Feedback unbound: from master to usher

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Introduction

Be on your guard;
Unmanageable oaf cuts both ways.
Finds the subject difficult,
Acquitting you, converts
Oaf into idiot, usher to master.
("Reports” by U.A. Fanthorpe 2005, p. 89)

A major theme of this book is that feedback should encourage dialogue; between students and lecturers, amongst peers and individually, as a form of self-critique and reflection. Here we endorse that theme but also propose an understanding of dialogue that goes beyond simple exchange or the presence of two or more voices. Inspired by Freire’s (1996) critical pedagogy we seek to make a link between the social nature of learning, the social nature of dialogue and the role of feedback as dialogue in a broader transformative learning process, and not merely as an adjunct to assessment.

Our analysis is informed by our commitments to the social justice purposes of higher education. Our aim is to consider how feedback can become embedded in the learning experience through the notion of ‘feedback as dialogue’ in ways that promote critical and transformative learning. Our conception of feedback as dialogue does not simply focus on the way in which information about a student’s work is conveyed to them, but on the fundamental aspects of the relationship between student and teacher, and the relationship of both to the act of learning. This radical promise of dialogue is betrayed by superficial uses
of the term that employ it as a trite acknowledgement of the student voice rather than a complex and uncertain educational relationship.

This conception of feedback as dialogue implies its integration throughout the learning process. Shackled to formal assessment, feedback is like great art hung in a dark corner; in contrast, it needs to be illuminated, displayed and discussed. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) define feedback as ‘information about how the student’s present state (of learning and performance) relates to… goals and standards’ where the goals and standards referred to could include ‘specific targets, criteria, standards and other external reference points (e.g. exemplars)’ (p. 199). There is nothing in this definition that limits feedback to assessment tasks as usually construed. Rather, feedback can illuminate multiple moments of learning, which crucially may include many identified by the student rather than the tutor. For example, when engaging with a concept in class, a student might worry about their ‘present state of learning’ with respect to it; they might be confused, or concerned that their peers understand it better. Feedback – from tutors or from peers – will make the difference here, but only if there are mechanisms to allow it. Tutors and students need to work together to cultivate these. Hence the teacher acts not as master (proclaiming what should be done) but usher, accompanying the student on their path towards learning.

Another illustrative concept we find useful is that of the feedback spiral (derived from the ‘feedback and guidance cycle’ in Hounsell et al. 2008). This emphasises the importance of timing to effective feedback and illustrates the multitude of points at which feedback, in its many forms, can be introduced within and between individual courses. Such a spiral can start with early advice building on students’ prior knowledge, incorporating ‘standard’ feedback after a task and involving ‘feedforward’ to the next task (at the next level of the spiral). That such a conception blurs the distinction between ‘feedback’ and ‘teaching’ is one of its attractions.
In this chapter we refer to these multiple points as “moments” for feedback as dialogue. Our use of the term moments seeks to capture the following qualities: part of something larger and ongoing; embracing initiatives that may be small and specific, but nonetheless significant to learning; recognising many different potential forms of feedback; and emphasising the dynamic aspect of movement and the possibilities of such moments acting as ‘fertilizer’ to boost feedback as dialogue and enhance student learning. The actual moments themselves generally involve quite modest interventions, however their pedagogical value can be profound as part of a broader commitment to dialogical teaching. Our examples, discussed in the last section of this chapter, are chosen to be illustrative of how the idea of feedback as dialogue can be implemented at different points in the feedback spiral, and of how the context of their use – such as early or late in a module – will influence their effects. For example, feedback may be used to establish trust and to build a relationship early in the spiral, may help clarify criteria and context for summative assessments in the middle or may be used to give very specific guidance on academic tasks later on.

Several of our examples draw on our experiences using what we term boot grit feedback (McArthur et al. 2011) in which students are given the chance to ask confidentially for further information or clarification of key concepts that remain unclear at the end of class. Students engage with feedback by depositing written comments into a ‘boot grit box’, or electronically by texting comments to a ‘textwall’ (a web site that displays the comments). In either case a fast response from the tutor is essential; with paper comments this can come within an hour or two as a posting to the course VLE, with the textwall they can be instantaneous (since the wall can be projected during the lecture). The idea is to resolve misunderstandings or knowledge gaps that might not initially seem serious, but if left unresolved could “worry away” at the students’ learning in a negative way – like a bit of grit
in a boot. As such boot grit resonates with similar approaches such as minute papers (Angelo and Cross 1993) or short ‘review discussions’ (Hollingsworth 1995).

Before turning to these practical examples, the next section develops our concept of feedback as dialogue, with particular emphasis on the social nature of both learning and dialogue and how these work together in our understanding of feedback as dialogue.

