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# Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education

A LEARNING-FOCUSED APPROACH

Naomi Winstone and David Carless



RESEARCH INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

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# Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education

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Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement, yet it is difficult to implement productively within the constraints of a mass higher education system. *Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education: A Learning-Focused Approach* addresses the challenges of developing effective feedback processes in higher education, combining theory and practice to equip and empower educators. It places less emphasis on what teachers do in terms of providing commentary, and more emphasis on how students generate, make sense of, and use feedback for ongoing improvement.

Including discussions on promoting student engagement with feedback, technology-enabled feedback, and effective peer feedback, this book:

- Contributes to the theory and practice of feedback in higher education by showcasing new paradigm feedback thinking focused on dialogue and student uptake
- Synthesises the evidence for effective feedback practice
- Provides contextualised examples of successful innovative feedback designs analysed in relation to relevant literature
- Highlights the importance of staff and student feedback literacy in developing productive feedback partnerships
- Supports higher education teachers in further developing their feedback practice.

*Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education: A Learning-Focused Approach* contributes to the theory and practice of higher education pedagogy by re-evaluating how feedback processes are designed and managed. It is a must-read for educators, researchers, and academic developers in higher education who will benefit from a guide to feedback research and practice that addresses well recognised challenges in relation to assessment and feedback.

**Naomi Winstone** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Higher Education at the University of Surrey, UK. Naomi is a cognitive psychologist specialising in learning behaviour and engagement with education. Naomi's research focuses on the processing and implementation of feedback.

**David Carless** works in the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. His signature publication is the book *Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from Award-winning Practice* (2015), published by Routledge.

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A Learning-Focused Approach

Naomi Winstone and David Carless

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# Foreword

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Feedback is a much disputed practice in higher education today. Students don't think they get enough of it and it is not of the type they want. Staff feel that they are putting a lot of effort into doing something which students don't sufficiently appreciate. In the many surveys of student satisfaction over the past twenty years, of all the things commented upon, feedback has been found the most wanting. This problem has led to much debate, many workshops and a flourishing of publications on the topic. So surely we must have sorted out the problem by now?

Unfortunately, this is not the case. While there are some signs that the quality of feedback has improved over the years, universally it continues to remain the most problematic part of the curriculum. This suggests that a new approach might be needed. Slowly, it has dawned that perhaps the solution lies not in doing better with what we presently think feedback to be, but to think about feedback differently. We could start by disentangling ourselves from our conventional assumptions to ask, what is it that feedback is supposed to do, and how might it do it? This profoundly shifts the debate: What is feedback for? Why would we devote so much time to feedback unless it was to help students in their learning? And if it is the case that it is about influencing learning, then we need to think about feedback not from the point of view of what teachers do, but what learners do. That is, what is the learner's role in the process of feedback? And how does the teacher contribute best to that?

Asking these questions has led to a profound shift in our collective thinking about the contribution of feedback. This shift has moved us from seeing feedback as a sometimes ritualistic chore undertaken after student work has been marked, towards feedback as a key feature of how courses promote student learning. By changing our perspective, we can begin to look at feedback differently and see new ways of making it relevant and potent.

We can no longer take it for granted that feedback is a simple idea referring to comments provided to students about their assessed work, with such comments offered by teachers and others in the hope that they might be taken up by students in some form. We need to ask, what is it intended to do? How does it do it? And how can its effects be best facilitated?

The commonplace notion of feedback as information-giving, as an input to students, has been accepted for such a long time that it is hard to shift. However, it is now being systematically questioned as inadequate, not least by the authors of this book, despite the fact that this misleading idea of feedback is enshrined in the very surveys of student satisfaction used to judge the performance of universities.

The view of feedback in the contemporary literature in higher education is one focused firmly on student learning. Feedback is certainly not complete when comments are sent to students. It can now be seen as a process which may be initiated by a learner or by someone else, such as a teacher, but which is essentially about the utilization of information from others to help learners improve the quality of their own work. This involves the learner as the most active feedback agent, not the person that has provided hopefully useful comments. We can no longer define feedback as just giving comments to students, we must use the word more accurately.

This stimulating book enters the feedback debate with a fresh contribution to make. Naomi Winstone and David Carless are leading feedback researchers and reformers in higher education. They have made important contributions to our understanding of assessment and feedback and the ways in which these can operate beneficially in a wide range of university courses. *Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education* brings together their complementary perspectives to provide a much-needed impetus to understand feedback better and improve feedback for students, not just to improve their satisfaction but to enhance the quality of their learning.

