

## Refereed Conference Paper

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### Title

Out of the margins: feeding learning forward

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### Abstract

In a climate of increased testing, measuring and focusing on student performance, the vital role of feedback is often blurred as a means of moving students beyond known boundaries, and shaping new learner identities. This paper will readdress and invite conversations about this focus and describe the interim findings of a research project that explores shared meanings of feeding back to students in order to feed learning forward, and the ultimate power of feedback to position and reposition students. Two literacy educators in pre-service teacher education at RMIT University interrogate the ways in which their feedback is authored and read. They also share the feedback strategies they are implementing and monitoring that seek to explore clearer conceptual frameworks for disrupting and strengthening students' learning while still allowing student voice.

### Keywords

Feedback, feed learning forward, feedback strategies, conceptual frameworks, strengthening students' learning.

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## **Out of the margins: Feeding learning forward**

*I add my voice to the collective call for renewal and rejuvenation in our teaching practices. Urging all of us to open our mind and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions--a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. \_\_\_\_\_bell hooks*

Gloria Latham and Julie Faulkner

### **Introduction**

Feedback can be a powerful tool for learning but it can also be a powerful weapon for impeding learning. Whether the feedback is formative or summative it involves far more than the written or oral comments that are recorded on pieces of assessable work. Every mark or remark, every gesture, facial expression, every act and every omission that occurs in and beyond the classroom is a form of feedback. As two literacy educators in teacher education, we find there are also particular tensions around providing purposeful feedback about the author's authorial role while still attending to aspects of their secretarial role in authorship. There are also tensions around the authority in our roles as assessors.

This paper explores our preliminary research for more consistent feedback across our School of Education by developing shared meanings of quality feedback, what students require from this feedback and how quality feedback can empower learners to question the norms of teaching they have come to accept. To help address this need, two teacher narratives will be shared as part of interim findings from a larger research project on feedback in order to illuminate ways teachers are working towards shared meanings of quality feedback along with individual practices that better the critical feedback provided.

Although undertaken more than a decade ago, Black and William's (1998) extensive review of formative feedback remains relevant as it draws together 250 studies that spanned all educational sectors. Not surprisingly, the review found substantial benefits of formative feedback to learning across all disciplines and across all levels of education. Feedback has extremely large and consistently positive effects on learning compared with other aspects of teaching or other interventions designed to improve learning. This paper will explore some conceptual frameworks around how feedback is interpreted by students. Students claim

feedback is highly valued, yet a recent study of university students by Sinclair and Cleland (2007) found that less than half of the students, 46%, actually collected their formative feedback. Yorke, (2003) and Boud and Solomon (2003) have looked closely at the ways in which the feedback that is collected is interpreted by the students. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) and Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2001) explore some of the difficulties students have in deciphering the messages provided. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) also highlight the importance of the feedback being understandable to students but caution that it must also be provided in a timely fashion and then be acted upon.

Students receive a myriad of messages every time that they enter a classroom that might be thought about as feedback. These messages position them in particular ways or suggest that they work in particular ways or pursue particular lines of enquiry.

While experts are in agreement that feedback is an essential component for fostering learning (Black & William, 1998) what is less clear is the nature of the feedback provided. While teachers continue to invest heavily in reading, talking, critical thinking, writing about, measuring, comparing and finding better ways to assess students, it is also necessary to invest time and energy in documenting, analysing and dialoguing with others about the feedback imparted to students.

Feedback often asks people to change the way that they write or express ideas, or change what they write about or express or the way that they think – and at times, the feedback asks them to change who they are. We need to consider how we are asking students to change. These requests to change are not superficial. They can shape students' lives in the long term through the cultural contexts students inhabit. Feedback can also strengthen or hinder their identity as learners by affirming and praising what students know and who students are or on highlighting their deficiencies. Feedback can be a powerful force in fostering learning, and the things that are being learned, and it can also prompt students to un-learn in order to re-learn. Implicit in the effectiveness of the feedback provided are the relationships teachers foster with students, the beliefs teachers and students share about learning and the confidence students have in the expertise of their teachers. This complex interplay of factors greatly affects how the feedback is received and how it is acted upon.

### **How it all began: (Gloria's story)**

The Feedback Project focus had its beginnings in several critical incidents. In my case, after re reading Barone's (2001) narrative study of one exemplary teacher, Donald Forrester, a high school teacher in North Carolina, I was struck by several confronting notions. Donald Forrester, the art teacher under intense scrutiny, is a teacher who was awarded an Outstanding Teacher prize by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Barone went in search of the qualities that make Forrester an outstanding teacher. Barone (2001) says, "Forrester promoted self knowledge within his students so that each might act wisely in constructing a

unique self-identity, rather than moving to replicate his own" (p. 134). Then Barone (2001) asks:

But what if Forrister had not advised students to 'follow your own heart' and do what you think is right for you? What if he had modelled a life narrowed by a prevailing cultural script?

