

Review of Feedback in Higher and Professional Education: Understanding it and doing it well. Edited by David Boud and Elizabeth Malloy

Linda Carey[†]

†Queen's University of Belfast

This useful book is a compilation of relatively short but well referenced articles on different aspects of feedback in higher and professional education. The book has a strongly international feel with contributors from a number of countries, in particular Australia and Canada, most of whom are from a Medical or Medical Educational background, with some notable contributors from Education. The book covers theoretical and practical issues and provides an interesting and fresh take on a subject which has become high on the agenda of many HEIs recently.

The introductory chapter by David Boud and Elizabeth Molloy succinctly states some of the key issues with feedback. The authors emphasise that the suggestions in the book are not designed to take up more of busy academics' time, but rather to provide fresh perspectives, and the reader is motivated to explore further. The chapter takes a student-oriented perspective and looks at the whole feedback process: "*For feedback to be effective, attention needs to be focused more on what occurs before the generation of comments and what occurs afterwards*" and they advocate embedding feedback in the whole module design process, rather than considering it separately. The chapter lists a number of problems with feedback, for example staff and students' perception of what feedback is, the impact of feedback on students' performance, the time-consuming task of providing feedback and the judgemental aspects of feedback. Finally this chapter provides the authors' definition of feedback:

*URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[145\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[145])

“Feedback is a process whereby learners obtain information about their work in order to appreciate the similarities and differences between the appropriate standards for any given work, and the qualities of the work itself, in order to generate improvement.” (p.6)

Using this definition as a basis the book then goes on to challenge our assumptions about what feedback is, what it is for and how it can differ in different contexts. The chapters are grouped into those concerned with the conceptual arguments (Chapters 1-3), the impact of emotion, culture and trusting relationships on the uptake of feedback (Chapters 4-6); different modes and types of feedback (Chapters 7-9) and different sources of feedback (Chapters 10-12), plus a very useful summary chapter capturing the key ideas from the book (Chapter 13).

In Chapter 2, Molloy and Boud examine what they call the “nostrums” about feedback – i.e. the commonplace assumptions which are not usually critically examined. Some of these are, for example, that all feedback is good feedback, the more feedback the better, and feedback consists of telling people how to do something better and once they have been told that is the end of the story. The authors unpick these assumptions as overly simplistic and provide their own models of the feedback process which embed activity as well as information. These diagrammatic representations help to clarify a new way of thinking about feedback, rooted in a more constructivist and student oriented approach. The practical applications and case studies at the end of the chapter help the reader to see the implications of the authors’ framework for their own practice.

Chapter 3 by David Nicol explores the concept of feedback as proactive rather than reactive and draws upon his work on feedback conducted under the auspices of the REAP project.

Nicol is particularly concerned with developing students’ ability to make evaluative judgements about their own work, what he terms “reflective knowledge building”. He makes the point, which is sometimes overlooked by teachers, that even if their comments are timely, detailed and clear, they may not effectively prompt students to improve their work – students may ignore the comments, not understand them fully and not be able translate them into actions. The rest of the chapter then provides some thoughtful and well supported ideas for helping students to get past this hurdle and use their feedback productively to improve. These include rephrasing

teachers' comments and commenting on teachers' comments, re-drafting based on feedback, and in particular, self and peer review strategies which make a student less dependent on teacher feedback. This chapter enables the reader to draw on recent research, see feedback from a cognitive perspective and draw on some strategies for developing students' ability to reflect and learn.

Chapter 4 takes a very different perspective in looking at the impact of emotions on how feedback is received and acted upon. The chapter by Elizabeth Molloy, Francesc Bararrell-Carrio and Ron Epstein, discusses how emotions come into play as part of the learning process more generally and particularly in response to feedback. This is an often overlooked aspect of teaching and learning and explores the idea of a "judgement gap" where a student's perception of his/her performance on a task could be very much at odds with the feedback they receive, blocking their ability to effectively respond to feedback. The authors suggest strategies for dealing with this difficulty, in particular self assessment, and re-examine the commonly held view that the "feedback sandwich" is an effective way of presenting negative feedback. The framework for considering the emotional dimensions proves a more sophisticated way for educators to address the emotional component of feedback and provides very useful self prompts to guide practice in this area. The extensive bibliography at the end of chapter is particularly useful to those readers who are unfamiliar with the role of emotion in learning and teaching.

Chapter 5 looks at socio-cultural considerations in providing feedback. Authors Andrea Paul, Kara Gilbert and Louisa Remedios focus on feedback in professional education. As the authors have a medical background this context is the one that they explore in depth. The authors provide "*a framework for educators to make explicit in their feedback the rules, practices and cultures of professions, including the discourse strategies for enabling learners to participate effectively in the feedback conversations and acquire professional skills*". This chapter is particularly useful in addressing feedback outside of a classroom situation and in applying socio-cultural and linguistic analysis to help to distinguish what makes a successful approach to feedback in a professional context. The case scenarios are very helpful for the reader to see how theory can be applied to real situations and to real students. The detailed analysis of the

“feedback conversations” provides insights into best practice, as well as possible pitfalls and could be used to help train tutors in how best to respond to students’ linguistic cues when providing feedback.