Based on an empirical study of feedback undertaken with UK academics and supplemented with data from elsewhere, the book takes as its starting point the major change in thinking about feedback that has occurred—which they identify as a paradigm shift—and examines the consequences of this for practice. It clearly articulates what is the new thinking on feedback and what it implies for the ways feedback is carried out in university courses. It explores this through examples across a wide range of disciplines, and it focuses particularly on the challenges for large classes.

They point out that it is not simply a matter of planning and organising new feedback activities. The move from old to new feedback practices faces barriers and constraints from students and colleagues who are trapped in old ways of thinking. The book addresses these concerns and provides practical suggestions about where to start and where the greatest impacts on student learning can be achieved.

It is a delight to read a book on feedback that is focused on the future rather than on the old nostrums that have held us back for so long. Reading this book offers the prospect of engaging with feedback with the expectation that it will make a difference and that it no longer needs to be so much of a chore.

David Boud  
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and Digital Learning (CRADLE),  
Deakin University, Australia*

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## Series editors' introduction

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This series, co-published by the Society for Research into Higher Education and Routledge Books, aims to provide, in an accessible manner, cutting-edge scholarly thinking and inquiry that reflects the rapidly changing world of higher education, examined in a global context.

Encompassing topics of wide international relevance, the series includes every aspect of the international higher education research agenda, from strategic policy formulation and impact to pragmatic advice on best practice in the field. Each book in the series aims to meet at least one of the principle aims of the Society: to advance knowledge; to enhance practice; to inform policy.

In this volume, Naomi Winstone and David Carless tackle head-on what they term 'the feedback challenge', namely the apparent difficulty in getting students to make effective use of the feedback they receive on their work. To develop the necessary student 'feedback literacy', Winstone and Carless give guidance on how teachers in higher education can redesign and manage effective feedback strategies. The work is grounded in the latest research on the topic, and the accessibility of the text is enhanced by reference to selected detailed case studies. This well-organized text is set to be an important resource for teachers and researchers who are looking to enhance the quality of student learning in higher education.

**Jennifer M. Case**  
**Jeroen Huisman**

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# Introduction

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Faced with the undertaking of designing assessment tasks, grading students' work, and providing information on students' strengths and areas for development, how do teachers decide on the design of assessment and feedback within their unit or course? To what extent do their beliefs about the fundamental purpose of feedback drive their decision-making, and how do the features of the environment in which they work, and other pressures they may experience, influence their feedback practices?

This book contributes to the theory and practice of higher education pedagogy by re-evaluating how feedback processes are designed and managed. Feedback practice should place less emphasis on what teachers do in terms of providing commentary, and more emphasis on how students generate, make sense of, and use feedback for ongoing improvement. Through eight feedback design case studies, we illustrate how active student roles in feedback can be facilitated.

The main aims of the book are as follows:

- 1 To contribute to the theory and practice of feedback in higher education by showcasing new paradigm feedback thinking focused on dialogue and student uptake;
- 2 To synthesise the evidence for effective feedback practice;
- 3 To provide contextualised examples of successful innovative feedback designs analysed in relation to relevant literature;
- 4 To highlight the importance of staff and student feedback literacy in developing productive feedback partnerships;
- 5 To support teachers in further developing their feedback practice.

## **Feedback Cultures in Higher Education project**

Drawing on a project funded by the UK Society for Research into Higher Education, we set out to contribute to the enhancement of feedback processes. The project was entitled 'Feedback Cultures in Higher Education', as its primary aim was to explore the proximal and distal influences on the common ways in which

feedback processes are enacted in contemporary higher education. In this context, we are referring to feedback to students, for example on their work, not from students, for example evaluations of teaching. Whilst many aspects of the feedback process might be specified in institutional regulations (e.g. the use of a specific feedback proforma, or the timeframe in which feedback should be returned), teachers are often free to consider the nature and timing of the assessment tasks they set for students, and the modality through which feedback comments are presented (e.g. written, audio, or video formats). Teachers also make decisions about the extent to which students will be part of the assessment and feedback process, for example through incorporating peer feedback or self-assessment within the assessment design. Whilst many aspects of the feedback process may rely on students' engagement (e.g. the ability to interpret feedback, understanding the purpose of feedback, and willingness to expend effort to implement feedback), teachers can still decide how and where to embed the development of these skills into the curriculum.

