

‘My work is bleeding’: Exploring students’ emotional responses to first year assignment feedback

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This paper explores the emotional responses that assignment feedback can provoke in first year undergraduates. The literature on the link between emotions and learning is well established, but surprisingly research on the relationship between emotions and feedback is still relatively scarce. This article aims to make an additional contribution to this emerging field. Semi-structured interviews with 24 first year undergraduate students from the Humanities and Social Sciences in a post-1992 institution were conducted. The interview narratives identified how the emotional impact of feedback was related to: prior experiences of education, the significance participants attached to the feedback received on their first assignment and how their interpretations of feedback comments were linked to beliefs about themselves as learners. The implications of these experiences on student ‘belonging’ and learning are discussed. The underlying themes that emerged from the findings are the polarised emotions of anxiety and

confidence. Based on the findings the paper concludes by making recommendations for reconceptualising feedback on first year assignments. It suggests that a holistic assessment approach which incorporates timely feedback indicating if students are 'on the right lines' with low stakes assignments is a practice that may both reduce anxiety and increase confidence to support students.

Keywords: feedback; emotions; first-year student; confidence; anxiety

Introduction

The relationship between emotions and learning has been documented (Weiss 2000; Barbalet 1998; Hattie and Timperley 2007). Weiss (2000) comments that the more emotionally engaged a learner is the more likely he or she will be able to learn. Emotional states which facilitate motivation (Dweck 2000) and confidence (Barbalet 1998; Hattie and Timperley, 2007) are recognised as being conducive for learning. Ingleton (1999, 9) states 'emotions shape learning and teaching experiences for both teachers and students'. Pekrun (2006) identifies several emotions associated with achievement. Positive activating emotions include enjoyment and pride and positive deactivating emotions include contentment and relief. Pekrun, also classifies negative activating emotions, such as shame and anxiety, as well as negative deactivating emotions, for example frustration and disappointment. For the purpose of this paper emotion is understood 'within the structural relations of power and status which elicit them. This makes emotion a socio-structural as much as if not more than a cultural thing...The social sources and consequences of an emotion tell us what that emotion is' (Barbalet 2001, 26-27). Beard, Clegg, and Smith (2007) argue for a clearer theorisation of the role of emotion in educational experiences.

Assessment has been identified as the most influential factor in student learning and the emotional impact assessment has on those being assessed needs further exploration (Steinberg 2008; Falchikov and Boud 2007). Exam anxiety (Putwain, Woods, and Symes 2010), threats to self-esteem (Lowe et al. 2008) and fear of failure (Meijer 2001) are all emotional states which have been associated with the impact of assessment. Emotions initially arise based on an individual's interpretation of a situation, but social appraisal theory (Bruder, Fischer and Manstead 2014) suggests that people mimic others' emotional expressions and their feelings can converge. This may be particularly

relevant when there is uncertainty about a situation. Turner found that the relationships among liminal individuals were of extreme equality. Liminality refers to transitional experiences. Within the liminal period, individuals often assumed what Turner calls 'structural invisibility' (1969, 99). There is no hierarchy within the group and everyone is in flux in terms of their individual identity. Recent research has shown that if others share one's emotional reactions to an event, one is more likely to regard oneself as sharing group membership with them (Livingstone et al. 2011), therefore shared emotional experiences may turn several individuals into a social group. Feedback is primarily an individual experience, but the emotions associated with receiving feedback may be common across a group. Värlander (2008, 146) argues that to date, 'there has been little research explicitly investigating the role of students' emotions in feedback situations.'

There are several studies into assessment and emotion which have started to make tentative conclusions in the area of assignment feedback, namely Beard, Clegg and, Smith (2007); Cramp et al. (2012); Värlander (2008); Falchikov and Boud (2007). Beaumont et al. (2011) identify that one aspect of the transition into higher education may be a change in how students experience feedback. The undergraduates in their study experienced a stark contrast of extensive support *prior* to assignment submission in further education settings which had provided reassurance and guidance. In comparison higher education had offered only relatively minimal feedback *after* submission which could heighten anxiety about performance. The type of feedback students receive is therefore likely to influence a student's emotional response.

