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Towards dialogic feedback

Academic biography

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to provide an overview of the Academic Literacies approach which frames an understanding of the practice of feedback. Secondly, to argue that feedback must assume a central position within a dialogic approach to learning and teaching. Thirdly, to use the seven principles of good feedback practice, identified by the HEA, as a stimulus to reflection upon how feedback can become more dialogic. Throughout, questions will be raised concerning the ways in which issues of meaning, identity, and institutional power relations shape the possibility of dialogic feedback. The conclusion is that making feedback more dialogic involves engaging with both the epistemological and ontological dimensions of learning and teaching.

Key words: Feedback; academic literacy; dialogic; power; identity.

Introduction

With the move to mass higher education (HE), the increasing preoccupation with quality assurance and the burgeoning ethos of consumerism, student feedback is now acknowledged as a significant part of curriculum practice (Harvey 2003). In most HE institutions, various forms of student feedback mechanisms are in place at the institutional, faculty, and module level. Furthermore, there has been a major cultural shift within HE from teaching to

learning (Rust 2002). A greater emphasis on students actively reflecting upon feedback is an integral dimension of that change. Thus, the current preoccupation in HE with the creation of students who are reflective, autonomous learners, would suggest that the importance of acquiring the capacity to effectively use, or 'feed forward', feedback will become ever more pertinent (Brown 2007).

My concern lies in making feedback more dialogic so that it can be more effectively used by students, thereby enabling them to become more critical and reflective learners, and to improve their performance. As Higgins et al. (2001:274) suggest, focusing on feedback is necessary but not sufficient; we need to shift the emphasis of our pedagogic practice towards enabling students to effectively feed forward feedback. Facilitating this process is an integral dimension of the development of a critical and reflective pedagogy which, I argue, can fruitfully be informed by the Academic Literacies approach to learning and teaching.

1. The Academic Literacies approach

The Academic Literacies approach has been developed by Street and Lea (Street 1995, Lea & Street 1998, Lea 2004, Street 2004). In this approach, student reading and writing are viewed as a particular form of literacy, which must be acquired within particular contexts. Academic Literacies emerged from the New Literacy Studies (Gee 1990), which problematized the idea that literacy was simply a technical skill, the ability to read and write. Influenced by the work of Bakhtin and Foucault, New Literacy Studies construes literacy as a complex set of social practices (Barton et al. 2000), powerfully shaped by wider social structures, cultural processes and biographical factors.

Acquiring academic literacy, just like any other form of literacy, means that students acquire a new way of knowing the world and making sense of their experience and themselves. Thus, academic literacy has epistemological and ontological dimensions. Learning to

read and write within an academic context, therefore, involves a complex set of psychosocial processes. Therefore, the problems experienced by students trying to acquire academic literacy are not simply construed as a skills deficit or a failure to acculturate adequately to academic norms and practices. Such problems are construed as emerging from “the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation” (Street 2004:15), and from the institutional power relations within which feedback is imbricated. As Lea & Street (1998: 3) argue, the Academic Literacies approach “views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power”.

The Academic Literacies approach incorporates both the study skills and academic socialization models into a more comprehensive model of learner reading and writing in higher education (Lea & Street 1998). These three models can be summarized in the following way:

Study skills

Focus: student skills deficit.

Reading/writing as technical/instrumental skills.

Academic socialization

Focus: student orientation to learning (deep, surface, strategic, apathetic) and interpretation of assessment.

Reading/writing learned through acculturation to norms of academic practice.

Academic Literacies

Focus: institutional power relations, epistemological and ontological dimensions of learning and teaching.

Reading/writing situated, complex and contested literacy practices. (Adapted from Lea & Street 1989: 169-170).

So, feedback is a complex academic literacy practice, the acquisition of which can challenge students on a number of levels. On the level of meaning, tutors and students may interpret feedback in different ways. On the level of identity, feedback may challenge students' self knowledge.

On the level of power and authority, asymmetrical relations exist within both the seminar room and the institution. Hence, feedback possesses both micro-social and macro-social aspects. It is shaped by the face-to-face relations of learning and teaching and by university policies on assessment, employability and widening participation.

2. The centrality of feedback

My interest lies in feedback as a genre of written communication. Feedback may be defined as: “the process of providing some commentary on student work in which a teacher reacts to the ideas in print, assesses a student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggests directions for improvement” (Macdonald 1991:3).