Teachers' pedagogic decisions are influenced by their own learning experiences and professional development, as well as external influences such as regulations and the curriculum. Thus, on a proximal level, decisions about feedback practice might stem from teachers' beliefs and values about the importance of feedback within the context of a learning process, or from the guidance and direction they might receive from colleagues within their departments. The extent to which these beliefs and values feed directly into practice is likely to be influenced by features of the local disciplinary culture, including factors such as workload, class sizes, explicit or implicit messages about the relative importance of teaching and research, or perceived agency to experiment versus conform to normative assessment practices. Decisions might also be guided by the (perceived) requirements of departmental or institutional guidelines or regulations, or the requirements of Professional or Accrediting Bodies.

Central to the book is a theoretical distinction between old paradigm transmission-focused and new paradigm learning-focused models of the feedback process, which we explore in depth in Chapter 1. As well as investigating teachers' alignment with each of these models, we aimed to bridge theory and practice by exploring how learning-focused models of feedback are enacted, as represented in the literature as well as in the work of teachers in their everyday practice.

The 'Feedback Cultures' project, conducted between January 2017 and January 2018, involved three strands of research:

### ***Strand 1: Understanding practice***

Through a mixed-mode survey distributed to academics in the UK and Australia, we explored knowledge, perceptions and practices aligned with transmission-focused and learning-focused models of the feedback process.

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**Strand 2: Understanding the drivers of practice**

Through semi-structured interviews with 28 UK academics, Naomi explored the factors that influence decision-making around feedback practices, and features of typical feedback ‘cultures’ in UK Universities. Through complementary data collection in Hong Kong and Taiwan, David further investigated feedback practices in settings beyond the UK.

**Strand 3: Driving practice forwards**

Through an evidence synthesis and collation of feedback design cases, we set out to capture evidence of the effectiveness of learning-focused feedback practices, and characteristics of the ‘feedback cultures’ where such practices are adopted effectively. The cases were selected examples of good practice that illustrate different dimensions of feedback designs. According to contextual differences, a variety of data collection methods were used, including teachers’ reflective accounts of practice; standard student evaluation data; interviews with teachers; interviews with students; and classroom observations.

This book focuses predominantly on the findings from the third strand of the project, but we draw upon snapshots of the findings from the survey and interviews to inform our theoretical framing and our synthesis of the learning from the project.

**The structure of the book**

We begin the book by framing feedback in terms of the theoretical distinction between transmission-focused and learning-focused models of the feedback process. We then move to explore practice, by presenting a series of approaches to feedback that in some way align with a learning-focused approach. Whilst the chapters provide valuable information for teachers looking to design feedback processes that are likely to facilitate student learning, the primary emphasis remains on student involvement with and driving of learning through feedback.

We begin each chapter by situating the feedback approach within a learning-focused feedback model, exploring relevant dimensions of research and practice. We then focus in greater depth on two key examples from the research literature to allow key points to emerge in greater depth. The cases in the second half of each chapter provide a window into how some of the theoretical concepts are implemented in practice. We draw connections between the approach in practice and relevant research literature.

Each chapter also contains a series of resources to bridge the divide between theory and practice, and a summary of key research findings. We learnt a lot from interviewing teachers about their practice, and we share the implications for practice pertinent to each approach. We also present a series of questions to stimulate reflection and debate; in line with a dialogic approach to feedback, we would

encourage readers to engage in reflection and discussion with others. The final chapter of the book synthesises what we have learnt about feedback in the course of the project. We also share some tools, developed through our work, for use by individuals or course teams to reflect upon their current approach to feedback, and to consider how they might develop their feedback culture to be more learning-focused.

Feedback is a complex, contentious topic, and there is no single ‘right’ way of engaging in feedback process with students. Key to shifting from a transmission-focused to a learning-focused feedback paradigm is recognising that, whilst we can provide students with evaluative and directive information in the form of comments on their work, feedback processes cannot take place without the student’s active involvement. However, by sharing real examples from teachers who face many of the challenges experienced by those working in contemporary higher education, such as growing class sizes, increasing workload, and the pressure of student satisfaction metrics, we hope to provide some indication of how a learning-focused approach to feedback can be operationalised in practice. We focus on undergraduate higher education contexts because this was the focus of our work, but we hope that many themes and practices discussed within the book will resonate with other levels of education too.

