

Cookie policy: This site uses cookies to simplify and improve your usage and experience of this website. Cookies are small text files stored on the device you are using to access this website. For more information on how we use and manage cookies please take a look at our [privacy \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/privacy-policy/\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/privacy-policy/) and [cookie \(URL=/cookie-policy/\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/cookie-policy/) policies. Your privacy is important to us and our policy is to neither share nor sell your personal information to any external organisation or party; nor to use behavioural analysis for advertising to you.

Agree



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Learning is a two-way street

24 April 2008

Students request more and better feedback, but focusing only on teachers' written comments is a mistake, says David Nicol

There is a growing dissatisfaction with the quality of teacher feedback. Feedback consistently gets the lowest satisfaction ratings in the National Student Survey and many institutions have been scrambling to find ways of addressing this problem.

More recently, the National Union of Students launched a campaign to highlight failures in this area. The NUS Feedback Amnesty asks students to submit samples of poor written feedback, presumably to be used to publicise and shame. Given that some of my work has been used to inform the amnesty, I feel that I ought to share my concerns.

The amnesty is a reaction to the findings of the NSS. The problem is, however, that the NSS focus is implicitly on written feedback, with the survey showing that such feedback is often not clear to students, lacks detail and is not supplied in a timely manner. But all other types of feedback are overlooked, for example in tutorials, during face-to-face meetings or in lectures.

The assumption that students would perform better if teachers only "delivered" more written feedback ignores the role that students must play. When teachers deliver written feedback, students must be able to decode it, internalise it and use it to make judgments about their work. Only then can they make improvements.

Focusing only on the quality of the initial input is problematic because there are limitations in how much a written message can convey. I suspect that even if teachers provide more and better-constructed written feedback as rapidly as possible, students will still want more. We must, therefore, change students' and teachers' understanding of what feedback is and how it works.

Moreover, the NSS does not take into account the fact that feedback does not come only from the teacher - it is self-generated when students engage in learning tasks and is also produced when they engage in peer discussions. And it does not occur at a single point in time: it starts when the task and criteria are discussed, involves every stage of assignment production and involves applying what was learnt. A good educational experience should help students to develop the ability to assess their work and that of others. Given that the NSS measures only teacher-delivered feedback, those who organise learning using a problem-based pedagogy reliant on rich peer feedback are likely to receive poor ratings.

A further problem is students' willingness to participate. Many institutions offer extra discussion sessions, one-to-one meetings and provide feedback on exams, but few students take part. And teachers who take time to provide

extensive written feedback often find that students don't collect their assignments.

So what can we do? We should start by engaging students as partners, as feedback relies as much on what they do as on what we do as teachers. And we have to manage student expectations and broaden their understanding of feedback and of the importance of different sources and different types, and ensure that feedback is continuous and embedded in all learning activities.

Yes, we must also improve the quality of written teacher feedback, with better guidelines on how to write comments in different disciplines. However, rather than teachers commenting more on students' assignments, there must be opportunities for students to respond to feedback and to discuss it with teachers and peers. Also, research shows that feedback on students' self-assessments and providing opportunities to resubmit assignments leads to more effective transfer of learning to new problems.

In conclusion, there is a need to rethink the NSS beyond a delivery model of feedback. Also, the NUS amnesty should be expanded to collect examples of effective, not just poor, feedback. With more meaningful data and exemplars of good practice, feedback interventions would be more productive, ultimately leading to greater student and teacher satisfaction.

David Nicol is professor of higher education, University of Strathclyde, and director of the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices project (www.reap.ac.uk).

- See www.nusonline.co.uk/feedbackamnesty/275199.aspx