**Feedback as Dialogue**
The concept of dialogue that informs this chapter is both simple and complex. It is simple because it is grounded in a sense of the essential humanness of dialogical activity: a sense that we flourish as humans and best achieve our potential through social immersion in, and engagement with, diverse perspectives and ideas. As Freire (1996) explains:

> dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they [people] achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity (p. 69).

But it is also complex because, within institutions such as universities, this can be far harder to achieve than might seem reasonable. Any dialogical encounter may be distorted by the domination of one view or person over another; there is therefore no room for the sentimentality sometimes associated with notions of dialogue (Freire 1996). The achievement of feedback as dialogue within a course is therefore no easy matter; it is usually easier to avoid such aspirations:

Set them no riddles, just
Echo the common-room cliché:
*Must make more effort.*

("Reports" by U.A. Fanthorpe 2005, p. 89)

Our understanding of dialogue rests not on the number of participants, but on the relationships between participants and/or their relationships with the focus of their dialogue (both feedback and the knowledge they engage with studying a course). We thus reject assumptions that written feedback is necessarily monological (eg. Carless *et al.* 2011) or that
a verbal exchange is always dialogical. A student and teacher may talk face to face about a
piece of work, but unless the student is moved to reconsider the work in light of the teacher’s
comments, then no dialogue has occurred. Note that we stress the student should reconsider
the work, not that they should simply accept the teacher’s suggestions. For in this case the
student’s behaviour is passive; they are receiving instructions. That is not what we mean by
feedback as dialogue: our conception requires active engagement with the feedback, rather
than passive acceptance.

It is useful here to consider the distinction between knowledge and information
(Brown and Duguid, 2000). Knowledge is complex, contested and dynamic; there is a
relationship between the knowledge and the knower and engagement with the knowledge is
essential. In contrast, information can be simpler: it can be passed over from one person to
another with very little, if any, active engagement.

We must therefore understand feedback as a piece of knowledge, with all the
attendant virtues and respect that deserves. If students are to be able to actively engage with
feedback, to be part of a dialogue, then that feedback cannot be presented, or regarded, as a
static canonical statement. By thinking of it in terms of knowledge to be discussed and
interacted with by both parties, we also introduce the notion that it is dynamic and contested:
not only do students have a right to challenge the feedback, they have a responsibility to
determine for themselves its validity, usefulness and implications.

This responsibility extends through all forms of feedback, albeit in different ways. It
is crucial to students actively engaging with knowledge (feedback) rather than receiving it
through transmission, or what Freire (1996) describes as “bankable” approaches to teaching
in which information is deposited into an empty vessel – the student. Many of the examples
of boot grit feedback in the next section deal with technical concepts (see McArthur et al.
2011). In asking for further clarification of such concepts students are acknowledging that
they have not understood them when explained in the lecture. If the problem was just a failure of transmission, if the message was somehow dropped en route from lecturer to the recipient (student), then simply repeating the same words would rectify the problem. But this is rarely the case; students often misunderstand the feedback provided (Carless 2006; Hounsell 2003; Scoles et al. 2012).

Even technical pieces of knowledge need to be actively engaged with if they are to be truly understood in meaningful ways that can form the basis of further learning. The point, therefore, is not necessarily to encourage students to dispute every concept or definition, which could prove incredibly burdensome. However passive student acceptance implies a teaching approach informed more by frustrated parenting experiences than pedagogical reasoning: “because I say so”.

In providing feedback as dialogue a teacher thus acts to usher the student through to new thoughts and understandings: the usher acts as informed companion, but should not dictate the route or outcome, because both of these will differ from student to student. The student should simultaneously gain greater control and responsibility for their own learning and enjoy a learning relationship with the person who provides feedback and the knowledge with which they are engaging. The goal is therefore to allow:

participants to have thoughts they could not have had on their own, yet to recognise these thoughts as developments of their own thinking (Game and Metcalfe 2009, p. 45).

In emphasising the contribution students must make to the path and outcomes of their own learning, we again touch on some of the problems involved in the tight coupling of feedback with formal assessment. Surely all students on a course are required to achieve the same outcomes, if not also follow the same route? But this confuses the artefact produced for a piece of assessment, or any other learning task, with the actual engagement with knowledge experienced by each individual student. All students may produce an essay, but the learning
processes for each – including their dialogical engagement with feedback – are necessarily unique. Feedback, as with any dialogic contribution, must be understood in terms of what has come before and also the future understandings likely to arise from it (Wegerif 2008). This is easily forgotten, especially when feedback is tightly coupled with assessment:

> The good have no history,
> So don’t bother. Satisfactory
> Should satisfy them.
> ("Reports" by U.A. Fanthorpe 2005, p. 89)

As Parker (2005) notes there is something “improper” in pre-determining what a student will learn: learning is always about more than an artefact of assessment. Hence our concept of feedback as dialogue, resting on critical pedagogy, emphasises the active role students have – through feedback as dialogue – in determining their own path; making the path by walking (Bell et al. 1990).

