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The meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education

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Contents

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I am also eternally grateful to Heidi Carnell for keeping me sane while writing this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis details research exploring the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. The research focused on tutors' written comments on students' written work. Two main phases of research were undertaken. In an exploratory phase, a questionnaire was administered to level one students from two learning contexts. Students from both contexts were also interviewed. In addition, samples of marked work were used to develop of typology of feedback. This typology was used to compare the feedback of three tutors'. Findings suggested that the students valued, paid attention to, and desired feedback. Yet, there seemed to be a problem of 'under-use'. A number of reasons were identified, including 'practical' barriers (such as the timeliness of feedback), alongside 'conceptual' difficulties relating to students' abilities to make sense of the language of assessment. Conceptual difficulties seemed to pose more fundamental problems to the feedback process than practical barriers.

A second phase of research explored these conceptual difficulties in greater depth. Level three students were interviewed. Repertory grid technique was also used. Findings support a view of feedback as a complex and problematic form of communication. Moreover, they suggest that the ways in which students make sense of, and respond to feedback is mediated by the social dynamics of the process as a socially situated activity (such as 'discourse', 'power', and 'emotion'). A provisional explanatory framework was developed. Current policy decisions and official advice seems, however, to be based on a more simplistic model and, as such, addresses only the practical problems at a superficial level. By addressing the more fundamental problems, implications for practice are far different. These implications underpin recommendations for practice made at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this chapter I provide a brief <u>background</u> to my research, outline <u>my interests in the research topic</u>, clarify some <u>key terms</u> and set out my <u>aims and objectives</u>. I then provide an <u>overview of the structure of this thesis</u>.

Background to the research

This research reflects important general issues in Higher Education (HE) relating to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. In particular, it reflects the growing importance placed on assessment as central to, and a 'driver' of student learning, where specific attention has been paid to its formative potential through the use of assessment feedback. At the same time, however, this thesis arose from more local and specific concerns. In 1997/1998, Sheffield Hallam University's School of Cultural Studies received three TQA visits and in all three visits the quality of assessment feedback was, to a greater or lesser extent, raised as an issue (it also cropped up at this time in other TQA visits across the university).

In response to this, a literature search was commenced to identify best practice and the evidence on which it was based. However, there appeared to be a paucity of evidence-based models of good practice for providing effective feedback to students. While plenty of useful 'advice' could be found, little seemed to be known about what students actually do with the feedback they receive (and to what effect). Moreover, such advice tended to be under-researched. The process of giving and receiving assessment feedback in HE constitutes a particular mode of communication. Illuminating how students understand, respond to, and make use of tutors' comments requires a model of

communication that is able to incorporate the unique characteristics of this communication process. Currently, literature in this area (from a variety of sources and disciplines) does not seem to refer to any particular model as a basis for its understanding of feedback. Rather, *assumptions* seem to be made regarding the nature of the process. The importance of examining these assumptions and developing a stronger theoretical base for our understanding of feedback is heightened by the fact that current thinking, to a large extent, guides practice. If the assumptions upon which practical guidelines are based are questionable, then they may be taking us in a 'wrong' direction. An understanding of feedback with a stronger theoretical basis may lead to quite different, yet more effective suggestions for practice.

It was therefore felt timely (if not urgent) to conduct research in this area. Funding was gained in the form of a research studentship and applications were invited for participation in a three-year PhD programme. As the successful applicant, I was given a wide brief to explore 'the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education'. Before outlining how I tackled this brief, it is worth positioning myself within the research process by elaborating on my interests in this topic.

My interest in the research topic

The motivation for applying for the studentship stemmed from a general interest in post-16 learning (having conducted a small research project looking at student retention in further education as part of a masters degree in social science research methods), and from my personal experiences of assessment and feedback in the HE setting. As a graduate, I was familiar with a range of assessment and feedback practices, but throughout my 'career' as a student, I was assessed mainly by written course work

assignments. The feedback that I received almost always took the form of a grade and written tutor comments. However, I found the volume, content and 'usefulness' of this feedback to have been consistently inconsistent. On occasions, I was provided with detailed assessment feedback, which was relevant to the criteria on which I was being assessed, formative, and sufficiently timely to allow me to act upon it. However, more often than not, feedback comments seemed unclear, arbitrary, irrelevant, insubstantial and, at worst, de-motivating.

So, while eager to receive feedback comments, and sometimes finding them useful and informative, often they took the form of brief statements, contained little helpful information, and were of limited use. One example of feedback from an undergraduate essay I wrote during my first year at university read:

> *'You have quoted a wide range of sources but the material is still very 'text book'! It would have been worthwhile to develop some of the more recent literature, give examples and analyse'.*

I was, however, at a loss to understand what the tutor meant by 'textbook' and to know what I needed to do to 'analyse'. Looking back at these comments with seven years experience of learning in the HE sector, I am still not certain I would know how to respond to such feedback.

Before embarking on this research, I decided to look at more recent examples of assessment feedback. This was not a systematic analysis, rather I wanted to get a 'feel' for the sort of feedback today's undergraduate might typically receive. Comparing the example of feedback from my own work with comments written five years later at a different university (and by different tutors in different subject areas), I was left with the impression that written feedback had changed little since my undergraduate days.

It therefore seemed to me that while feedback continued to be promoted as an effective way of improving student learning, there might be problems with its use value. At the same time, it appeared that what assessment feedback actually means to students 'on the ground' and how they respond to it, remained a mystery. I was therefore interested in exploring further students' experience of feedback and their reactions to it.

Clarification of terms

I do not wish to dwell here on definitions of 'feedback' or what makes an assessment 'formative' as these are conceptual issues outlined and discussed in the literature review chapter and other sections of this thesis. Rather, I wish this brief clarification to be no more than a starting point for understanding concepts central to this thesis, since the meanings attached to certain terms will unfold and unravel in later chapters.

The focus of my work is on written comments from tutors on written pieces of work that have been submitted for assessment, marked and returned to the student. This is not to imply that I was concerned primarily with assessed work, which had both a formative *and* summative element. I was simply interested in assessment feedback in the form of written comments to students. Therefore, the purpose of the assessment task was not an immediate concern. Rather, the focus of this thesis is written feedback to a student on any piece of written work, submitted to a tutor, judged by that tutor, and returned with comments based on the tutor's judgement. It just so happens that my research on the meaning and impact of assessment feedback took place in a context where assessment tasks had both formative and summative characteristics. This seems to have been the case for two related reasons:

1. In chapter 2, I make a distinction between summative and formative assessment, pointing out that rarely (if at all) can an assessment task be considered purely summative or formative; all assessment tasks arguably have a summative and formative element;

2. While 'assessment *of* learning' (summative assessment) remains a central concern for employers, the public and policy makers, there has been a growing acceptance (particularly within the last ten to twenty years) of the potential benefits of 'assessment *for* learning' (formative assessment). This is reflected in the widespread practice of tutors commenting (to a greater or lesser extent) on written assessment tasks, which simultaneously have a summative purpose.