My concern is with those conditions that either enable or prevent tutor and student entering into a meaningful and effective academic dialogue. For it is through the creation of a dialogical learning and teaching relationship that students can effectively feed forward feedback. Through the identification of strengths, weaknesses, and priorities for improvement in student assessment, and by encouraging self reflection and self evaluation, feedback has the potential to develop learning, and to motivate students to improve their performance (Case 2007). However, the relationship between the provision of feedback and the process of using feedback to improve performance is problematic. This process is overdetermined, the product of a complex web of psychosocial factors. Within that web, my focus will be on questions of meaning, identity, and power, and how these factors shape the ways that feedback is read and used.

Evidence surveyed by Falchikov (1995) suggests that significant numbers of students do not understand or act upon written feedback, and some students do not even deem it worthy enough to be read. They simply look at the grade. Duncan (2007) also argues that many students are not interested in feedback. However, Higgins et al. (2001,

2002) and Weaver (2006) suggest that most students do read feedback. This does not imply that they either understand what the tutor meant by the comments or that they are able to use, or feed forward, those comments.

The Academic Literacies approach problematises the idea that students know what feedback is and what they should do with it. A simple “receptive-transmission” model (Askew and Lodge 2000) of feedback is inadequate. Tutors do not simply transmit feedback messages concerning the strengths and weaknesses of assessment which students then receive and put into practice. Decoding feedback is a complex process which can be fraught with difficulty (Higgins et al. 2001). Indeed, students often misunderstand tutors’ feedback. Channock (2000) demonstrated that an ostensibly transparent comment, such as ‘Too much description; not enough analysis’, was rife with ambiguity and interpretive complexity for both students and tutors. For example, there was little consensus among either students or tutors about the meaning of description and analysis.

Furthermore, research suggests that students are often ill-prepared for university study by their pre-university learning, teaching and assessment experience (Lowe & Cook 2003). This indicates that we cannot assume students understand the nature and purpose of feedback in HE and how to use it most effectively. What is needed is an ‘engagement’ model (Light & Cox 2001) of feedback, that is, a model that is oriented to creating a dialogic learning and teaching relationship which enables students to understand the meaning, and internalise and act on the information constructed by tutors. However, before addressing seven principles that can inform such a dialogic model of feedback, it is first necessary to consider the question ‘what is meant by the term dialogic?’

The dialogic principle: beyond epistemology to ontology

The dialogic principle is central to the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986). Bakhtin used the term in three particular and related ways. Firstly, to refer to a process of shared enquiry that involves an endless posing and answering of questions. The term dialogic does not simply refer to the general dialogues people conduct in everyday life. It refers to the ways in which meaning is created and understood in spoken and written discourse (Wegerif 2006:59). Secondly, dialogic refers to a way of speaking and writing which is open, and which endeavours to cross the boundary, but not efface the difference between self and other. As Wegerif (2006:59) observes:

Education in general is only possible if words and voices can cross the boundary of the self so that students can learn to speak in new ways, to be new people.

Through speaking and writing we continually become ourselves (Holquist 1990). Communication, for Bakhtin, is irredeemably social, as is the self. Dialogic communication, therefore, has an important ontological dimension. Thirdly, the term dialogic refers to ways of knowing which recognize the contingency of all knowledge. Bakhtin (1986:170) described the epistemologically open nature of communication in the following way:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there can be no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future).

This epistemological assumption has important pedagogical consequences. It means that teaching should not simply involve the transmission of subject knowledge, but should be oriented to the development of students’ capacity “to engage in the dialogues through which knowledge is constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed” (Wegerif 2006:60).

In sum, as Wegerif (no date) observes, Bakhtin's dialogic principle takes us beyond questions of how we know the world and opens up questions concerning the nature of being. Using this principle we move beyond the domain of epistemology to that of ontology.

3. Towards dialogic feedback: seven principles

Within dialogic teaching, the purpose of feedback is to diagnose, inform, extend, and encourage student learning (Alexander 2006: 14, 18). As such, dialogic feedback occupies a very important place within a critical and reflective pedagogy. It is central to the process of enabling students to learn how to learn and to become reflective, autonomous learners.

