



Formative activity and its effect on student learning: results of a pilot study.

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Aims

- Report the results of the pilot research
- Report the researcher's experience of, and learning from, using specific methodologies
- Work in progress



Background

- Much literature about the role formative assessment and formative feedback plays in the student learning trajectory – some of it favourable, some of it less so
- There is considerable resource afforded to formative activities
- Are these activities of benefit to student learning?



Research Question

- What is the value and impact of formative assessment and formative feedback to the learning experience of students?



Purpose of the Pilot

- Test the process
- To enable a “tried and tested”, more rigorous and refined research methodology to be implemented in the main study
- Identify unpredictable events, results or consequences that might be beneficial to the main study in that they should be nurtured and exploited, or eliminated



Ethics and Approvals

- School Research Ethics Panel approval
- NRES not necessary
- Permissions to recruit participants from Head of Department, relevant Head of Divisions and Course Leaders



Methodology

- One UK university
- All full-time, final year undergraduate students from two “health and social care” courses (n=80)
- 3 distinct components:
 - anonymous electronic questionnaire
 - participant observation
 - student focus group
- All participants - anonymous electronic questionnaire via VLE
- Three participants, plus two, were purposively selected - observed and video and/or audio recorded in at least 1 authentic university-based or practice-based learning setting in which they received feedback
- Observed participants – student focus group

Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 1

- Initial requests and email prompts - a 32.5% return rate (n=26)
- Students were asked to describe themselves as a gifted, average or weak student
- Almost 85% (n=22) of respondents rated themselves as an average student

	Freq	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
A gifted student	1	3.8	3.8	3.8
A weak student	2	7.7	7.7	11.5
An average student	22	84.6	84.6	96.2
Don't know	1	3.8	3.8	100.0
Total	26	100.0	100.0	

Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 2

- Strongest in academic or clinical aspects of studies?
- Almost 70% (n=18) felt they were strongest in their clinical practice

	Freq	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Academic work	1	3.8	3.8	3.8
Both elements	6	23.1	23.1	26.9
Clinical practice	18	69.2	69.2	96.2
Don't know	1	3.8	3.8	100.0
Total	26	100.0	100.0	

Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 3

			Strongest				
			Academic work	Both elements	Clinical	Don't know	Total
Description	A gifted student	Count	1	0	0	0	1
		% of Total	3.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.8%
	A weak student	Count	0	1	1	0	2
		% of Total	.0%	3.8%	3.8%	.0%	7.7%
	An average student	Count	0	5	16	1	22
		% of Total	.0%	19.2%	61.5%	3.8%	84.6%
	Don't know	Count	0	0	1	0	1
		% of Total	.0%	.0%	3.8%	.0%	3.8%
Total		Count	1	6	18	1	26
		% of Total	3.8%	23.1%	69.2%	3.8%	100.0%

Of the almost 85% of students (n=22) who rated themselves as average, 61.5% (n=16) felt that clinical practice was the strongest element of their studies



Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 4

- Almost 85% (n=22) and almost 77% (n=20) of respondents had experienced FA and FFB respectively during that academic year, with over 71% (n=19) experiencing both
- **2 of the respondents who had experienced FA responded that they had not or did not know if they had received FFB**
- Of 23 individual responses to the question “How would you describe formative assessment?” 65% (n=15) explicitly described it in a manner pertaining to summative assessment and/or verification of learning - “degree mark”, or “it doesn’t count” or similar:
 - *“Pieces of work that are marked within the university graded system, but that don’t actually count towards your degree”*
 - *“Marks that don’t count towards your overall score”*
 - *“An assessment which has no addition to our final degree class”*
- Only 1 respondent mentioned “learn” – not used in the prospective sense:
 - *“Formative assessment is a method of testing students on topics that they have **learnt** so far that do not count towards final marks”*



Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 5

- When asked specifically about the purpose of formative assessment, replies were more akin to learning:
 - *"To aid learning"*
- But ...
 - *"For **tutors** to see what you are learning and areas which are lacking in understanding"*