However, the summative nature of the assessment tasks that became the focus of my research did come to hold important, yet unanticipated, implications for students' responses to feedback, which I discuss in later chapters.

Setting aside the summative and formative distinction, it is also important to point out that I did not intend to restrict my research focus to any one form of assessment. Again, my main aim was solely to explore students' experiences of, and responses to feedback and so any form of assessment which generated written tutor comments fulfilled this criterion, including essays, reports, portfolios of work, case studies, and so on. This focus is further justified by the central role the written assignment continues to play in HE and the prevalence of written feedback comments as a way of communicating information on a student's performance (see Chapter 2). I use the terms 'assessment feedback', 'feedback' and 'tutors' comments' interchangeably to refer to the *written* comments on students' *written* work (unless stated otherwise).

I also wish to clarify that I use the term 'tutor' in a broad sense. I am aware that a 'tutor' might be equated with a 'personal tutor', someone designated to offer the student particular academic and pastoral support. I also recognise that students encounter a variety of professional groups (with different levels of seniority) during their time at university with whom they interact to a greater or lesser extent. For example, they are likely to have varying degrees of contact with both support staff and academic staff. However, I am simply interested in all those who both teach and assess students' work and are responsible for providing them with assessment feedback. Therefore, when I refer to a student's 'tutor' or 'tutors', I am making reference to the members of academic staff who teach and assess them.

Aims and Objectives

The broad aim of this research (as indicated above) was to contribute to a better understanding of the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in HE. The research process was 'organic'. That is, it evolved and developed as it progressed over three years (although in an intervening year I took a job as a researcher elsewhere, suspending my PhD registration for 12 months). The reasons for this reflected the nature of the topic of research about which little was previously known, resulting in the need to be responsive to new and important issues as they emerged during the course of the research. They also reflected the pragmatic decisions I had to take as I encountered practical obstacles to, and constraints on the research. Yet, at the same time, the research process was underpinned by my own preference for an 'adaptive' approach to research, involving an ongoing dialogue between data collection and theory generation, which allowed the focus of research to shift as and when appropriate. I elaborate on all

of these issues in Chapter 3. The point is that my initial objectives were inevitably broad. The two main objectives were:

- to investigate how students receive, interpret and respond to feedback in the form of written tutor comments on written course work assessments

- to investigate the reasons behind student reactions to this feedback

By meeting these objectives I hoped that my research would enable me to recommend practical steps to take to help tutors produce more effective feedback and help students *use* feedback more effectively.

The structure of this thesis

Throughout my post-compulsory education, I have encountered a wealth of published research papers, research reports, conference papers, and so on. The structure of the majority of these follows a well-established pattern, involving, in turn, an 'introduction' section, a 'literature review', a single 'methodology' or 'methods' section, a 'results' section, a 'discussion' and, finally, 'conclusions'. Yet, as any researcher will admit, the process of research is often a 'messy' business. Rarely does the 'clean', logical order of publications reflect the true path of research. Rather, for the sake of clarity, a form is adopted which details the findings and how they were arrived at in a coherent and structured manner. There is nothing wrong with this - after all, the ability to articulate the research process and its 'product' clearly and concisely is essential if knowledge, ideas, evidence and assertions are to be communicated to, and shared with an academic community. And, in many instances, authors set-aside a paragraph or two to explicitly reflect on, and refer to some of the practical difficulties and dilemmas they encountered.

However, I feel that to simply offer such brief reflections in this thesis would not do justice to, not accurately reflect the research process, which has occurred during this PhD programme. Moreover, a rigid structure of reporting would not fit well with the theoretical assumptions underpinning my research. Consequently, this thesis, while to some extent resembling a 'traditional' approach to the writing-up of research, in other ways adopts a more flexible framework. This provides a clearer account of how my thinking developed during the research process and the ways in which initial empirical work and discussion of findings necessitated further data collection and further discussion. The structure of this thesis, therefore, reflects a 'cyclical' research process, illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. The research process
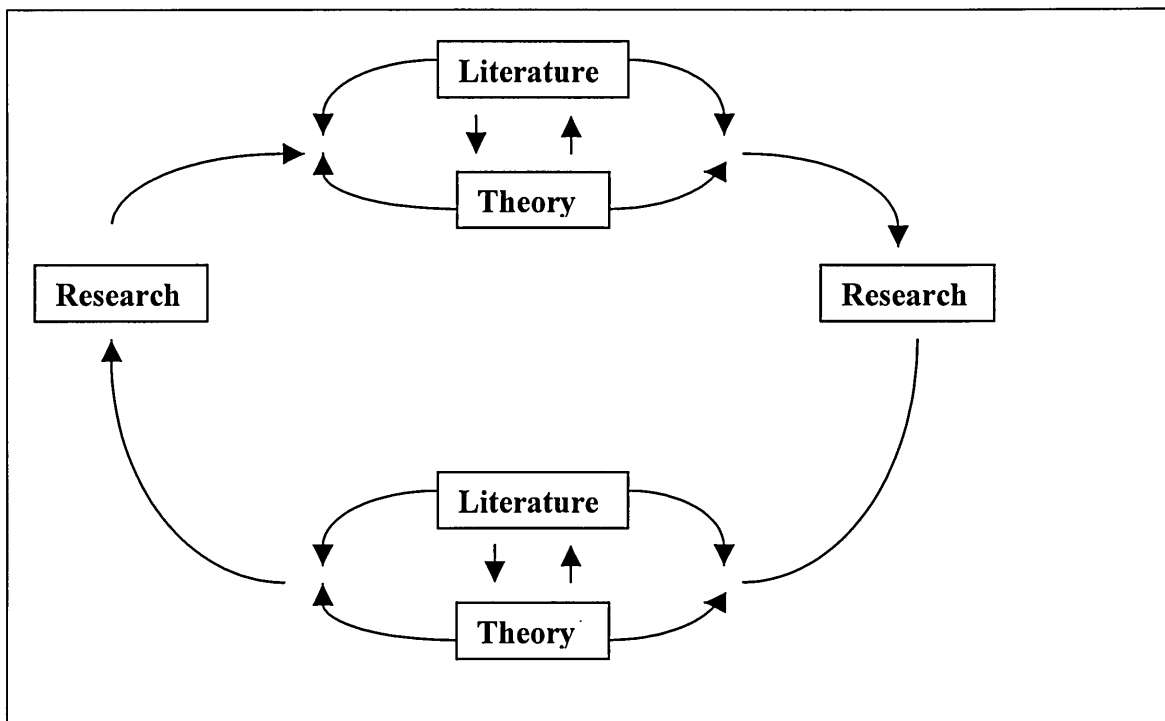
Following this chapter, I present a review of the literature. From this review, more specific research questions emerged in relation to my initial aim and objectives from the gaps I was able to identify in this literature. These questions, and guiding methodological principles, influenced my choice of research methods. I discuss these

methodological assumptions and then outline my methods in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I present research findings, which I then discuss in Chapter 5 (relating them back to the literature identified in Chapter 2). However, while addressing some initial questions, these findings and the subsequent discussion raised more fundamental questions about the role of assessment feedback in improving student learning. These questions required further empirical investigation. I therefore undertook a second phase of data collection. I describe the methods I used in this phase in Chapter 6, and detail the findings in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 offers a discussion of these findings, relating them to my earlier literature review and to the findings from, and discussion of my first phase of research. I also introduce areas of literature not discussed in Chapter 2. These had not seemed initially relevant to the topic of assessment feedback when first reviewing the literature, yet proved useful for supporting my discussion. In addition, I offer a provisional explanatory framework within which the process of giving and receiving assessment feedback can be better understood. Finally, in Chapter 9 I conclude by making recommendation for practice and assessing the contribution of my research to this topic.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