Juway et al. (2004) provide a useful framework within which to begin thinking about feedback. It is not my intention to summarise the content of this most useful paper, but rather to use the seven principles of good feedback practice as a stimulus to my own reflections upon how feedback can become more dialogic. It is to those principles that I now turn.

i. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning (Juway et al. 2004:11)

With expanding student numbers in a mass HE system, the provision of "high quality information" may be increasingly difficult to maintain (Falchikov 1995). Research suggests however that a significant proportion of feedback provided to students is not of a high standard (Juway et al. 2004:11). An obvious question is: what is high quality information? High quality feedback information should be:

a. Focused on what has been achieved and on the product not the producer. It is the performance that is being assessed not the student.

b. Related to the learning outcomes so that a clear link can be made between it and the assessment. A clear relationship must be demonstrated between the module's assessment task, learning outcomes, assessment criteria

and feedback (Case 2007: 287). Rogers (1989:62), however, argues that feedback should be focused on only a few good and bad features of performance as otherwise there is the danger of feedback overload which may damage self esteem. This said, as Brown & Knight (1994) observe, some students want detailed and comprehensive feedback. Furthermore, the authors suggest, different forms of feedback could be usefully correlated with different approaches to learning: deep, surface strategic and apathetic.

c. Understandable, that is, overly complex language should be avoided. But, as Higgins et al. (2002:62) argue, there is a need to "investigate further students' abilities to understand the academic discourses upon which the language of feedback is often based". Yorke (2003:487) suggests, the way in which a student understands and interprets the information given in feedback is a function of their psychological state. This, in turn, will affect their attitude and ability to feed forward feedback. From an academic literacies perspective, this approach is too psychologistic. It does not give enough emphasis to the role of social and cultural inequalities upon the process of understanding and interpretation. The pedagogy Yorke expounds is built upon a psychological foundation that "serve(s) a system which does not and will not recognize social differences" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979:76). Social differences, emerging from class, gender, ethnicity, and age based dispositions, are an important dimension of the framework through which feedback is interpreted. Social differences both enable and constrain the possibility of establishing a dialogic relation between tutor and student.

Hence, as Becker et al. (1995:12-13) argue, we must analyse "the patterns of collective action students develop in their academic work" and "how the environment they operate in constrains them to see things as they do". Students' engagement with their academic work is

powerfully shaped by “the socially structured conditions of student performance” (Becker et al. 1995:131). Put in the context of establishing dialogic feedback, a student’s ability to understand and interpret feedback is shaped by a constellation of structural, cultural, and biographical factors. These shape the range of possible interpretations that can be made of feedback information. Feedback discourse is read within specific contexts which come together to produce the meaning of feedback.

ii. Facilitates the development of self assessment (reflection) in learning (Juway et al. 2004:6)

Students’ ability to reflect upon their own learning is principally developed through feedback (Thorpe 2000). Thus, students become reflective learners through the process of understanding and using feedback. Good feedback facilitates the process of students entering into a dialogic relationship with themselves. The purpose of good feedback is to foster autonomy so that the student becomes capable of assessing their own work. But in order to encourage autonomy feedback must be *consequential*, that is, it must require students to engage with it (<http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/assess/feedback.php>).

But how can tutors ensure the consequentiality of feedback? One strategy is to link feedback on one piece of module assessment to a succeeding piece in such a way that evidence of the ability to use feedback becomes a learning outcome and therefore affects the assessment grade. This may go some way to create “a recursive cycle or feedback loop” (QAA 2007), which is more efficient for tutors as it obviates the need to repeat the same guidance.

Facilitating the development of self-reflection and increased autonomy in learning is not a straightforward process. Indeed, as Castoriadis (1997) observes, to what extent do educational institutions which ostensibly encourage autonomy simultaneously act to thwart it through their teaching and learning strategies? Castoriadis

urges us to think about the effects of such strategies and the possibilities and limitations this creates for the relationship between students, knowledge and autonomy.

iii. Encourages dialogue around learning (Juway et al. 2004:7)

To successfully feed forward feedback, it is not only necessary for students to enter a dialogic relationship with themselves; they must also enter into a dialogic relationship with their tutors. Tutors need to create a “constructive dialogue” which encourages students to compare their own performance with that of an ideal, and which enables them to diagnose their own strengths and weaknesses (Rogers 1989:62). Feedback is given with the aim of encouraging students to self-reflect, to re-think both the form and the content of written assessments. But to enable self-reflection feedback must be intelligible to students, and structured in such a way that they know how they can improve their performance. If feedback indicates to students that they have done something wrong, but does not equip them with to address their work’s shortcomings, then such feedback is useless. Moreover, in such cases, students are in a worse position than they were before they received feedback as their self esteem has been damaged (Brown 2007:36).