In Chapter 6, David Carless focuses on the importance of trust in facilitating dialogic feedback. He takes a single case study of an award winning teacher with strengths in giving feedback and analyses how this teacher stimulated dialogue with his students through developing and fostering their trust. The case study is set in the Faculty of Business in Hong Kong University and the author bases his findings on the analysis of interviews with this teacher’s students, focusing on classroom atmosphere and the fostering of dialogue. Although based on a single case study, the results are indicative of a strong relationship between these two factors and identify a number of specific features of teachers’ practice which promote an atmosphere conducive to dialogic feedback in the classroom, including relationship building, promoting student self evaluation, showing empathy and listening attentively.

Chapter 7 by Brian Jolly and David Boud looks specifically at written feedback and how it can be improved. The authors contend that although written feedback is the most common mode of feedback, there are not necessarily well formulated guidelines, underpinned by research, to guide staff on how to do this well. Written feedback they contend is usually one-way from teacher to student, and there is often not an iterative process involved. This contrasts sharply with an academic’s own work which is likely to go round the feedback cycle several times and be informed by discussion with peers. The chapter continues with some specific research-informed advice on giving written feedback. Based on work by Hattie and others, the authors discuss in some detail what to give feedback on – e.g. task focused feedback, process focused feedback and self-regulation focused feedback. They also very usefully discuss how to give and not to give feedback, discussing the avoidance of “final” language as far as possible and emphasising nurturing the learner. Their list of features of “good” written comments, based on Nicol’s work, is of particular interest to teachers.

In Chapter 8, Brett Williams, Ted Brown and Robyn Benson provide a useful run through of some of the innovative ways of providing feedback which have become possible in the digital environment. A theoretical framework is provided and a brief history of how digital media have evolved and are evolving. Then different ways of delivering feedback are discussed in turn, with suggested applications and reference to articles which expand on some of the methods mentioned, which include: ePortfolios, Mobile learning and Internet video conferencing, Facebook, Wikis, Blogs and Clickers (personal response systems). For the technological newcomer, this chapter is extremely useful in introducing ideas for providing feedback through technology and the follow-on reading will provide a more detailed discussion for more expert readers who would like to know more.

Chapter 9 has specific application in clinical areas as it deals with giving feedback in clinical procedural skills simulations, a mode of teaching becoming increasingly popular in Medical Schools. The authors, Debra Nestle, Fernando Bello and Roger Kneebone outline the role and importance of feedback in simulation training and then provide a detailed case study of giving feedback in Patient-Focused simulations conducted in Imperial College London. Feedback is provided by clinical assessors, the simulated patients themselves and the learners. This chapter goes into specifics of how the students are rated and examples of feedback provided

In Chapter 10, Jocelyn Lockyer and Joan Sargeant also discuss a particular kind of feedback, in this case multisource feedback (MSF or otherwise known as 360 degree appraisal). The context for this is normally the workplace. The chapter offers some guidelines for good practice when introducing MSF, some technical advice about the integrity of the data and in particular focuses on feedback strategies. The authors then apply their model to teaching in higher education and demonstrate that it can be a useful tool.

Chapter 11 provides an introduction to a powerful method of giving feedback in higher education -- the role of peers in feedback processes. Richard K Ladyshevsky outlines some of the evidence which supports the use of peer feedback and raised key questions about the purpose and design of peer feedback systems. The discussion also interestingly broadens out to encompass peer tutoring and peer coaching systems and there is a discussion of evaluative

peer assessment and peer assessment for feedback purposes only. Again, as in other chapters, the case studies are of particular interest as they demonstrate how some of the ideas discussed can be applied in real educational settings.

Chapter 12 by Lisa McKenna and Fiona Kent focuses again on the medical context and discusses how the voice of others (consumers) can be utilised to provide feedback. The context here is particularly medical education -- the role of patients in providing feedback is explored in some detail. Issues such as validity and the limitations of the method are explored, as well as some guideline and advice for those who want to incorporate consumers into their feedback processes.

Chapter 13, again by David Boud and Elizabeth Malloy, attempts to draw together some of the lessons from the previous twelve chapters and to distil some “main messages” about feedback purposes, uses and applications. This chapter is crucial in giving a holistic view of a very complex topic which has been discussed in a variety of contexts and through a variety of lenses in the book as whole. By summarising the feedback “choices” that staff need to make, the chapter will be very useful to staff in helping them to determine how they can best provide feedback to students in their own particular context and for their own specific purposes.

Underpinning the whole book is the power of feedback as a learning tool and the questions posed by the authors for the reader to consider place the learners at the centre. The book is very useful in its diversity of contexts, in its discussion of different modes of feedback and in its focus on making feedback as useful, relevant and supportive of student learning as possible.