At the time of writing the final draft of this thesis, I still encounter the occasional (albeit often obscure) reference to an article on assessment. Therefore, in this chapter, I present a review of the literature that while not exhaustive (I have yet to encounter any review that truly is), is nevertheless comprehensive, covering work that I feel has made the most significant contributions to the topic of assessment feedback. Where a number of empirical studies relate to an issue I raise in this review, I sometimes refer to just a few of these as examples. I therefore apologise to any authors who may read this review and feel that their research has been overlooked.

The way I have chosen to organise this literature review is not the only way I could have done so. However, it is the way that has made most sense to me and one I feel grasps the key issues and important research bearing on this area. I begin by providing a brief outline of the development of 'feedback' as a concept, which provides some historical context as well as an introduction to some important conceptual issues. I then discuss they ways in which feedback on assessment has been conceived of as essential to student learning in HE. Key issues and key research are explored in detail. These suggest a number of factors, which mediate the production of, and student responses to assessment feedback. However, there remain notable gaps in the literature, with many of these key issues requiring further investigation since, in many ways, they raise more questions than they answer.

The concept of 'feedback'

The term 'feedback' originates from engineering systems theory (Wiliam, 1998) and refers to the process of feeding back information on an output of a system to an input. This is in order to influence future outputs in such a way as to close the gap between actual outputs and a reference level or input level. The concept of 'feedback' is also apparent in early theories of communication and, later, became influential in business management theory (Ramaprasad, 1983). More recently, it has attracted the attention of educators.

In 1948, Claude Elwood Shannon developed the first complete mathematical theory of communication (Taylor, 1993), proposing a linear model. His aim was to quantify the cost of transmitting messages and to maximise the efficiency of information transfer by avoiding undesirable disturbances, or 'noise' (ibid.), which might hinder communication. Shannon's theory had a major impact on the telecommunications industry and led, in part, to the emergence of a concept of 'information' and the first systems approaches to communication (Matterlart & Matterlart, 1998).

During the 1960s, Melvin De Fleur brought greater complexity to Shannon's linear model by elevating the importance of 'feedback' (Matterlart & Matterlart, 1998). He suggested that a 'social system' is constituted by means of communication and, while each communication medium is independent to some extent, it performs a role within a system by interacting to maintain the balance of the system as a whole.

Prior to De Fleur, and at the same time as the emergence of Shannon's theory, Norbert Weiner published the first edition of *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948, second addition published in 1961). Like De Fleur, a central concept for Weiner was 'feedback'. He asserted that:

11

'... when we desire a motion to follow a given pattern the difference between this pattern and the actually performed motion is used as a new input to cause the part regulated to move in such a way as to bring its motion closer to that given by the pattern' (1961: 6-7).

For Weiner, free flows of information and effective systems of feedback were essential for an organised society (Matterlart & Matterlart, 1998).

These early models make a number of assumptions about the communication process and the role of feedback. Two significant ones are considered here. The first relates to 'meaning'. Assuming no *external* hindrances (such as Shannon's notion of 'noise') to the transmission of a message, (feedback) information can be encoded and sent and then received and decoded without a problem. Information is therefore assumed to be inherently meaningful. For example, according to Shannon's model:

'the content of the whole message is equal to the sum of the information conveyed by its parts ...[so] the message is seen ... to be sufficient, *in and of itself*, to reconstitute the information initially present in the source, in the absence of outside interference' (Taylor, 1993: 60-61 (italics in original)).

The second assumption relates to 'objectivity'. That is, communication is objectified at all levels. Even where communication takes place between people, the participants in the communication process are cast as passive. They are objective components of the process rather than subjective actors. Information too is seen as objective. There is no mention of potential conflict between the sender and the receiver of a message; the communication process is functional and serves a common purpose; It maintains order,

and this is precisely what the term 'information' in these models is held to represent - structure, order and organisation.

If feedback is considered in the context of human performance, it may be defined as the process of evaluating current performance levels, comparing these levels to pre-determined reference levels and, where the performance level is below that of the reference level, feeding back this information to the individual and requesting that they take steps to increase their performance levels (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). If we consider this definition in relation the models of communication outlined above, the focus will be on measuring performance and sending appropriate messages so as to effect change, rather than on the ways in which messages will be interpreted or the possible ways recipients of feedback information will respond.

Consideration of the possible subjective nature of the process of giving and receiving feedback has, however, been explored elsewhere. Ramaprasad (1983), in addressing what he sees as a lack of a clear definition of feedback in business management theory, offers his own definition. While Ramaprasad defines feedback as '... information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (1983: 4), he importantly goes on to outline three necessary conditions for feedback to occur. These are:

1. 'Availability of data on the reference level of the system parameter' (Ramaprasad, 1983: 6).

2. 'Availability of data on the actual level of the system parameter' (ibid.).

3. 'Availability of a mechanism for comparing the data on the reference level with that on the actual level to generate information about the gap between the two levels' (ibid.).

Setting out these conditions allows Ramaprasad to explore the difficulties which might prevent them being met. He argues that objective judgements of performance are not always possible and that differences between people will mediate their judgements. As a result, precision and objectivity are not always possible. That is, Ramaprasad makes the point that where 'system parameters' are qualitative, attempts to 'measure' the gap between the 'reference level' of the parameter and the 'actual level' inevitably involve subjective judgements (Ramaprasad, 1983). He argues that 'When reference levels are implicit and/or qualitative, comparison and consequent feedback is rendered difficult' (1983: 6). Ramaprasad (1983: 6) goes on to suggest that:

> 'Of course, reference levels can be explicated to make comparison and consequent feedback easier ... [yet] On the other hand, only some qualitative reference levels can be quantified. Most cannot be, except by trivialising the meaning of the parameters. For example, it is very difficult to quantify the reference levels of interpersonal skills. In fact, qualitative parameters prove to be the most difficult for performance appraisal'.

Moreover, he argues that even when specific criteria for judging such levels are established, the scope for individual differences between judges or 'measurers' of parameters will continue 'to complicate the feedback process' (Ramaprasad, 1983: 5).

In addition to recognising the possibility that feedback involves subjective judgements based on performance criteria, which may not be easy to pin down, a second important feature of Ramaprasad's definition is that he argues that feedback can be on inputs, processes or outputs. In other words, it can take the form of 'feed-forward' on inputs, 'feed-within' on processes or 'feed-back' on outputs (Ramaprasad, 1983, using Bogart's (1980) terminology). This is a significant distinction to make because, as Ramaprasad

14

(1983: 5) points out, 'Focus on output parameters alone unnecessarily restricts the usefulness of the concept [of feedback]'.

