

Forum Insights

FORUM INSIGHT: Year 1 Feedback Project

Introduction

This Forum Insight is both timely and relevant as the scope and form of the new enhancement theme, Assessment of/for Learning is being delineated. The attention of this Insight centres on the area of feedback in the first year arising from recent findings of the Teaching & Learning Enhancement funded project *Supporting Transition: Enhancing Feedback in First Year Using Digital Technologies (Y1Feedback)*.

What is the project about?

The Y1 Feedback project seeks to enhance feedback dialogue in first year undergraduate programmes using digital technologies to support student transition to higher education and to collate case studies of practice. Led by Maynooth University, in partnership with Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University and Dundalk Institute of Technology the project has recently published two interesting and important resources. These are *A Landscape Snapshot* of current feedback practice from staff and student perspectives <http://y1feedback.ie/alandscapesnapshot2016/> and a synoptic survey of the literature on Technology Enabled Feedback <http://y1feedback.ie/synthesisoftheliterature/>.

What does *A Landscape Snapshot* tell us?

It outlines the findings from a series of focus groups with first year undergraduate students from the partner institutions, as well as the views of staff from an online questionnaire. 36 class representatives from a wide range of disciplines contributed with the majority representing cohorts of approximately 80 students, though smaller (10 or less) and larger (150 – 500) cohorts were also represented. Approximately 700 staff from the partner institutions were eligible to participate and in the region of 30% completed the online questionnaire.

Staff perspectives

In terms of staff respondents, the main disciplinary areas were represented with a slightly higher concentration of social science respondents. 63% of staff had 11 years or more experience of HE teaching. Generally staff were in strong agreement that feedback provided an opportunity for individual students to gain information about their academic performance in sufficient time to have an impact on their future work. 99% of respondents agreed with this view, and many more agreed that feedback, in order to be useful, should prioritise areas for development. Opinion was less sure about the use of feedback for collective purposes a theme which was reiterated later in relation to the forms of assessment typically employed. Some key issues to emerge from the staff responses included:

- Staff were largely in favour of the transparency of feedback (79%) and most (71%) believed that preparing students to receive feedback was also important;
- 81% of staff signalled the importance of timely feedback to students;
- The most commonly used forms of assessment are written examinations with 43% always using this form;

- By contrast assessments involving more than one learner tended to have lower useage ratings: 57% specified never using peer assessments and 36% indicated that group projects were never used;
- Paper submission of assessments was most frequently used 76%, though submission via Moodle was highly reported also at 71%;
- In terms of frequency of feedback provided, 86% of respondents indicated that feedback was always or frequently given to first year learners;
- However, it was also apparent that in the majority of cases the provision of feedback was often the responsibility of an individual;
- In terms of timeliness, 34% of respondents reported that feedback was provided within one week of submission;
- When provided with the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question on the factors impacting on feedback timelines, the impact of teacher workload and class sizes were cited as negatively impacting on the feedback timescales;
- The forms of feedback most commonly provided were grade and brief comments (64%) with slightly fewer (51%) indicating that grade along with significant written feedback was provided;
- Feedback was mostly provided in-class (31%) along with the use of VLE (26%) or one to one discussion (25%). In terms of format, the use of technology to support feedback was predominantly low with staff consistently identifying a lack of time, lack of knowledge and the increased workload of using technology as significant factors;
- When asked to describe an assessment feedback approach that worked particularly well in first year, the most frequently described approaches made reference to one to one or oral approaches which were believed to support transition, eliminate misunderstanding and establish a mechanism for dialogue.

Student Perspectives

Through focus groups, the following key points emerged from the student perspective:

- Broadly students were consistent with staff perspectives in understanding feedback as providing important information about their performance and how it might be improved for the future;
- Students highlighted the features of feedback including purposes of clarification, affirmation, supporting and enabling improvement, as a source of motivation;
- Whilst students confirmed receiving feedback, they highlighted variability in the amount, quality and type of feedback across modules and teaching staff. In many instances the approachability of staff was seen to be very important in terms of accessing feedback;
- Students while indicating that they would request feedback if they had not received it in a timely manner, overall reported that their feedback experiences had met or exceeded their expectations;