# The feedback challenge

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Many articles on assessment feedback in higher education open by posing a commonly experienced dilemma: we know that high-quality feedback has the potential to have one of the strongest influences on students' achievement (e.g. Hattie, & Timperley, 2007), yet feedback is often framed as the dimension of students' experience with which they are least satisfied. In addition, despite recognising the value of feedback, and commonly voicing dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of feedback received, students often appear to make limited use of feedback. This conundrum has occupied the minds of teachers who often express frustration as the effort they expend in the provision of feedback is perceived to be wasted when students do not appear to engage with the advice. However, whilst there is a wealth of research evidence regarding perceptions of feedback and how it might be delivered, there are comparatively few studies of how students use feedback. This is problematic as the simple act of delivering feedback is limited in its effectiveness, as argued by Royce Sadler: "Learners do not always learn much purely from being told, even when they are told repeatedly in the kindest possible way" (Sadler, 2015, p. 16).

In recent years, the literature on student engagement with feedback has experienced significant development; researchers are exhibiting a growing interest in how and why students engage with assessment feedback, how best to design assessment and feedback to facilitate engagement, and how to measure the impact of feedback (Henderson, Ajjawi, Boud, & Molloy, 2019). Feedback is being reframed from something that teachers do, to a process where students are involved in seeking, processing, and using feedback information. As neatly argued by Sadler (2010), feedback as 'telling' is not effective in facilitating learning because the connection between feedback comments, students' work, and future learning relies on clear and unambiguous interpretation of those comments, and in many cases key messages remain invisible to students. In this book, we look beyond feedback as the transmission of comments towards an approach where teachers design feedback sequences in ways that enable students to construct and implement their own understandings on the basis of feedback exchanges. In order for assessment and performance feedback to facilitate long-term learning and skill development, the feedback receiver needs to be open to hearing the advice of the

feedback-giver, to remember how they have been advised to develop their skills, and to take advantage of opportunities to use the comments they have received. Feedback can, however, sometimes be difficult to comprehend, difficult to remember, and putting feedback into practice requires time and effort.

Discussions around feedback are often fraught with tensions and dilemmas, where “Feedback is a complex notion, often embedded in a common-sense and simplistic dominant discourse” (Askew, & Lodge, 2000, p. 1). Furthermore, whilst many guidelines for effective feedback have been published (e.g. Evans, 2013; Nicol, & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), the translation of such guidance into practice is by no means straightforward (Barton, Schofield, McAleer, & Ajjawi, 2016). In this chapter, we first discuss different approaches to conceptualising feedback and set out the key features of old and new paradigms of feedback. We relate these to the social-constructivist approach which frames our thinking around feedback. We then move from dominant sources in the literature to the voices of higher education practitioners, to explore some of the common challenges experienced in the assessment and feedback process, and perceived barriers to reforming feedback processes, drawing upon data from the Feedback Cultures project. We conclude the chapter by considering how to move beyond a transmission-focused approach to feedback.

## **Defining and conceptualising feedback**

One of the key challenges inherent in managing feedback in higher education is that there is much debate over what the term actually means. The term itself is broad, and has been used in widely differing ways, by different stakeholders, in different contexts. A conventional view is to see feedback as information provided by an agent, for example, a teacher, peer or self, about aspects of performance or understanding (Hattie, & Timperley, 2007). This is how feedback is commonly interpreted by teachers and students. Whilst students do need information about their performance in order to improve, this is insufficient for the implementation of effective feedback processes because students also need motivation and opportunities to make sense of comments and to use them to for improvement purposes.

Accordingly, in the recent literature on feedback in higher education (e.g. Boud, & Molloy, 2013; Carless, & Boud, 2018; Sadler, 2010; Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017a), greater focus has been placed on students’ actions in response to performance information from teachers, peers and their own self-evaluation. For information to lead to action, students need opportunities to apply feedback to future tasks in order to inform the development of their learning. Building on this line of thinking, feedback is conceptualised as a process whereby students are proactive in seeking, making sense of, and using comments on their performance or their approaches to learning. This emphasis on sense-making and future actions resonates with the new paradigm feedback practices that are the focus of this book. A fundamental dimension of this conceptualisation is that a