This question Barone (2001) raises resonated with me and caused further reflection concerning the feedback I provide students. I wondered to what degree my feedback is advising and encouraging students to follow my heart? What is inferred in the language I use? What sense of agency am I denying if students follow my heart? (p. 157) This became the main focus of the strategy I am undertaking. Although I seek to disrupt students' thinking I understand that adopting new thinking can be problematic when novice teachers enter the teaching profession with at least 12 years of being a learner. They are already insiders (Britzman, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) in terms of what it means to be a teacher. They come with intimate knowledge and firmly ingrained images of the practices of schooling from direct experience. Common practices in schools tend to reinforce traditional beliefs and assumptions about learning, and how schools are organised with beliefs being deeply connected to identity formations around teaching. These ingrained practices get challenged yet if students desire to be on the right track are they denying their beliefs in order to conform to what their teachers desire. Many are investing their time and energy in learning how to read their teachers rather than learning how to read and critique their course content. So I am questioning how I can disrupt their thinking, provide unimagined possibilities while still allowing their personal voice to surface.

A number of the comments made by students during the study sent me searching for ways in which my feedback is read. I want to understand if unwittingly I am marginalizing the views of students in providing advice.

Two first year mature age students shared:

What you try and do is figure out what the lecturer is looking for and you try and write it for them.

And there was one time that I wrote purely what she wanted and I did well. Had I written what I thought I don't think she would have been so impressed.

Sometimes you get a sense of a subject being a lecturer's baby...and you're hopping along for the ride, but you need more than that. You need more than the ride...

I want students to own their ideas rather than merely hop on for the ride in order to get the desired grade. Yet I questioned how their ownership of ideas can be accommodated.

### **How it all began: (Julie's story)**

When considering the question of what, exactly, we are feeding back to students a useful concept for me sits around the deep architecture of academic knowledge. What underpins the word choices and use of conventions that pre-service teachers, in our case, communicate? Are we commenting on surface features as opposed to a knowledgeable grasp of what Gee (1996) calls the discourse of teacher education? Discourse in Gee's (1996) sense alludes not only to the language, but also to the gestures, attitudes and beliefs which accord with the field. To fully embrace the discourse, it is also necessary to take on the values embedded in these orientations and behaviours.

Pre-service teachers are learning this deep architecture of teacher education while transitioning from school learner to school teacher. Doing well in assessment is seen more often about giving the assessor what she or he wants, rather than a deep learning process. This observation is not entirely a cynical one, or not intended to be cynical towards the learner rather than how we learn to 'do' school. It grows from questions around learner use of uncomfortable syntax, misuse of terminology and awkward structuring. Evidence of these elements ultimately suggested to me more about the difficulties of managing a new discourse than any inherent individual weaknesses.

One Graduate Diploma Primary student expressed: "As our knowledge in the field grows, you get more comfortable with the language of the field and can write across all the subjects. You need indicators along the way to help you." She went on to discuss rubrics and the vagueness of the language of her feedback "It was something about a professional voice or something. I still don't know what a professional voice might look like."

The value of effective feedback then shifted to how I could offer support which attended to the structures of the new genre, moving beyond what Vygotsky (1978) labelled empty verbalism. Vygotsky refers to a reproduction of discourse features without taking up the ideas behind them in any comprehensive or personal way. Employing feedback in this way then became a far more challenging practice for me to renegotiate, as it involved deep learning over getting it right.

### **The research study**

In a research study undertaken at RMIT University in 2008 a group of six teacher educators had as our premise that the ongoing feedback we provide must be manageable for staff and effective for students. The research project entitled: *Building and sustaining critical pedagogy and effective feedback strategies within communities of practice* was conducted in the School of Education. It comprises educators interested in interrogating and bettering their formative and summative feedback. In this research team are educators who teach across all programs, TAFE and Higher education, undergraduate and graduate, and have varied disciplinary expertise, and varied knowledge about information and communication technologies yet all possess innovative thinking and the desire to improve aspects of their feedback practices.