And finally, Ramaprasad (1983: 8) argues that:

> 'The information about the gap, by itself, is not feedback. The information can only be called feedback if, and when it is used to alter the gap ... Only when the awareness is translated into action ... does the information about the shortfall become feedback'.

Ramaprasad's definition of feedback therefore extends the conditions required for feedback to occur. It does this by emphasising the need for a person whose performance requires improvement to actually use the information fed back to them on their performance. In other words, the feedback 'loop' is only complete when information about the gap is used (Ramaprasad, 1983). This is because the concept of feedback is, as Di Stefano et al. (1967) have argued, inherently and essentially 'circular'.

Three points then make Ramaprasad's definition of feedback crucial and move thinking about feedback on from ideas based on more 'mechanical' models of communication:

1. Feedback requires data on 'reference levels' and 'output levels'. In, other words, it requires evaluation criteria and performance indicators. However, where information on 'system parameters' is qualitative, their measurement is made difficult as feedback is inevitably mediated by subjective decisions. Even when criteria are established on which to make such decisions, not all parameters can be quantified and the meaning of others may be trivialised.

2. Feedback can take the form of information given prior to a performance, during a performance, or after a performance.

3. Information must be acted on by its recipient in order for it to be considered feedback (but while Ramaprasad considers potential difficulties with the qualitative nature of 'system parameters' and the subjectivity of judgements, he does not discuss in detail the ability of an individual to act on performance information as a necessary condition for feedback to occur).

Assessment feedback and higher education

More recently, there has been a growing interest in assessment feedback in higher education. This interest reflects an increasing focus on the ways in which students are assessed, which has developed at a time when the face of UK HE is rapidly being transformed. Increasing teacher workloads, the introduction of student fees, modularisation, a rise in student numbers vis-à-vis a fall in resources, increasing external audit and calls for greater quality standards have all put pressure on institutions and teachers to re-examine their assessment practices. Assessment has come to be seen as one way of improving student learning, and assessment feedback as integral to the assessment process. For example, Rowntree (1987: 24) declares feedback to be the 'life-blood of learning'.

So while assessment in HE 'may be many things for different people' (Brown & Knight, 1994: 13) and be conceived as serving a number of purposes, in HE today, an important purpose is considered the improvement of learning (Cross, 1996; Gipps, 1994). That is, assessment is not conceived solely in terms of the setting of a task and its completion. Rather, it is recognised as an ongoing process and central to both student learning and the student experience (Falchikov & Thomson, 1996). For example, Graham Gibbs argues that assessment is 'the most powerful lever teachers

have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners' (1999: 41).

The crucial link between assessment and learning is feedback to students on how they have performed. However, the nature of this feedback will vary. Some feedback will be provided with the notion of improving students' performance, while other feedback will be for the purpose of simply supplying evaluative information (Hyland, 2000a). And it is important to make a distinction between feedback from summative assessment and feedback from formative assessment. Formative assessment is about helping students to learn. For assessment to be formative, it must form part of a continuous cycle of learning. To do this, it must not only provide students with an indication of their achievements, but crucially it must also provide information and guidance from which students can learn (Brown, 1999; Ding, 1997). As such, feedback is integral to formative assessment and so is very much part of the learning experience (Brown & Knight, 1994). Moreover, feedback from formative assessment is also essential for motivating students. As Brown & Knight argue, if students 'do not know how they are doing, they tend to stop working ... Motivation and feedback are therefore intertwined' (1994:33). Hyland (2000a) makes the point that:

> 'whatever the relationship between teaching and the assessment system, in most cases each student's sense of personal achievement, motivation, and hopes and prospects of improvement will be directly related to the nature and utility of the feedback that they receive on their assessed performances. For it is this feedback that has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument for the further development of each student's learning' (2000: 234).

When feedback is provided following summative assessment, however, it tends to simply report a grade or whether the learner has passed or failed. This reflects the purpose of summative assessment, which is to enable (largely numerical) judgements to be made for the purpose of classifying students. Summative assessment usually occurs at the end of a course or module and is not focused on helping the student to learn and develop. Of course, in reality, assessments are neither purely summative nor formative. In most cases in higher education, assessments will vary in their primary purpose, but generally they will have some formative *and* summative elements. Even end-of-year examinations will convey some information to students on the extent to which there is scope for improvement.

Entwistle et al's (1988) definition of learning highlights the importance of formative assessment feedback. For Entwistle et al. (1988), learning should involve changing students' conceptions and understandings of the real world, not by furnishing students with 'correct' concepts, but by enabling students, within a supportive environment, to make mistakes, explore alternatives and confront discrepancies between their present ways of thinking and new ways. Furthermore, Radloff and de la Harpe (1999: 1) define studying as 'a process involving a range of appropriate cognitive and metacognitive strategies and requiring effort and personal responsibility aimed at achieving positive learning outcomes'. This implies that students need to be active in their learning and need to be able to plan, monitor, evaluate and reflect. It is this reflection that is particularly important since it enables students to think critically about actions and outcomes in order to continue learning and improve future outcomes (this is particularly important if individuals are to become lifelong learners as advocated by The Dearing Report (1997)). Assessment feedback is therefore seen as essential for student learning (Brass, 1999; Gibbs, 1999), not only to foster effective learning but, more

fundamentally, to also help students become autonomous learners who have effectively learned *how* to learn (Hyland, 2000a). Without feedback, students will struggle to evaluate and learn from their work (Stefani, 1998) and will not find it easy to understand where they may have gone wrong (or indeed what they did right) (Taras, 2001). In terms of improving learning then, summative assessment has limitations. In particular, while it is able to pass a summary judgement on a student's performance, potentially providing students with a benchmark against which to assess and monitor their performance (Ding, 1997), it is unable to facilitate the development of the kinds of skills identified above through advice and guidance. Feedback from formative assessment is where the potential lies to achieve this.

Yet despite the potentially crucial role of formative assessment feedback in improving student learning and a growing interest in the link between assessment and learning, its potential to effect improvement in learning seems to remain unrealised (Ivanić et al., 2000; McCune, 1999; Ding, 1998; Hinkle, 1997). And it is an area that surprisingly remains relatively under-researched and under-theorised in education literature. Particularly noticeable by its absence is research from the student perspective (although a small number of studies have been undertaken, which are discussed later in this chapter). Consequently, a number of specific questions remain unanswered as to the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. And at a more theoretical level, as Ramaprasad noted in the context of business management theory, there are few definitions or agreed upon conceptual models of formative assessment feedback.