Price et al. (2010, 278) provide a helpful taxonomy of five types of feedback: correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, bench-marking and longitudinal development. Corrective feedback could evoke a negative emotional response if students are unable to make a distinction between product and person. Yorke (2003, 489) suggests 'I am a failure' may dominate over 'I didn't understand what was expected of me'. Reinforcement of key points relies on students being in an emotional state which will allow them to absorb the information. The function of 'reinforcement' feedback which identifies the 'correct' information or approach within an assignment may be lost if it is 'eclipsed by learner's reactions' (Race, 1995, 67). This means that the emotions evoked from reading the feedback are so strong that they prevent the

student using it to improve and develop. Arguably this response may also happen with the forensic diagnosis and benchmarking functions of feedback when the 'gap' between current and desired performance is emphasised (Sadler 1989). The longitudinal role of feedback in providing feed-forward is seen as being extremely important for future learning, but the emotions aroused are likely to influence the efficacy of feedback in fulfilling this role.

This paper charts first year undergraduate students who experienced positive and negative feedback and the corresponding emotions they felt. The discussion highlights the implications for a sense of belonging and learning in the first year of university (Tinto 1993). However, there are two caveats to this thesis. First, this paper avoids falling into a therapeutic discourse (Ecclestone 2004) and second it avoids portraying a deficit model of students. Rather, the paper acknowledges the resilience of students, but seeks to explore ways in which feedback can be more effectively utilised to foster a sense of belonging in students and not be hindered in their capability as learners. The remainder of the paper is split in three sections. Firstly, the research design is discussed and secondly, themes from the findings are explored (pride and doubt, anxiety and waiting, confidence boost, being 'good' enough' and 'being wrong'). Finally, recommendations are made for an assessment approach which reduces anxiety and increases confidence.

Research design

The research study was underpinned by an interpretivist approach. The study is based on the belief that participants' actions are a response to the social reality in which they find themselves (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Humans are reflexive and react according to the situations in which they find themselves in relation to the beliefs and assumptions which they hold. This study draws on the 24 semi-structured interviews which were carried out with students. Participants were drawn from two first year undergraduate modules which provided formative feedback on assignments, but were invited to discuss their assessment experiences on all of their modules. The first module was a Study Skills optional module open to students in the Humanities and Social Sciences and was assessed through a portfolio. The second module was a Psychology module which was assessed by writing two reports. The formative feedback on the first report was incorporated into the second report. The student's name was written on the

assignment feedback pro-forma sheet, but the marking was undertaken by several tutors and therefore the tutor may or may not have known the student personally. The students received their semester 1 feedback either before the annual break in December or at the beginning of semester 2 at the end of January. The students who participated in the research were interviewed at the beginning of semester 2. The participants could choose to bring their semester 1 feedback to the interview as a point of reference for discussing their experiences of feedback. Although it was not feasible to include responses from all participants in this paper, the quotes which have been chosen are representative of the thoughts and experiences of the sample.

As is appropriate for a qualitative study, the validity in the research comes from context-rich, meaningful and ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz 1973), and through asking participants to discuss the extent to which the analysis resonated with their perceptions of their feedback experiences. The researcher emailed a copy of each transcript to each participant for ‘member checking’ (Silverman 2001) to ensure that participants agreed that the transcript was an accurate recording of what they had said and to give participants the opportunity to add to or amend any of their comments. To ensure that the interpretation of the data reflected participants’ social reality, five students were re-interviewed to discuss if they felt that the analysis of the data was an accurate reflection of their own social reality. The data were analysed as Miles and Huberman (1994, 9) recommend through identifying ‘patterns and processes, commonalities and differences’. NVIVO 7 was used to categorise and code the data from the interview transcripts.

The data analysis process was supported by *memoing* (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Memos are notes about any thoughts, ideas or questions that are emerging from the concepts in the data. Glaser (1992, 82) explains the memoing process as ‘the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst’. The value of memos is that they are a way of recording new thoughts and enable the researcher to consider different ideas within the data analysis. The link students made between their past, the present and future suggested that narrative inquiry may be an appropriate framework in which to analyse the data. Narrative inquiry concentrates on how participants make sense of their lives through their stories and experiences (Cousin, 2009). Two coding techniques used in narrative inquiry are metaphors and contrastive

rhetoric. Although codes can take the form of a straightforward category label, the use of metaphor, for example is a more complex way of interpreting the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994) because it is a figure of speech which presents strong imagery or symbolism. Contrastive rhetoric (Hargreaves and Woods, 1984) might include 'us and them' or 'past and present'. The use of 'past and present' was used by participants as a way to compare previous and current experiences of education, whereas the use of 'us and them' was used as a way of differentiating between the students and lecturers.

