility and their perception of the need for change. Hence the relationship and subsequent dialogue between the recipient and their supervisor remains as a key aspect of multisource feedback implementation. Educational research has demonstrated that there are also great benefits to the feedback provider in peer feedback situations. Indeed, the provider may receive greater cognitive gains than the recipient because of the requirement to reorganise their thoughts in order to provide explanations in simple terms or to ask pertinent questions of the recipient. Furthermore, the subsequent dialogue between peer feedback recipient and provider generates an environment in which it is relatively safe to explore any deficiencies in knowledge. This is distinct from many student and tutor interactions where power differences may inhibit self-disclosure. A point also strongly emphasised is that, to be effective in their role, feedback providers require guidance and practice.

Chapter 13 is a final summary chapter which stresses the importance of effective decision making when designing feedback components of educational curricula. Feedback should be

an integral component of educational programme design rather than added as an afterthought. Appropriate decisions at the planning stage will ensure that the feedback information provided is likely to be used by students. An important message of the book is that the current problematic nature of feedback will not be circumvented by simply providing more feedback of the same kind more quickly. Since changes implemented by isolated tutors are likely to have limited impact, course managers and tutors collectively need to consider feedback as a learning process that is tested in subsequent assignments. Furthermore, while key decisions concerning the roles and positioning of feedback need to be made as part of course design, tutors do, within the overall strategy, need to be allowed a degree of flexibility to enable them to tailor their feedback to particular student cohort or individual student needs. The chapter also considers the specific dispositional changes needed to produce to a view of feedback as having a serious influence on learning. Key factors include the development of a common understanding of what feedback is amongst all stakeholders and a willingness to collect and use evidence to drive changes in teaching and learning practices.

Overall, the book seeks to emphasise the potential of feedback, not only to develop students' learning of the immediate topic, but also to facilitate students becoming *sustainable* learners. By considering and developing the role of students in implementing feedback, students become aware of the value of particular feedback instances and this has two consequences. Firstly, students become empowered to actively seek the information they require to overcome obstacles in their development and, secondly, students' self-assessment abilities are encouraged. In this way students can become lifelong learners.

The book, with the aid of some useful case studies, considers ways in which the student developments outlined above might be achieved. Firstly, as has already been noted, feedback should be considered as a system embedded at course level rather than in relation to individual assignments. Secondly, assessment tasks within a course need to be incremental and nested. Having some degree of planned overlap between subsequent tasks provides students with explicit opportunities to implement feedback and it also enables tutors to monitor the effectiveness of their feedback processes. Thirdly, tutors should provide as many opportunities as possible for students to make judgements about and comment on the quality of their peers' work and of their own work. Such peer and self-assessment will strongly supplement tutors' feedback in facilitating understanding of what high quality work entails. It also exposes students to alternative ways of tackling a task and it provides a relatively safe environment within which students can consider and recalibrate their self-beliefs of their abilities. Finally, tutors should be aware that anonymous marking makes the direct monitoring of feedback effectiveness more challenging and so may need to develop additional informal means of feedback provision. Such informal encounters can also be used to supplement tutors' efforts to encourage students in their implementation of feedback.

All of these changes require students to be placed at the centre of the feedback process rather than perceiving them as passive recipients of tutors' comments. It must be recognised that students will use their own judgements to determine how feedback is used and, with the increasing diversity of, firstly, contexts in which feedback is provided and, secondly, of students themselves, a shift away from formulaic ways of providing feedback is needed. Furthermore, after individual students have decoded feedback messages in their individual ways the meaning of the messages undergo more changes through dialogue within student social networks and communities of practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that feedback messages can be interpreted by students in ways that are difficult for tutors to anticipate. These discrepancies will continue unless tutors engage in their own dialogue with students.

The proposed changes to feedback practice are not trivial. They will require considerable negotiation amongst course teams and managers, but, it is argued, they are required if the current problematic nature of feedback in HE is to be solved.

This thought-provoking book should be read by all those concerned with the delivery of learning within HE.