There are, however, some notable exceptions to this latter observation. Authors such as Sadler (1989), Black & Wiliam (2000) and Yorke (2000), have attempted to provide a stronger conceptual basis for improving practice. Sadler (1989) distinguishes between

feedback, self-monitoring and formative feedback. For Sadler, feedback results from information originating from an external source (usually the tutor), while self-monitoring results from evaluative information generated by the learner himself or herself. But for *formative* feedback to exist, both feedback and self-monitoring must occur together, with a desirable goal being to 'facilitate the transition from feedback to self-monitoring' (Sadler, 1989: 122). Moreover, three conditions must be met. Firstly, that students share a conception of quality with their tutor. Secondly, that they are able to monitor what they are producing *while* they are producing it (or in other words, are able to compare the current standard of performance with the desired standard). And finally, that students are able to draw from a 'repertoire' of alternative strategies.

More recently, Black & Wiliam (2000) (in the context of classroom learning and assessment) have offered what (at the time of writing) they call a 'sketch' or 'notes' toward a theory of formative assessment. They attempt to draw together three strands of the learning context - the teacher and what the teacher does, the student and what the student does, and the nature of the subject - and insist that teachers, students (both individually and in groups) and subject matter must be seen as components, which interact in a complex way within something akin to Lave & Wenger's (1991) notion of a 'community of practice'. Formative feedback is not seen as part of a decontextualised, linear process of communication. Rather, formative assessment needs to be understood through the interactions of all three strands of the learning context. And, as in the work of Sadler, there is an emphasis on the role of teachers in equipping students with the cognitive skills to self-assess and self-monitor rather than on the teacher being a sole provider of information.

Meanwhile, an important feature of Yorke's work on assessment is his emphasis on the need for teachers to both understand student behaviour and focus on students' needs.

That is to say, the teacher must be orientated toward student learning, must understand the nature of student learning and be committed to facilitating learning, must be aware of and take into account students' current levels of development and what the next steps for students might be, and have knowledge about styles of feedback and the skills to provide feedback appropriately (Yorke, 2000).

These approaches are a departure from early models of communication and ideas about feedback and, while sharing characteristics of Ramaprasad's definition of feedback, suggest models more appropriate to the education setting. This is because they focus on the recipients of feedback information (i.e. students) as active learners with particular needs, and on teachers as needing to recognise these needs and meet them by fostering self-monitoring and self-assessment (rather than simply instructing students). At the same time, this focus takes a more considered view of the many contextual factors mediating learning and assessment in particular education settings

All three approaches also reflect a gradual shift in thinking about assessment. Filer (2000) outlines a both 'technical' and 'sociological' discourse of assessment. The 'technical' discourse focuses on how the ends of assessment are to be met. That is, there is an emphasis on assessment 'techniques' and issues of reliability and validity (Broadfoot, 1996). Meanwhile, the sociological discourse confronts more fundamental issues by exploring the social and political functions of assessment (Filer, 2000). Here, assessment is regarded as a socially situated and constructed educational activity (Pryor & Torrance, 2000).

While the technical discourse has tended to dominate public and policy debates around assessment (Filer, 2000), there has been a significant growth, particularly within the last decade, in literature adopting a sociological approach. This approach has involved a more critical appraisal of assessment processes, which are otherwise assumed

21

transparent and unproblematic by the dominant discourse. For example, Torrance and Pryor's research on classroom assessment yielded findings, which suggest that:

> '... each participant brings to the [assessment] event understandings not only of the cognitive agenda, but also of the kind of social relations and practices that are legitimate in the circumstances. These understandings are then subject to change as a result of the inferences that are made during the interaction' (2000: 126).

James'(1996) study of mature students' experiences of assessment also highlights the need to conceive assessment practices as problematic and bound up with subjective traditions, regulations, and the interests of a range of different stakeholder groups. In particular, these factors can be shown to impact on, and problematise the development and use of assessment criteria, which I discuss further in later sections of this chapter.

Key issues and important research

The centrality of tutors' written feedback comments

While feedback can be given to learners in a number of ways (for example, verbally, to groups of individuals, via face-to-face tutorials and during informal conversations outside of the teaching programme), the majority of studies focus on written feedback comments on written coursework assignments. This preoccupation with written feedback may be justified because it recognises that the written assignment occupies a 'central place in higher education ... [as] both a tool of assessment and an avenue to learning' (Hounsell, 1984), despite a rise in innovative assessment methods (McCune, 1999). It also recognises that written feedback continues to constitute one of the most

common forms of exchange between tutors and students, and that it is where students tend to look for information on how they are doing (Hyland, 2000a). In fact, it could be argued that it is *because* of recent innovations in assessment that the role of the written comment remains central since, as Morgan et al. (2002) have recently noted, assessment tasks are increasingly complex, requiring greater levels of interpretation of student 'texts' (which are usually written) on the part of tutors as more 'traditional' forms of examination have been replaced by 'open-ended' tasks. Moreover, tutors' workloads are increasing while student numbers continue to grow and, at the same time, the use of distance learning and new technologies is becoming more extensive. As a result, face-to-face student-tutor contact time is diminishing, leading to a greater reliance on written correspondence (whether paper- or electronic-based); rarely do face-to-face discussions of students' work take place on an individual basis.

It is worth pointing out, however, that this tendency to focus on written feedback comments has not precluded these studies from encompassing a wide range of different forms written feedback (for example, short comments written in the margins of students' work as well as longer comments located at the end of the assignment), nor the different kinds of written assessment tasks students are expected to engage with (for example, essays, reports, portfolios of written work and individual projects).

The importance of assessment feedback for student learning

The case for making a link between formative assessment (and feedback) and improving student learning has, as demonstrated above, been made by many academics. But is there empirical evidence for making such a link? Kluger & DeNisi (1996) looked at 131 reports in their review of research relating to the effects of feedback. They found

that while the reported effects of feedback varied significantly, overall, the effects were positive and fairly large. However, significant variation in both the direction and size of reported effects was found. And so in commenting on Kluger & DeNisi's analysis, Dylan Wiliam (1998) suggests that the *quality* of feedback is important for improving classroom learning, not simply its existence.

Later, Wiliam himself undertook a similar meta-analysis with Paul Black. They conducted an extensive review of journal articles relevant to the subject of formative assessment in education. They identified 600 studies (relating to all levels of learning and undertaken by researchers from a number of different countries), deciding to include 251 in their final review. From their analysis, they concluded that, in general, considerable learning gains can be achieved through formative assessment methods and, in particular, that quality feedback is crucial to maximise the impact of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998a). Yet this finding is qualified by noting that for feedback to be effective it should focus on tasks learners need to improve on, rather than on learners themselves (ibid.).

The suggestion that the 'type' or 'nature' of feedback is more important than simply its presence is supported by Johnson et al.'s (1993) research. Their findings suggest that 'learning-oriented' feedback leads to better performance than 'performance-oriented' feedback. That is, feedback that provides specific, descriptive information on how to perform a task (learning-oriented) better enhances performance than feedback which simply gives knowledge of results by presenting information about performance outcomes (performance-oriented) (Johnson et al., 1993). And further evidence in support of the need for tutors to provide the 'right' feedback is offered by Ding & Ecclestone (1997). The researchers developed a typology of tutors' comments from previous work by Tunstall & Gipps (1996) (in the context of primary education) to

24

explore the 'types' of feedback most likely to facilitate learning among HE students. From their findings they conclude that 'positive' and 'negative' comments, which evaluate a student's work, need to be complemented by 'descriptive' comments, and that both formative and summative information are needed to effect improvements in student learning. It is worth noting that a tendency for research to focus on the efficacy of different types of feedback comment has a long history in the literature on written composition (Hinkle, 1997). However this literature has tended to address only a narrow range of questions specific to particular styles of composition.