- In terms of the form of feedback, written feedback was popular amongst students though many expressed the view that a combination of written and oral feedback would be the ideal;
- Although peer feedback was reported as occurring quite frequently on programmes, not all students considered this to be feedback, though a small number of students reported participating in structured peer assessment or feedback;
- Variable experiences of the timeliness of feedback were reported, where feedback was not timely students expressed frustration that this could adversely affect their performance in subsequent assessment tasks. Students expressed awareness of the impact of large classes on feedback timeliness;
- With reference to technology, students described an increasing use of submissions through VLE along with the use of specialist software such as Turnitin. On the question of technology enabled feedback very few experiences were reported.
- Overall students indicated that they would appreciate provision of: greater uniformity in feedback; guidance as well as grades along with more timely feedback.

A Synthesis of the Literature: Technology-Enabled Feedback in the First Year

The synthesis publication provides a synoptic overview of contemporary thinking in relation to enhancing feedback in higher education with an emphasis on the benefits to be derived from technology – supported approaches. The report is organised in five main sections:

1. The context for the growing interest in feedback in HE;
2. A summary of recent literature on feedback in HE;
3. Importance of feedback in supporting students' success and transition;
4. Features of effective feedback in first year;
5. Technology supported feedback approaches.

Context for growing interest in feedback

A number of contextual factors are highlighted these include the growth of student numbers against the backdrop of declining financial and staff resources for HEI's leading to larger classes which create challenges for the provision of timely, high quality feedback. The impact of modularisation and semesterisation appears to narrow the focus to individual units of learning and impacts on students' learning behaviours and connections between feedback and feedforward. Bunching of assessments at particular points of the semester is also apparent. The varied purposes of assessment in HE can include: certification of achievement; supporting student learning and maintaining quality and standards. In many instances assessments can fulfil all three functions which can cause complexity for the focus and timeliness of feedback.

Recent literature on feedback

Over the last 10 years there has been a discernible shift in the concept of feedback from one-way transmission from teacher to student to more flexible and dialogic approaches which are ongoing, varied in format and in different learning contexts. Models of good feedback practice are highlighted from international research and practice in Australia, Scotland, England and Hong Kong. The concepts of feedforward to future work as well as expanding feedback from being associated

solely with assessment to incorporate informal and formal feedback practices in class and amongst learners are detailed. Benefits of dialogic feedback approaches mean that a range of feedback sources are available to the learner and that the process of self-regulation of learning is embedded whereby the learner monitors their own learning independently drawing on a range of informal, formal and peer feedback settings.

Feedback and First Year

National and international research has underlined the importance of supporting student transition to higher education through supports and learning approaches that foster support, connection between staff and students and opportunities to develop knowledge and confidence. Well –designed feedback can have a central role in supporting both transition and retention. In particular developing students' assessment and feedback literacies is critical in terms of assisting students to recognise, internalise, and apply the key feedback messages.

Effective Feedback in First Year

The features of effective feedback in First Year, eight in total, are outlined. These are accompanied by detailing of specific strategies for implementing the features of effective feedback including: informal feedback; peer feedback; marking guides, rubrics and exemplars; in class dialogue and feedback; feedforward strategies; generic feedback; anticipatory feedback and programmatic approaches.

Technology supported feedback approaches

Benefits of technology supported feedback have been highlighted through various reports and publications. Key among these was the JISC project on Assessment and Feedback which ran from 2011-2013. The potential benefits generally identified from these various projects include the potential for: provision of greater volume of timely feedback; improved student understanding and engagement; support for a greater variety in feedback format and approaches; opportunities for dialogic feedback and greater flexibility and accessibility to feedback. Specific examples of technology supported feedback approaches are detailed including:

- Technology enabled written feedback;
- Audio and audio-visual feedback;
- Peer feedback technologies;
- E-portfolios;
- Automated feedback tools;
- Classroom response systems;
- Learning analytics;

For further information on both reports please see:

A Landscape Snapshot of current feedback practice from staff and student perspectives
<http://y1feedback.ie/alandscape snapshot2016/>

Technology Enabled Feedback in the First Year: A synthesis of the literature

<http://y1feedback.ie/synthesisoftheliterature/>