Anonymous Electronic Questionnaire – Results 6

- Examples for formative assessment and formative feedback asked for – generally a good level of recognition of the “formal” formative assessment tasks and when “formal” formative feedback offered:
 - *“... a mock practical exam ...”*
 - *“Tests in lectures ...”*
- **But** very little recognition of the continual [often practice-related] formative assessment and formative feedback:
 - *“A practical session where feedback is given to allow for development of practical skills”*
 - *“for example during ... practical sessions ... The tutors would give us feedback ...”*
- **Does this mean that the 61.5% of students who described themselves as average but strongest in clinical elements are not acting on formative feedback on practice as they don’t recognise it as such?**
- E.g. an example of FFB:
 - *“A printed sheet with a mark and comments on”*



Learning?

- Unclear and/or artificial differential between FA and FFB?
- Lack of recognition of “informal” FA and FFB opportunities
- Lack of self-regulation and ownership
- Retrospective – where is the feed-forward learning?
- Electronic questionnaire – VLE unable to produce results in a user-friendly way
- Electronic questionnaire – poor response rate
- NVivo
- Timing



Participant Observation

- Video and/or audio recorded plus field notes – analysis ongoing
- Assumptions made:
 - Practice/clinical experiences of students will be similar
 - Exposure to “feedback” will be similar
- Students verbally (e.g. “Yeah”/“Hmm”/“Yes”/“OK”) and non-verbally (e.g. nodding) suggest to tutors that they understand the feedback being given but then demonstrate that they misinterpret what is being said and/or remain unclear by the subsequent questions they ask:
 - *T: “... ethics section is superficial ...”*
 - *S: “It needs to be a lot longer”*
- **If there is no opportunity to ask questions (e.g. written feedback alone), do students remain unclear?**
- Lack of ownership:
 - *“I don’t know why ... the Group seemed to think that it was a good idea”*
- Evident that students want to simply pass assessment tasks – assessment driven
- Mixed messages from tutors:
 - *“Again it’s not me that’s marked it, I’d have just ...” – inconsistencies*
 - *“It’s going to be capped at 40 regardless ...” – assessment-driven*



Learning?

- Don't make assumptions about student learning opportunities based on own learning and teaching experiences
- Is dialogue crucial to learning from feedback?
- Assessment [not learning]-driven culture?
- Students appear to receive mixed messages from tutors
 - Is the goalpost a moveable feast?
 - How do standards and benchmarks fit with this?
 - How can students "close the gap" when the gap and/or how to get to the "gap" is constantly shifting?
- Does HE truly want to foster a learning culture or does it want to be measured by student achievements alone? Can the 2 be a partnership?



Student Focus Group

- Questionnaire
 - Electronic method of data collection efficient
 - Anonymous data but respondents want to put a face to the researcher and be provided with a data collection opportunity
 - *"We didn't realise it was you"*
 - Need to be selective with reminder emails
- Understanding of FA and FFB
 - *"... a self-evaluation tool ... you can see areas that you're strong in and also ... any weak areas ..."*
 - *"an opportunity to obtain constructive feedback ..."*
 - In relation to a comment about constructive feedback not always being that constructive *"... depends how you view it ..."* – **insight into levels of learning adopted by students?**
- **Formative assessment indistinguishable from formative feedback [to the student]**
- Participant observation
 - Excluding service-users impossible within an authentic practice-based learning opportunity – NRES implications



Learning?

- Reconsider engagement with student cohort and authentic practice-based learning settings
- Is the VLE the best vehicle for the questionnaire?
- Levels of student learning – will “one size *really* fit all?” What are we trying to achieve within HE with respect to feedback?
- Reframe my research question: **What is the value and impact of feedback to the learning experience of students?**



Next Steps

- Reconsider practical elements of methodology
- Reconsider the breadth of feedback – including dialogical aspects
- NRES
- Revisit the literature for “feedback”