Findings

The interview narratives identified how the emotional impact of feedback was related to: prior experiences of education (pride and doubt), the significance participants attached to the feedback received on their first assignment (anxiety and waiting; confidence boost) and how their interpretations of feedback comments were linked to beliefs about themselves as learners (being 'good' enough; 'being wrong').

Pride and doubt

Noteworthy were the participants' comments about having triumphed over adversity by being the first in their family to enter university. On the other hand, students felt that they got to university *despite* the hindrances about which they spoke. The students were proud because they had been accepted. Nevertheless, the way in which students talked about these troubling journeys into higher education indicated how this had damaged their self-esteem and confidence about their capability as learners.

I'm the first, the first so far out of my entire family [to attend university]. (Scott, interview)

I really struggled and I failed quite a few of my subjects (Claire, interview)

I went to school, after that A levels, it was three years in sixth form, also at the same time three years of one day a week evening classes for my maths GCSE (Anthony, interview)

In school I was just on my own and I was being bullied. I absolutely hated it. I left when I was 16. I got okay GCSE's but I found it really hard to concentrate and learn (Josie, interview)

The stories the students told about their journeys into higher education indicated that the students' identities as learners could be described as 'fragile' (Gallacher et al. 2002, 43) which meant they entered university lacking confidence in their academic capability. Researchers (Weil 1986; Gorard and Rees 2002) contend that a key aspect of a student's learner identity is formed by their prior experiences of education and their beliefs about their capability as a learner. Yorke and Knight (2004) argue the 'self –theories' of students are a neglected aspect of higher education, yet are influential in student development and achievement.

These examples of students' troubling journeys into higher education highlights that they felt they were taking 'risks' in exposing their academic capabilities in going to university. So regardless of the length of time since students' last experiences of learning their emotions were characterised by a lack of confidence based on a sense of a failure to achieve academically. Being accepted at university was not enough to allay their fears about their capability to study at university level. The students were anxious and often commented on what they perceived to be their lack of academic potential.

My grades weren't the greatest in the world (Scott, interview)

My parents were quite surprised at how well I actually did (Josie, interview)

To my amazement I actually got in. I was surprised to say the least. (Debbie, interview)

In light of the academic and personal investment students were taking in studying at university, it is perhaps of no surprise that the feedback from their first assignments was crucial to them. Students were looking for evidence to confirm or not their decision to attend university as being the 'right one' by validating themselves as 'capable learners' and were using their feedback as a sign to do this.

I need to be reassured that I'm doing the right thing or going in the right direction I mean I'm not brilliant at grammar like commas and semi-colons I'm rubbish at stuff like that. (Josie, interview)

Oh I did terrible. I just like messed around you know I wasn't really interested, but as I got older you know you want to do well you are more motivated because you know the outcome in the end. Yeah I was like in the bottom class when I was a little kid about 5, then I worked myself up and then in my last year at school I was in the top set which was a good achievement for me. I thought I'd come to Uni to be good at Psychology. (Helen, interview)

Receiving this confirmation of being 'good' or 'on the right lines' was a protracted process as students waited several weeks to receive their feedback (in line with most feedback policies at UK institutions).

Anxiety and waiting

The students discussed feelings of anxiety as they were waiting for their first assignment feedback in their first semester. The first assignment then acted as an initiation ceremony into becoming a student and the students were 'stuck' in a space of anxiety and concern until they received their feedback.

I think feedback is important if you can get it as soon as possible because you're already anxious as to how good the work is and the longer it takes to get feedback you start thinking of all sorts of things like maybe I didn't do it quite well and then you have got others things that you are working on. (Gillian, interview)

There was a lot of anxiety I suppose wondering have I taken the right approach? The first assignment was just horrendous... we all sort of fumbled in the dark with it but in a weird and warped way you're not the only one who is panicking so you think well it's not just me being thick. (Zahara, interview)

Students who are often uncertain about their 'belonging' at university remain particularly vulnerable to 'dropping-out' because of the liminal space they occupy until they have received assignment feedback. The time in which students' were waiting for

feedback prevented them from allowing themselves to be fully integrated into the university experience.

Confidence boost

The confidence boost that students gained from receiving positive feedback on their first assignment was hugely significant as it increased their self-esteem and gave them permission to start learning at university.