Feedback as dialogue should enable students to escape pre-set paths and find their own way – with all the attendant joys, surprises and achievement that comes with that. But it also has important implications for the role of the teacher who must also engage in a learning process. As Freire pointedly asks: ‘How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?’ (Freire 1996, p. 71). To achieve feedback as dialogue teachers need to find ways to let students know that they too are open to learn through the relationship. This is a relationship that is undeniably between people in very different roles – student and teacher – with all the attendant differences in experience, knowledge, power and authority. Genuine dialogue is not reached by ignoring these differences, but rather by acknowledging and, in the case of some, celebrating them. This approach is further enhanced when the teacher is open about the fact that they still have much to learn.

To summarise, the essence of feedback as dialogue is how we (students and teachers) regard the feedback provided. Is it a static, canonical statement that students should pick up and follow? Or is it a dynamic piece of knowledge, which students must engage with and
take responsibility for using in their own learning? To achieve the latter requires a commitment to feedback as dialogue on both the part of student and teacher. If feedback is not given in the spirit of dynamic and contestable knowledge, then there is little chance for dialogue, no matter how many face to face conversations or the like occur. If students are unable to realise that they are active partners in the feedback process, then the best intentions of teachers will get nowhere.

**To walk together: practical moments for feedback as dialogue**

We turn now to the different moments at which feedback as dialogue can be introduced into a course. Most importantly, it must be introduced in ways that recognise that students actively interpret their own learning environments (Maclellan 2005) and this leads to a great variety of experiences. As Giroux (1992), argues, students read the world differently to academics, and to each other. Students’ must be able to express themselves in voices that are genuinely their own if their participation in the feedback dialogue is to be effective (McArthur 2009).

In deciding how and where to introduce feedback moments into a course we suggest two factors are essential to the realisation of the dialogue explored in the previous section: these are clarity and control. ‘Clarity’ refers to attempts to explicate feedback and allow students to construct their own understandings of it. To achieve this students must be able to contextualise feedback and to understand the aims of the provider. Treating students as partners in learning implies sharing control with them, in feedback as in other areas. This ‘control’ dimension acknowledges that feedback includes emotional, moral and political issues. Rather than a simple transfer of knowledge, it can enhance or undermine self-esteem, generate trust or suspicion, subvert or buttress hierarchies of power. Hence students look to feedback for messages (such as personal attention or support) distinct from (and at times at odds with) simple information transfer (e.g. Huxham 2007).
A third dimension that informs the examples of feedback moments outlined below is that of timeliness (McArthur et al. 2011). The achievement of both clarity and control in students’ experiences of feedback is influenced by the moments along the feedback spiral at which different forms of feedback are introduced. The following examples are illustrative, rather than prescriptive, of moments in which feedback as dialogue can be realised.

**Moment One: establishing feedback as dialogue before a course begins**

The idea of feedback as dialogue can be encouraged even before a course begins. Course handbooks may contain statements about “feedback expectations”, often with a commitment to provide feedback on assessed work within a certain period of time. While commendable to make such a commitment, the narrowness of the way in which feedback is presented can reinforce the tight coupling of feedback and assessment, and thus work against the day-to-day fostering of feedback as dialogue.

Used differently these course handbook statements on feedback can provide a strong foundation for feedback as dialogue. Consider the following extract from a handbook within the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh, which has led an explicit initiative to encourage more dialogical approaches to feedback:

> Feedback for the majority of the topics for the short weekly assignments will be provided by discussion in the seminar, where you can compare your ideas with those of other students, and the way some of the topics have been developed in the literature.

Feedback is emphasised as something to be talked about, and even generated through discussion, rather than merely received by a certain date. An expectation of informal dialogue between the student and teacher, and between peers, is encouraged.

**Moment Two: the first lecture of a course**

Dialogue should be encouraged and normalised in the very first lecture or tutorial. In our work with boot grit feedback we found that giving students opportunities to ask questions in the first lecture was both welcomed and important to the general learning culture that then
developed (McArthur et al. 2011). Early use of boot grit establishes the two-way relationship crucial to feedback as dialogue: students ask a question and find that their lecturer, as promised, provides a timely response, normally within a couple of hours of the class. Then in the next class the lecturer is able to ask if students found the feedback useful, thus demonstrating that it is not simply a transmission process. If the explanation provided did not help, the lecturer knows to try again, to explain differently.

This feedback moment also helps to induct students into the norms and expectations of a new course. In a modularized system students may face a number of complex learning contexts as they move between subjects (Higgins et al. 2002), each with their own unfamiliar norms and expectations.