Deep and surface learning

Other authors have explored *how* students act in the context of teaching, learning and assessment, and how this mediates the ways in which they might respond to assessment feedback. Before looking at this work, it is first worth outlining how areas of the education literature have characterised the ways in which students learn and deal with assessment.

Higher education literature, particularly where it has adopted a 'psychological' perspective, is littered with attempts to define, measure and quantify different 'types' of student learning in order to identify the most effective. Measuring the ways students learn and study has tended to be linked to a concern with one of two conceptually different things (Murray-Harvey, 1994). Firstly, there is a concern with 'approaches to learning and studying' and, secondly, with 'learning styles', and although there is a common interest to understand the differences in the ways students learn, these two concerns are not the same. Essentially, different theoretical positions underpin the two concerns. The learning styles approach is based on cognitive psychology theory and

25

assumes that students' psychological pre-dispositions determine the ways they learn and that these 'learning styles' are resistant to change. The implication is that certain students will inevitably approach learning in certain ways and that the educational environment (including assessment practices and feedback provision) need to be tailored to these learning styles to foster improvement (Murray-Harvey, 1994). Meanwhile, the concern with approaches to learning and studying derives from qualitative analyses of 'student reports of their own study processes' (Entwistle & Watson, 1988: 258) and assumes that approaches to learning are dependent upon the context of the HE setting (and so can change) (Laurillard, 1979). As such, there is no one approach to learning which will characterise a student's general approach to education. Rather, the approach a student adopts is likely to be unstable and vary between tasks. Given this potential flexibility, it is suggested that students may be 'taught' to adopt approaches that improve their learning.

Seminal work by Marton & Säljö (1976) underpins the approaches to learning perspective (which has tended to dominate recent debates in teaching and learning). Their research suggests that while different students learn through texts and lectures in different ways, two general approaches can be identified - a 'deep' approach to learning and a 'surface' approach. These approaches were initially generated inductively (Marton & Säljö, 1976; 1984) and were subsequently operationalised and investigated through further research, and built-upon to include an 'achievement' or 'strategic' approach (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Entwistle, (1987) outlines the 'defining features' of 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning as:

Deep approach

- intention to understand;

- vigorous interaction with the context;

26

- relate new ideas to previous knowledge;

- relate concepts to everyday experience;

- relate evidence to conclusions;

- examine the logic of the argument.

Surface approach

- intention to complete task requirements;

- memorise information needed for assessments;

- failure to distinguish principles from examples;

- treat task as an external imposition;

- focus on discrete elements without integration;

- unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies.

Strategic approach

- intention to obtain highest grades possible;

- organise time and distribute effort to greatest effect;

- use previous exam papers to predict questions;

- be alert to cues about marking schemes.

(Reproduced from Entwistle, 1987: 16)

Approaches to learning, motivation and the learning context

As these defining features imply, approaches to learning are inextricably linked to student motivation (for example, see the work of Biggs (1993)). However, student motivation may be complex and so it is far from clear that students will adopt a wholly deep, surface or strategic approach to learning. For example, McCune (1999) presents evidence of surface approaches to essay writing existing *alongside* deep characteristics.

27

Moreover, student responses in research by Ecclestone & Swann (1999) suggest that factors mediating student learning, approaches to assessment and responses to feedback are both complex and multiple. Their work highlights the social power and status of assessment in view of students' anxiety over grades and, moreover, suggests that attempts to improve learning via formative assessment will be mediated by tutors' and students' cultural and social expectations of their roles and students' prior educational experiences. This reflects a belief that the learning environment plays an important role in mediating student motivation and, in turn, their approaches to learning and assessment (for example, see Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Newble & Clarke, 1986; Murray-Harvey, 1994).

The context of HE

Entwistle (1987) asserts that a 'surface' approach to learning is most strongly correlated with 'extrinsic motivation and narrowly vocational concerns' (Entwistle, 1987: 19), while intrinsic motivation (such as interest in a subject area) is most strongly (and positively) correlated with a deep approach (ibid.). As suggested above, these motives are likely to be mediated by a complexity of factors pertaining to the particularities of the learning context. In *Making the Grade*, Howard Becker (1968) claimed that US students' academic lives were dominated by assessment demands. And his research suggested that as a result, their behaviour reflected the strategies they adopted to cope with assessment, obtain the grades they needed, and progress through the education system. Their actions were therefore described as instrumental, mechanistic and pragmatic. Although over thirty years old, the findings of this study reflect current concerns in UK HE. Considering the wider social and political context within which assessment and feedback practices take place, it is argued that HE is increasingly driven

28

by utilitarian, pragmatic thought, where students are the new 'consumers' and behave as such, doing what is necessary to achieve the marks and progress (Allen, 1998; Brown & Knight, 1994).

Specific changes to the landscape of HE, such as increasing student numbers and increasing tutor workloads, are also blamed for promoting summative rather than formative assessment practices (Hyland, 1994), which encourage the learning of facts and basic skills rather than critical thinking and critical autonomy. The suggested implications are that while tutors might emphasise the importance of critical thinking, this is not always reflected in teaching and assessment methods (Entwistle, 1984). Moreover, as students may be increasingly driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark (Winter, 1993) they are tending to adopt a 'surface' approach to learning (Hounsell, 1987). It may therefore be difficult to foster intrinsic motivation and deep learning in a climate where students are increasingly seeing a degree as linked to better employment prospects and therefore as a means to an end (Ecclestone, 1998)

Implications for the efficacy of formative assessment and students' responses to feedback

So if extrinsic motivation and surface learning dominate, efforts to encourage deep learning may be compromised. Moreover, the potential for formative assessment to contribute to student learning may be diminished. Brown & Knight argue that:

> 'in recent years students have become much more strategic in their study
>
> patterns, rarely studying for the love of learning alone, but concentrating
>
> their energies on what will get them a better degree ... This means that
>
> getting them to accept the value of formative assessment will not be

simple, and that if formative assessment is not in-built as a normal, natural procedure in all courses, then its affects are likely to be severely compromised by this extrinsic, mark-driven motivation' (1994: 33).

And research at Sunderland University found that 'some students threw away feedback if they disliked the grade, while others seemed concerned only with the final result and did not collect their marked work' (reported in The Times Higher Education Supplement, 25/09/98 (see Wojtas, 1998)).