There is a growing body of research which has found that feedback which cannot be understood by students produces a loss of self esteem: their identity as a capable learner and as a capable person becomes threatened. A student who perceives that they did not perform adequately in an assessment, but feels incapable of understanding why or what to do about it, is doubly disempowered. As Ivanic et al. (2000) argue, such students have a very personal reaction to feedback: it is interpreted not simply as a commentary upon the failings of their work, but upon their failings as a human being. It compromises their ontological security (Giddens 1991).

As Bakhtin's work suggests, for a genuine dialogic relationship to be established, students should be offered an opportunity to respond to written feedback, most practically in an oral form (Ivanec et al. 2000). This will enable tutors to address individual student's problems (Case 2007), and enhance the likelihood that feedback will contribute to students achieving the learning outcomes (Brown 2007). However, some students, even when offered the possibility to engage in dialogue, may be reluctant to do so. One factor in students' unwillingness or inability to engage in dialogue may be asymmetries in tutor-student power relations.

In order to understand and explain how feedback is enmeshed within power/knowledge relations, it is instructive to draw upon the work of Foucault (1972, 1977, 1980, 1990). Foucault's work enables the dialogue around learning and teaching to be seen as existing within the "anatomy-politics of learning and teaching" (Sutton 2006). Power and authority are two of the most significant dimensions of feedback (Higgins et al 2001:272). The power and authority manifest in feedback is a product, not simply of the micro relations of learning and teaching, but of macro relations at the level of the academic institution. A student's perspective and performance is produced, in part, by the position of "loose subjection" (Becker et al. 1995:133) that they occupy in relation to teaching staff and administrators.

The subject positions of student and tutor are, therefore, inscribed by complex and peculiar power relations, albeit of a loose nature. Tutor and student collaborate to produce a successful academic performance (Yorke 2003:478). But this can run the risk of fostering "learned dependence": student over reliance on tutor input. That a tutor has the dual position of both collaborator and assessor i.e. supports and judges a student's development, may also be problematic (Yorke 2003). Occupancy of both these subject positions can at times make the tutor-student relationship uncomfortable.

iv. Helps clarify the nature of good performance (goals, criteria, standards, etc) (Juway et al. 2004:8).

The aspiration of clarification is however problematic. The meaning of assessment criteria, for example, is open to misunderstanding and contestation. As Bakhtin argues, "meaning is achieved through struggle" (Holquist 1990:39). Meaning emerges from the difference between tutor and student perspectives (Wegerif, no date: 2, 7). Tutors must acknowledge this difference, and through dialogue, develop students understanding of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Only then will the possibility of the wealth of meaning that is contained within them be liberated (Yorke 2003:480). Such meaning needs to be unpacked, reflected upon, and shared collaboratively. Once this has been achieved, students need to put the criteria to work:

Students come to understand criteria through experience, through trying themselves out against a criterion and getting feedback ... students will be most receptive to feedback related to given criteria if they have already had experience of working with those criteria (Brown & Knight 1994:114).

From an Academic Literacies perspective, however, problems may arise from gaps between tutor and student understandings of the epistemological structure of different academic disciplines. Different disciplines, and different tutors within a discipline, may have different epistemological assumptions concerning both the nature of academic knowledge and learning (Lea and Street 1998). As Lea (1994: 218) observes, "each discipline has specific ways of ordering and presenting knowledge". Thus, the existence of discipline specific discourses results in different "disciplinary underpinnings" (Lea and Street 1998: 3) to the types of feedback students receive. Students may not be able to understand the often implicit, un-explicated assumptions tutors have about what counts as valid knowledge. Moreover, the different epistemological contexts within which tutors work affects how they give meaning to criteria such as 'critical

evaluation', 'structure' or 'argument' (Lea and Street (1989).

v. Provides opportunities to improve performance

(Juway et al. 2004:6)

In order to achieve this aim, particularly within modularized systems, feedback should be *timely*, so that students can use it for subsequent learning, and *prompt*, so that students can remember what they did and how they did it (Rogers (1989). Brown (2007) argues that if feedback is not given within 2 weeks of the submission date its usefulness is significantly compromised. Feedback received beyond the two week threshold is likely to be ignored, especially by weaker students, and it is unlikely that students will attempt to enter into a further dialogue with tutors about it (Case 2007). For me, this is of profound significance, and has significant implications for the way in which we teach the curriculum. If feedback is to be effective then the curriculum will have to be redesigned accordingly. If our students are to learn more, and more quickly from feedback, we will have to allocate less time to lectures and seminars, and more time to marking and crafting feedback.