I was very happy with feedback because most of it was positive anyway (laughter). Because it had been my first essay since I had been in university and I was quite nervous about it and thinking 'oh dear' do I really know what I am supposed to be doing. A lot of questions at the back of your mind, but the way it came back it was like positive and it made me more confident and told me the areas which I was weak and the areas which I was strong in. (Gillian, interview)

In Gillian's example the emotional impact was notable in that the positive messages she took from it, giving her a sense of relief because the feedback had confirmed that she was in the 'right' place and capable of learning. Gillian was subsequently inspired to achieve to her full potential knowing that she was able to succeed because she had received feedback which confirmed this. Confidence functions in opposition to emotions, such as anxiety and dejection. Confidence is a very important emotion in learning as it is the only emotion with time as its object: 'All action is based upon the confidence which apprehends a possible future' (Barbalet 1998, 82). Hattie and Timperley (2007, 92) report that confident students are more likely to engage with feedback and Weiss (2000) comments that the more emotionally engaged a learner is the more likely he or she will be able to learn.

Being 'good' enough

Once Zahara had received her feedback – instead of confirming her decision to study at university, it increased her level of doubt about her capability to undertake the course:

The first assignment in and it has really knocked my confidence... you feel the sand slipping through your fingers and you think it's a bad start to the semester and it has knocked my confidence. (Zahara, interview)

The emotional toll of receiving negative assignment feedback was heavy for Zahara and Katya. They were both left initially feeling incapable of learning.

I don't know what she is saying [feedback comments], is she saying I'm being stupid?...When you can't learn from what you are doing wrong so you can't improve your future work it does not tell you what you are doing wrong in terms of you are not doing enough analysis. How you are not would be more helpful, it can't take me anywhere except to know that I can't do analysis. It's like negative, demoralising because it doesn't give you how to improve. (Zahara, interview)

I was really hurt. I was devastated. Although I knew that I haven't done well the feedback was quite negative only the first sentence said it was a nice attempt, but then a long row of negative things. So I was really devastated. I was really hurt. For the first few days I was just in an upset mood. And I couldn't get over it and then I said to myself the approach is not correct. And if I have this approach I'm never going to make it. The advice they are giving me is to improve myself so I started working off the words. (Katya, interview)

The difficulty in overcoming negative emotions when receiving feedback should not be underestimated. The findings suggest that it takes students a long time to engage with feedback when it has had a detrimental impact on their confidence, particularly on their first assignments, as they remain in a liminal state not yet having made the transition to student-hood (Van Gennep, 1960). The experiences of students who received negative feedback on their first assignments can be likened to the concept of 'stuck places' highlighted by Ellsworth (1997). Ellsworth describes these stuck places as, 'terms that shape a student's knowledge, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances' (1997, 71). The students in this study were indeed stuck as they remained in the liminal space waiting to enter the threshold to student-hood (Turner, 1969) The transformation can be protracted, over considerable periods of time and involve oscillation between states, often with temporary regression to earlier status.

Being wrong

A related dimension to that of negative feedback and 'stuck places' concerns the extent to which students found it hard to differentiate between 'getting it wrong' and 'being wrong'. Getting it wrong was a state of being rather than a cognitive error that yields to correction. Kuhn (1995, 609) likens this to students experiencing 'a constant fear of never getting it right', this is supported by Ingleton who argues 'the classroom is the site of constant social interaction centring on approval and disapproval for being right and being wrong' (1999, 9). Feedback which centred on what was 'wrong' was read as a personal criticism which the students were all too ready to accept.

They are writing all over my work and it is like mangled up and most of the lecturers use red pen and I don't know it kind of gets to me if I open it up and it's covered in red crosses and marks and it's horrible. It's like my work is bleeding. (Josie, interview)

Students often applied a deficit model to their own ability to learn, believing they did not have the ability to understand the feedback, which goes back to the emotions of failure and fear that they started university with.

Further depth is a little bit vague and I'm not exactly the brightest spark... I can analyse something, but critically analysing something is a bit of a different story because it is slightly different. So applying that was very difficult to do. (Scott, interview)

My response is well for sure I'm thinking about what I have done and focus on the wrong parts of the work were outlined by the tutor and try not to repeat to these problems, but it is easier in theory not practice. (Peter, interview)

For students who received negative feedback, their self-esteem was often already damaged, as indicated by their troubling journeys into higher education. This meant for students who had personal doubts about their capability to study at undergraduate level they felt that this was being 'confirmed' by the assignment feedback they received. They blamed themselves when they could not understand feedback. As Ecclestone (2007) found in her study of further education students, less confident students who regularly received low grades did not believe that formative feedback could help them improve. Butler's (1988) study with 132 11-year old Israeli students demonstrated the

impact of including summative marks as part of the feedback provided. The study assessed student interest and performance with three different forms of feedback treatment: grade only, comment and grade and comments only. When students received comments only there were greater learning gains with interest and performance remaining high. Conversely, the study found that when feedback comments were accompanied by a grade this generally reduced both interest and performance because grades had a negative impact on the self.