## Feedback as relational

As a research team, we began to articulate our individual and collective views about feedback. We are in agreement that feedback is dialogic; a conversation between teacher and student either oral or written. We recognise that this view reflects a particular contemporary set of understandings regarding what it means to be a teacher and what it means to be a learner as well as regarding how learners and teachers create knowledge. We see feedback as discourse or a social practice that enables students to own their learning and to find ways to move their learning forward. These are the implicit messages we share and send forth to students. And yet, we became aware that what our feedback may tell us is far more about other beliefs. Tang (2000) challenges notions of authority and asks ... “if we implicitly allow our students to be who we explicitly encourage them to be?” (p. 157). Tang (2000) suggests that who the students are depends in part on who we are. Boud (2000) and Ramsden (2003) identify another central challenge facing lecturers and students with respect to assessment and feedback. They refer to this as double duty. It is the interface between grading and learning. As we shared our views, the research team became aware of greater complexities between what we said we wanted to do and the messages that were received.

Initially, we have made our focus for the study on teacher education staff in The School of Education and the first year of our renewed Bachelor of Education, although we hope to extend feedback practices to all teachers, programs and year levels in the School. Our first task as a research team was to wrestle with what good quality feedback might look like, sound like and feel like and how we might document changes in students' behaviour. We began by examining Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2004) list of good feedback practices which:

- help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
- facilitate the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning
- deliver high-quality information to students about their learning
- encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

We embraced the beliefs behind these feedback practices but needed to add to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2004) capacities to:

- ensure information to students feeds forward (Duncan, 2007) to future learning tasks
- provide timely and individualised feedback
- enable constructive and consistent feedback across the school.

We recognise that particular fields of study have some discipline-specific needs that feedback should address. As well, the year level, and undergraduate or graduate also influenced the

nature of our response. For instance in the current climate of teacher education we need to be responsive to criticisms of teachers' personal literacy skills. Pre-service teachers themselves are often aware of their accountability in this area, and need to revise or learn metalinguistic elements of English. We also need to also remind them, however, that control over the technicalities of English, while important for clear communication, is only one dimension of meaning-making. This idea is captured in significant literacy frameworks, such as Green's (1988) 3D model and the Four Roles of the Reader (Freebody & Luke, 1990). In both models, spelling and syntactical features of language use are part of one dimension or role of a number of dimensions or roles contributing to powerful literacy practice. Another way of situating this approach is through discussing the tensions between the secretarial and authorial roles of the writer.

### **The research process**

After securing Ethics for this qualitative study, we created an online survey and 200 students across all undergraduate and graduate programs in Teacher Education participated. Using an action research approach we transcribed the data and it was analysed to elicit emerging themes. These themes were interrogated further in a series of student and staff focus groups.

### **Some lessons learned**

#### **The value of feedback**

The students greatly value feedback as advice. They especially value feedback that helps them learn. When the feedback was merely praise for the work they had undertaken, it did not help them learn. When asked about the types of feedback they received they only mentioned the feedback they received on assignments. Many value oral feedback over written, providing opportunity to dialogue.

#### **Early constructive feedback**

Overwhelmingly the students surveyed looked to their teachers to tell them if they were on the right track. This statement, in the online survey and in the focus groups was heard as the most common catch cry at all year levels and across all programs. The students wanted early feedback so that they could know if what they were doing was correct. Of course the implication in their plea is that there is a single track to be on. In reality, we are aware that there are many tracks with many different drivers.

#### **Inconsistencies across courses**

Students pointed out vast inconsistencies in the feedback provided across courses, which are problematic. In some courses students received a series of ticks on what many described as a vague rubric while in other courses students received critical and constructive assistance. Feedback in some instances is permissive and expansive while other forms received are regulatory and constraining. The students want constructive and consistent feedback.

### **Understanding the feedback**

There were times when students expressed that they could not understand the feedback that had been offered. This may be because they were unable to read the handwriting of the assessor but more often it was because they could not understand the specialised language of the assessor. As well when a comment is made such as, "This is more description than analysis," the student may well understand the language but not possess the understanding of the process.

### **Collecting assignments**

Students said they highly value feedback. Yet in some instances, the assignments were not worth collecting because either the assessment was not valued or they didn't value the feedback from the particular lecturer. They also revealed that they found it difficult to find some lecturers when they came to collect their assignments.