Research suggests that students want feedback to give a clear justification of why a particular mark was awarded, and a clear delineation of the shortcomings and strengths of an assessment (Brown 2007). There should be a clear relationship between the written comments and the grade in order to reduce ambiguity. Shorthand comments such as 'weak' or 'strong', and question marks written on student work, should be avoided as their meaning is unclear. This will go some way to enabling students to improve their performance. However, if improvements in performance do not occur, "then all learners, but particularly adults, quickly lose interest: their motivation

flags, and without motivation there can be no learning" (Rogers (1989:58).

vi . Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem (Juway et al 2004:12)

Feedback should be constructive, in order for students to "feel encouraged and motivated to improve their practice", and thereby supportive of learning, so that students have clear guidance on how to enhance their performance

(<http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/assess/feedback.php>).

However, Higgins et al. (2002:59) raise two pertinent questions: what motivates students to try to improve and does the type of student motivation matter? The authors' research suggests that grades are not the only motivator for students. Students want to reflect upon their own learning in order to improve it. They observe that students can be "conscientious consumers" who "desire feedback which focuses on generic, 'deep' skills" (Higgins et al 2002:60). Grades are of cardinal significance to students, but they are not solely animated by the extrinsic motivation of the grade. There is a complex relationship of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that form the context in which feedback is received.

Research suggests that feedback which starts with positive comments leads to increased self esteem, and makes students more receptive to negative criticism (Falchikov 1995). However, there is also evidence to suggest that some students find the formulaic inclusion of positive comments patronizing (Brown 2007:37). Feedback can also be "obscured by emotional static" (Chanock 2000:95). In short, encouraging self esteem and positively motivating students is a complex task, and that emotion is an important dimension of the process of reading feedback (Higgins 2001:272; Falchikov & Boud 2007).

vii. Provides information to teachers that can help shape their teaching (Juway et al 2004:13)

Dialogic teaching necessitates the creation of opportunities, (beyond module evaluation forms), in which students can provide feedback to tutors. Feedback from students can help tutors to adapt and adjust their teaching strategies in order to accommodate the learning needs of particular students

(<http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/assess/feedback.php>).

By identifying the types of knowledge that students find troublesome, and the places in which students become stuck, student feedback can be used to identify the “epistemological obstacles” (Brousseau 1997 cited in Land & Meyer 2005:377) which impede their’ progress. Troublesome knowledge and stuck places possess both epistemological and ontological dimensions. As Meyer & Land (2005:386) observe, within their studies students have to negotiate “epistemological transitions and ontological transformations”: changes in their subject specific knowledge; changes in how they know themselves, others, and the world in which they live; changes to their “educational being” (Barnett 2007). Therefore, enabling students to get out of stuck places and overcome epistemological difficulties is more than a problem of curriculum design. Students are embodied, emotional beings that may resist any simple technical solution to what appears to be a skills deficit. Inability to cross a performance threshold may be the result of a more complex constellation of psychosocial factors.

Conclusion: Against Formulaic Feedback

The seven principles of good feedback practice are a useful starting point for critical reflection upon learning through feedback. This said, as Brown (2007) argues, there is no universal formula for producing effective feedback. Tutors must enter into a dialogic relationship with their students

in order to discover their feedback needs. If students are to successfully feed forward feedback, it must have relevance to, and be meaningful for, individual students. It must be oriented to their particular hopes and desires as learners. Furthermore, students must be able to identify with feedback so that it can become part of their learner identity. To achieve this goal feedback must become more dialogic. This is essential to both enabling students to learn how to learn and to improving academic performance. Here our College motto, “Abeunt Studia in Mores”, retains its relevance: study, (of which feedback is an essential component), becomes part of character.

The Academic Literacies approach provides a useful framework for thinking about the possibilities of making feedback more dialogic, and the ontological and epistemological challenges this may present to both learning and teaching. Of especial importance to these processes are: how meaning is constructed, interpreted and contested by tutors and learners, the relationship of feedback to learner identities, and the way in which both micro and macro relations of power and authority shape the context and practice of feedback.

Finally, if dialogic feedback is to become a central component of learning and teaching then time and space within the curriculum must be made. This will necessitate teaching less so that students can learn more. To achieve this feedback must be established as a learning and teaching resource which is highly valued by both tutors and students; and securely embedded in institutional structures and strategies (Hounsell 2007).

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