Even if students do want formative feedback, it has been argued that they are likely to want extensive, specific feedback that tells them exactly what to do to improve their mark, rather then feedback that encourages them to reflect on their learning (Swann & Arthurs, 1998). Moreover, Winter adds that since new students 'will approach universities ... as sceptical consumers, having probably had experience of criterion-referenced assessment at school or at work' (1993: 110), they will only concern themselves with feedback when it appears to serve their purposes. It has also been claimed that disinterest in feedback comments will be acute in situations where the comments refer to an assessment topic on which the student will not have to work again (this may particularly be the case in the context of modular degree programmes). Some students will therefore see tutors' comments as irrelevant or 'as having nothing to offer beyond the confines of a particular essay' (Hounsell, 1987: 116).

Students' responses to feedback

So at a time when student numbers are rising and competition for graduate jobs growing, are students increasingly becoming instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark (as suggested above)? And so will they heed written

feedback, which encourages them to reflect on their learning? Or will they simply pay attention to the grade and seek feedback only when it is perceived to provide 'correct answers' to commit to memory (and only then when their grade expectation has not been met)?

Research by Drew (2001) found that students recognise the importance of being autonomous learners and of understanding the principles and concepts of their subject rather than simply committing information to memory. They also believed that 'reflection' is important for learning. The students in Drew's (2001) study seemed to value formative assessment for this kind of learning and motivation and saw effective feedback as crucial (a finding supported by Cooper's (2000) research). And in interviews with undergraduate students by Orsmond et al. (2002b), only three of the sixteen students who took part in the study claimed *not* to read feedback comments. Moreover, nearly all of the students thought that an absence of feedback would affect their learning, mostly in a negative way.

A survey of undergraduate history students by Paul Hyland (2000a) across a number of institutions (both post- and pre-92) also found that the majority of respondents claimed to read feedback comments and most (even if only occasionally) tried to use comments for future assignments. In fact 90% of the students questioned believed that feedback could help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to feel a sense of achievement and to raise their marks on future work. Hyland (2000a) noted how 'they [students] never seem to lose faith in its [feedback] potential value' (2000a: 243). An important reason why written feedback comments remain central to students is reflected in Hyland's (2000a) finding that 40% of history students questioned claimed to have never had a face-to-face tutorial on their assessment work. However, only 3% of respondents had often requested one (Hyland, 2000a) and this may reflect both a

perception on the students' part and a reality that tutors have little time to spare for such tutorials (Hyland, 2000a). Moreover, the students in his study seemed to be frustrated by feedback that told them what their weaknesses were, but not how they might go about addressing them. So feedback that is merely judgmental and evaluative rather than developmental may be seen as of limited use to students who want to know how to improve. Deciphering tutors' handwriting also seemed to be a common problem (Hyland, 2000a). The top four factors identified by the 561 students in Hyland's (2000a) study as hindering attempts to improve their work included not only a shortage of study time, but also poor self-management, a need for greater self-reflection, and limited academic literacy. Hyland argues that the second and third factors identified here suggest that skills relating to student autonomy and self-reflection (both characteristics of deep learning) indicate that students want and need to develop such skills (Hyland, 2000a). The fourth factor suggests that students are also aware of potential problems grappling with particular academic discourses and conventions (a point that shall be explored in more detail later in this chapter).

In Orsmond et al.'s (op. cit.) study, which focused on 3rd year Biological Sciences students' responses to feedback comments, findings indicated that feedback was used by students in a number of ways. They used it to 'enhance motivation', 'enhance learning', 'encourage reflection', and 'clarify understanding' (Orsmond et al. 2002b). The authors found that feedback motivated students to develop a greater understanding of their subject, and that this could result from both 'negative' and 'positive' comments. The students also regarded feedback as enhancing their learning because it contributed to what they saw as an ongoing learning process and/or it could be used to meet the demands of particular course or module topic areas and future assessments, and potentially help to secure better grades. Feedback was also used by students to

understand how and why they had received a particular grade, and to clarify what was expected of them. The students also seemed to want guidance (or 'feed-forward') in advance of assignments to help them to know what tutors expected and what particular assessments required of them (ibid.). Just under one half of the students felt that their responses to feedback depended on who was providing it, and a number of students indicated that their propensity to discuss feedback with their tutors was also dependent on who the tutor was.

There is also evidence from outside the UK that students do respond to feedback and in different ways. Fiona Hyland (1998) reported on a New Zealand study (focusing on English as a second language (ESL) writers in HE). Hyland found that, in general, the students participating in the research tried to use the written feedback they received (although the particular teaching and learning context may have played a part in this since it was one where the students could revise their writing in light of feedback prior to re-submitting their work). In this study, there were also apparent differences in students' use of feedback, which seemed to result from students' past experiences, their present writing ability, their attitudes toward writing, and cultural differences. And on the occasions where feedback was not used, this seemed to be because the student had already revised their work prior to receiving their tutor's comments thereby rendering the feedback irrelevant and/or the feedback was simply ignored or misunderstood. However, Hyland (1998) concludes that 'Written feedback from teachers can play a significant, if complex, role in students' writing development' (Hyland, 1998: 281).

Students in Ding Lan's (1998) research also seemed to read tutors' comments, but did not seem to make 'good use' of feedback. This perhaps also reflects the existence of 'barriers' to the feedback process as alluded to in both Paul Hyland and Fiona Hyland's

respective work. Below, these potential barriers are explored separately and in greater detail in light of further research on students' responses to assessment feedback.

Student motivation

As has already been suggested, it must be remembered that the environment within which students approach their learning is complex (Heywood, 1989). Psychological, economic, organisational, and social factors are all distinct yet interrelated pressures upon the student (Heywood, 1989). In particular, these factors may mediate student motivation and their approaches to learning and assessment as well as their responses to feedback.

Research undertaken at Sunderland University provides useful insights into factors that mediate students' use of feedback. An important emerging theme from this work is that students' motivations are one important factor mediating the effectiveness of feedback and there is evidence that a concern with the grade on the part of the student affects the 'type' of feedback they desire and the extent to which they will use it (Ding, 1998; Swann & Arthurs, 1998). Students seemed to respond to written feedback in different ways depending on the grade that accompanied these comments (Ding, 1998). Some of the students in Ding Lan's (1998) study seemed more likely to 'use' feedback positively if they received a grade just below that required to pass an assessment (or to gain a 2:2 or 2:1 degree classification etc.) than if they received a grade which lay comfortably within the boundaries of a degree classification.

So it is suggested that although good students need to be pushed towards deeper understanding and 'stretched' by constructive comments (Ding & Ecclestone, 1997), it may be unlikely that students who are doing well and coping with university work

comfortably will bother to read feedback comments in the first place. Conversely, students only seem to regard formative feedback as important when the grade they receive is poor or less than the grade they expected (Ding, 1997). Furthermore, Cooper (2000), in trying to improve students' essays by providing an opportunity to revise work in light of feedback, found that the students who received reasonable marks on the first draft decided to 'stick' with what they had got rather than take the risk of radically altering their work. And in research by McCune (1999), interview responses suggesting that students had paid little attention to feedback comments are accounted for by the incidence of relatively high grades within the research group and, consequently, a lack of pressure on the students to change and improve.