### **Taking the findings to our colleagues**

Findings in light of the rich literature on feedback were brought to our colleagues in a half day feedback workshop in late 2008. We invited sessional staff and ongoing staff to the workshop. As we are employing increasing numbers of sessional teachers it is imperative that they have opportunity to gain new information about feedback, contribute views and explore their own feedback processes. Three of our sessionals took up the offer to both attend the workshop and work on a strategy to better their feedback. As well, 19 ongoing staff attended. After sharing ideas we asked each participant to commit to working on one aspect of their feedback, which they identified on the day, and to document the process in Semester 1, 2009. It was important to encourage staff to take on a manageable strategy that they wanted to better. It was important to keep the strategy small and to give them ownership over the feedback practice they want to pursue. By forming a community of practice we can all support one another where possible.

At the beginning of 2009, postcards were sent to all staff who participated in the project. We reminded them about the strategies they elected to work on so that they could consider the strategy in light of their course planning. The research team explained our intent to collect the

data documented and further interview those interested educators in order to produce a series of rich case studies accompanied by recommendations for future practice.

### **Possible feedback strategies to explore**

- providing early constructive feedback to further guide students' learning journeys
- making all feedback experiences more explicit so students recognise and value formative as well as summative advice
- creating tasks that allow students opportunities to revisit and improve upon the feedback received
- asking students what sort of feedback they prefer and adjusting feedback responses to particular individuals
- having students read the feedback before they are given their grade/mark
- asking students to reflect on and attach draft feedback to the completed assessment task
- providing greater choice within an assessment task to build autonomy and to attend to different learning preferences
- devising oral feedback opportunities that are also taped
- exploring the nature of the feedback provided across a series of courses and year levels
- being more explicit about the expectations of tasks and scaffolding their components.

### **Gloria's story (in progress)**

Once I understood the direction of my interrogation, I decided to focus attention on a fourth year literacy course. In this course, students read two novels and develop curriculum around one of these novels using a conceptual framework that involves new learning pedagogies. The three part assessment task is intended to feed learning forward. Each part of the task receives extensive feedback from peers and the lecturer in order to move the next part forward with more informed guidance. I ask the students to take risks and to look far beyond the known for far more transformative and emancipatory teaching practices. In order to support their journey, it is necessary for me to imagine the reader of the feedback; to try and empathise with what the reader is struggling to come to terms with, being asked to question his/her knows; to unlearn and relearn. The nature of this type of request is often confronting and unsettling. In order to feed their thinking forward the conversations, orally and written, must welcome participation rather than obligation. Students need to feel safe to express their uncertainty and I need to listen to their stories respectfully while presenting alternative narratives they can explore. This is a relational challenge. Barone (2001) believes a lot of tension can be alleviated by formative assessment, which can be exploratory. Is this not the core of the educative process?

One of the areas I am working towards is being far more explicit about my teaching beliefs and the intentions behind my feeding back to feed forward.

### **Julie's story (in progress)**

Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) assert that “the feedback comments convey a message based on an implicit understanding of particular academic terms, which in turn reflect a much more complex academic discourse, which in turn may be only partially understood by students” (p. 272). In my search to help students grasp what Gee (1996) calls the design grammar of a discourse, I depend now more heavily on oral feedback. I ask students in small groups, or individually, to unpack and paraphrase difficult concepts so that they, and I, can hear where their understanding connects or breaks down. If assessment criteria are well constructed, students should then be able to indicate where, in their work, they are meeting the criteria. This kind of articulation, or metacognitive activity supports deeper understanding, conferring agency on pre-service teachers as active learners. It also serves to reduce the transmissive elements of limited feedback practices, where learners tend to be told, not shown. Finding the right questions to ask is a vital part of the process that I work on continually. To dig deep is a time consuming process and blurs the line between pre- and post-assessment feedback, and this feels like the right way to go.

Gloria's concern to interrogate assumptions and practices in order to relearn, and Julie's desire to use feedback as a tool for deeper structures of meaning are two ways of conceptualising feedback.

### **Present and future directions**

Through this study, many fruitful conversations have emerged which offer a number of possibilities for how feedback can be constructed to strengthen understanding. We are currently in the process of interviewing staff about the small projects they have elected to undertake. These will be written up as cases and shared with all staff. Keeping in touch with the feedback we are undertaking helps us keep on track. There are always a plethora of competing demands on teachers' time. This is where 'good intentions' and the day to day realities of our work often pose tensions. Grades need to be entered, reports need to be written, and forward planning needs to be undertaken for the new term or semester. These are just some of the realities teachers face at time when they are trying to provide quality feedback. It is easy to slip back into the margins of what is manageable rather than attending to what is purposeful. We continue to offer one another strategies for how best to achieve this balance.

As teacher researchers, we plan to confront and better our feedback practices as a means of supporting pre-service teachers in the deconstruction and reconstruction of their professional selves that are both critical and innovative.

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