**Moment Three: introducing the teacher as learner**

We use another variation on the boot grit idea to reinforce the sense that the teacher is also a learner. Timed normally around the fourth week of a new course, in which students have already become familiar with the boot grit idea, we ask students to provide boot grit feedback for the lecturer. While this is a piece of in-course evaluation, not feedback, it can function powerfully as dialogical fertilizer that feeds into, nourishes and improves, the other moments. To achieve this, such an intervention must be sensitive to our third dimension of time by coming early enough to make a difference.

This can be achieved in simple ways, such as puzzling out loud while teaching, or bouncing ideas off students. In written feedback the teacher can acknowledge that they have learned something new or been challenged, intrigued, surprised by what the student has written. In doing so, the teacher demonstrates that they too are a learner in this dialogical exchange and demonstrate the humility which Freire (1996) also regarded as important to achieving dialogue.
Moment Four: establishing the course as a safe learning space
Feedback as dialogue can contribute to the fertile learning environment within a course by minimising some of the pressures that can seem threatening to students. A key feature of boot grit is that students ask their questions anonymously but are also able to see the questions and answers from the entire class. Boot grit feedback encourages dialogue with those students who may not feel comfortable contributing in the “bear pit” of a large lecture class (McArthur et al. 2011, p. 18).

We found that students were greatly reassured to see that they were not alone in failing to grasp certain aspects of the course; indeed, it is a perfectly normal part of any learning process. Being able to study the feedback outside the class that elicited it can also allow for more timely engagement with a particular concept (unlike a busy lecture) and thus more chance of understanding it.

Using textwalls allowed students to participate in the very familiar medium of texting, and they therefore tended to express themselves freely and informally. The resulting exchanges were indicative of the spontaneity and risk inherent in any genuine dialogue, while also encouraging the development of an atmosphere of playful trust.

Moment Five: large classes – bursting with potential for feedback as dialogue
The large lecture is often regarded as an evil necessity in higher education. However, it can also offer a breadth of alternative experiences for students in a safe and accessible way. Game and Metcalfe (2009) describe the particular way in which large classes can form a dynamic presence in which ‘students learn to appreciate and respect their own possibilities when they are surprised by hearing their shy and private inklings enunciated by others’ (p. 50).

Peers are important partners in the establishment of a culture of feedback as dialogue within a course. Here we refer not to the assessment context but the everyday course
exchanges with peers that can flow into feedback as dialogue; thus providing an abundant source of ideas, questions, alternatives, challenges and positive reinforcements that students can harness to improve their engagement with a given subject. Although such moments occur spontaneously there are many ways in which they can be fostered and encouraged. Within large classes textwalls can illuminate a critical mass of the different perspectives of everyone involved. Used in carefully considered short slots within a longer lecture, textwalls can reinforce the complex nature of a subject, in which dialogue based on different perspectives is legitimate, without setting the whole thing off course and introducing unhelpful confusion.

**Moment Six: looking beyond the course**

The end of a course or module provides a particular challenge in applying notions of feedback as dialogue; the conversation with one tutor may have reached an end and it can be difficult for students to see how learning during one module applies to another. But we can use dialogue to encourage students to link learning between modules and carry it forward with them. For example in one module MH uses a one-to-one oral interview as a final assessment (see Huxham *et al.* 2010). The feedback from this interview is emailed to students, who are asked to respond with their thoughts on the feedback, on their performance and on what the experience of the interview has taught them. Although optional, students are encouraged to take part before they receive their actual grade. Most students take up this opportunity for self-generated feedback that we hope will prove useful throughout life.

**Conclusion**

Strikes the right note:
Encouraging, but dull.
Don’t give them anything
To take hold of. Even
Feedback as dialogue celebrates the uncertain nature of learning. It recognises the way in which learning occurs at an intersection between shared knowledge and individual perspectives. To realise their potential students need the freedom and space to make their own path through a shared course. Policies to improve the quality of learning experienced in our universities therefore need to move away from standardisation and audit-based approaches towards a greater acceptance, even celebration, of uncertainty and difference. Such approaches should not neglect quality, but redefine it in ways that truly acknowledge the social nature of learning.

Feedback as dialogue can contribute to this process by nurturing a ubiquitous sense of dialogue with the ideas of others. This cannot be achieved when feedback is bound to formal assessment because the latter inevitably involves parameters and certainties that restrict the unbounded dialogue we seek to nourish. There are, therefore, few examples of feedback linked to formal assessment (formative or summative) in this chapter, but this does not mean that feedback as dialogue has no relevance to assessment: quite the reverse. Our intention is to show the background to learning upon which any individual task or event (including assessment) occurs. Feedback as dialogue emphasises the social nature of learning and its temporal qualities. Learning occurs within contexts informed by past experiences and future aspirations: to make sense of these requires a constant act of dialogue, with ourselves, with the knowledge we engage with and with the ideas of others.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to the Higher Education Academy subject centres for Education (ESCalate) and Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) for funding that enabled the development of these ideas.
References