The participants discussed in this paper who had received negative feedback on their first assignments decided to continue with their course. This response can be likened to the 'get in and stay in' mentality of the working class students in the Crozier et al. (2008) study. A lack of success at school can often be an incentive for later study (Gorard and Rees 2002). The fact these students may not have been confident learners does not mean that they do not have a strong disposition to learn (Gorard and Rees, 2002).

I thought well if I get a D5 it will be acceptable because it will at least be a pass.
(Zahara, interview)

The Leathwood and O'Connell (2003, 609) study considered the learning experience of students in general and did not specifically focus on feedback. However, they do make the pertinent observation that 'it is apparent that the impact of what are perceived to be poor assessment results on those with low self-esteem, who already feel that they can never be good enough or never get it right, can be profound'. Boud (1995, 45) states that 'too often the distinction between giving feedback on a specific product, which has been produced by a person, and judging them as a person is not made'. Moreover, it seems likely that students with the kind of histories already indicated find making a separation between the assignment and 'self' much more difficult. The need for students to protect their self-esteem suggests that greater attention to building student confidence and enabling them to develop more positive learner identities may have a role to play in encouraging engagement with feedback. This would enable them to view feedback more positively as a developmental tool.

Positive feedback confirmed the participants' decision to study at university as being the right personal choice. It had a significant impact on their learner identity as they started to believe that they had the capability to study at university level and that they could be successful learners. It was much easier emotionally for students like Gillian who had received 'positive feedback' to start the process of using feedback to improve and develop because the feedback had given a boost to their self-esteem and identity as learners. For other students, such as Zahara, Josie and Scott – they did not interpret the feedback they received as positive and as a result a mixture of self-blame about their capabilities as learners and doubts about being able to study at this level emanated.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the most significant finding of this paper is the strength of emotion that students attached to their feedback and the extent to which this feedback was then translated into confirmation (or not) that studying at university was the 'right' decision. These findings raise the question: how can tutors effectively provide feedback which will invoke a positive activating emotional response and in turn encourage further learning? To a large extent students' emotional responses to the tutor feedback was shaped by their learner identities. This suggests that developing models for 'effective feedback' will not go far enough in encouraging engagement with feedback. Learner identity then is a useful analytical tool to begin to address the complexity of giving feedback which will induce the positive activating emotions needed for learning. The level of confidence that students have as learners when they begin university and how this can shape their reading of feedback and their emotional response to the feedback has yet to be explored in detail by researchers in this area. Further studies into how assignment feedback can be reconceptualised to increase confidence and reduce anxiety in first year undergraduates to facilitate a sense of belonging at university and effective learning is worthy of greater research.

Arguably, a holistic approach which incorporates timely feedback on low stakes assignments is a practice that may both reduce anxiety and increase confidence. The stress that students in this study were under whilst waiting for their feedback should not be underestimated. Therefore a quick-turn around time for first assignment feedback should be prioritised to support students settling effectively into university. However, the timeliness of feedback itself will not be enough to alleviate concerns about failing.

Ecclestone (2007) notes that when the fear of failure is removed from assessment processes the level of anxiety is greatly reduced.

Low-stakes assessment may be effective in reducing anxiety. These are small pieces of assessment with relatively low risks attached to the outcome. Low stakes assignments mean firstly students can be guided into the expectations of higher education and secondly it removes the burden of 'failure' in this early transitional phase. If students do not do as well as they hoped, it will not count significantly towards their overall mark whilst it will give them further opportunities to improve. The difficulties of tutors having time to give formative feedback have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Blair et al. 2013). If we are to acknowledge the importance of formative feedback for first year students then decisions about where support and resources are to be placed is required at a strategic level. In order to increase student confidence assignment processes that enable 'second chances' (Ecclestone, 2007) are worthy of consideration. If students receive formative feedback - they have a clearer idea of knowing if they will 'pass' and ways in which they can achieve an improved assignment grade. The finality of submitting assignments without any chance to improve or with little sense of being able to evaluate your own assignments is likely to increase anxiety and lessen confidence. Therefore a 'first attempt' seems a sensible way to mitigate against this. By acknowledging that students use feedback as a 'sign' of belonging and their capability to learn, we should consider reconceptualising feedback practices to ensure that feedback meets these needs.

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