Gibbs (1999) also reflects on student motivation in relation to feedback comments. He suggests that written comments may lack 'immediacy' and not engender the motivation required to make the effort to attend to them. He argues that if feedback was more of a social process - that is, if students' work is judged in face-to-face encounters with either tutors or peers - then the social pressure to be active in such encounters may spur students on to respond to feedback and produce better quality work (Gibbs, 1999). Furthermore, Gibbs (1999) implies that students might feel detached from the assessment process in the sense that they perceive the marking of assessment and the resulting feedback to be something that lies within the domain of the role of the tutor and may therefore not understand the importance of 'actively internalising standards in order to be able to supervise one's own work' (ibid.: 47). This latter suggestion is supported by Ecclestone & Swann's (1999) research, which revealed that students might view themselves as being 'outside' of the assessment process. This perception can be compounded by assessment and administrative procedures. For example, returning assignments via a school office may render the process of giving feedback more

impersonal (ibid.). However, in light of her research into the effects of different types of feedback, Lin Norton (1997) suggests that the use of 'constructive criticism' and 'praise' may constitute one effective way to motivate students to improve.

The timeliness of feedback

Ding Lan's (1998) study suggested that students might lack the time to act upon feedback comments. In particular, students enrolled on modular degree programmes may experience heavy workloads affording them little time to reflect on tutors' comments (see also Hounsell, 1984) (partly a result of the increased use of course-work assessment). Gibbs (1999) also claims that with rising student numbers, the provision of feedback can be a slow process (ibid.). As a result, and particularly in the context of short teaching units, students may have 'moved on' to a different subject by the time they receive their tutors' comments. By this point they 'may not care about anything except the mark and may not even read feedback that has been expensively provided' (ibid.: 46). Moreover, if feedback is focused solely on subject-specific aspects of assignments, then feedback may be irrelevant for subsequent work on other units (Ding, 1998). So, as McKenzie (1976) argues, if feedback is not timely students might not make the effort to go back to the assignment, which may seem distant and remote (especially if a pass mark has been gained) (MacKenzie, 1976). Furthermore, Sadler (1989) argues that in the context of formative assessment, the length of units on modular degree programmes prevents the feedback process from working - that is, there is simply not enough time to submit work, get feedback, rework a piece and become proficient, and then resubmit for a good grade (Sadler, 1989).

Staff approaches to assessment

Scepticism

Other areas of the literature focus on the tutor's attitudes toward assessment and feedback, and on their practices. It has been argued that many tutors feel that it is important that students proactively seek out help and advice. This reflects two tutor concerns. Firstly, that if students are given greater tutor support, then this might foster dependency (Swann & Arthurs, 1998), which in turn might act against the development of independent, autonomous, critical thinking that such support is designed to foster. Secondly, there is the concern that students are not prepared to make the effort to see tutors. So while students may want greater systemised support (Swann & Arthurs, 1998), tutors believe that the onus must be on students to seek out tutors for clarification of feedback comments (ibid.). Therefore, when students do not take the opportunity given to them (by way of tutors' office hours) to seek further feedback, help, and support (as suggested by Hyland's (2000a) findings), tutors may feel that it is due to a lack of motivation or commitment, which in turn may lead tutors to reconsider the value of investing time in providing future feedback.

Differences between tutors and inconsistent feedback

According to Prosser and Trigwell:

> '... teachers do not have the same experiences of the world. There is variation in their approach to teaching, their perceptions of their teaching situation, and their prior experiences of teaching' (1999: 23-24).

And Tomlinson (1999) argues that, from the outset, new teachers bring with them to their training courses implicit knowledge of classroom life and explicit ideas about teaching. The former is underpinned by a powerful and detailed understanding, based on much experience (including being students themselves and observing what goes on), of what normal classroom practices are (or should be). Consequently, new teachers 'tacitly' know what to do and how to respond (ibid.). These experiences may be of desirable learning practices, but equally they may be linked to flawed practice. Meanwhile, explicit ideas about teaching are based on consciously held concepts and views regarding teaching. These may originate from explicit thought processes and social exchanges about teaching, but also stem from implicit ideas and concepts that, through consolidation, 'come to the surface' (ibid.) This may partly explain Hargreaves et al.'s (2000) finding that teachers in their study adopted a range or repertoire of assessment feedback strategies in their classrooms. It also reflects James' (2000) finding that the mature higher education students in his study experienced feedback as variable in terms of quantity and utility.

Implicit and explicit ideas about teaching and divergent practices may not just be confined to new teachers engaged in initial training, but may pervade the entire teaching profession. For example, in the context of HE, Entwistle (1984) claims that while universities may emphasise the ideal of developing *critical thinking* as a primary objective, the practice of education does not always live up to idealistic intentions and tutors' behaviour varies. Assessing students and providing feedback is not immune to divergent practices. Differences in these practices are illustrated by the fact that there appear to be qualitative and quantitative variations in tutors' comments on course work assignments (Ding, 1998; Hounsell, 1987; MacKenzie, 1974). For example, while some feedback comments may be very authoritarian, judgmental and detached (Connors

& Lunsford, 1993), others may be very personal and empathetic. Moreover, it is argued that some tutors use feedback primarily to evaluate work, while others use it to foster improvement (Brown & Knight, 1994). Factors such as variations in tutors' perceptions of the purpose of assessment and feedback, and in their assessment and feedback preferences are suggested as factors accounting for this (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Hounsell, 1987; Hextall, 1976; MacKenzie, 1974). But also, constraints such as tutors' workloads, deadlines, and a lack of time will determine the extent to which detailed feedback can be provided (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). So even where assessment guidelines are structured in such a way as to promote consistent formative feedback, there will inevitably be scope for, and pressures to operate 'beyond' the assessment guidelines tutors are presented with and to adopt different approaches to assessment feedback (Bowman-Smith, 1993).

This notion of acting beyond guidelines or official discourses of assessment is taken forward by Morgan et al. (2002) who (backed-up by their research findings) suggest that teachers may draw on multiple discourses for their practice. These are both informal and formal discourses, which tutors use in making evaluations of students' work (Morgan et al. 2002). An overall 'evaluation discourse' for assessing students is formed from both these 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses (Morgan et al., 2002). And tutors 'position' themselves in different ways within this evaluation discourse since official assessment discourse is 'recontextualised' by teachers as they draw on unofficial, tacit discourses. Moreover, this 'positioning' mediates teachers' assessment practices and strategies (Morgan et al., 2002). This suggests that different tutors will evaluate work in different ways and may give different advice and guidance. And it also raises the question of how students are able to grasp the 'evaluation discourse' if many aspects of it are underpinned by tacit values, beliefs and understandings (an issue

raised by other research, which is discussed in greater detail in the following two sections of this chapter).

Further empirical evidence for differences between tutors in their assessment and feedback practices is presented by Ivanić et al. (2000), who report on data comparing tutors' responses to students' writing. They found that there were enormous variations in 'quantity' of response and, like a number of authors already mentioned, suggest that the primary reason for this is that tutors' values and beliefs about the nature of university education and the role of their feedback in student learning, have led to the development of particular working practices. The belief that there are differences in tutors' values and beliefs (and therefore working practices) also seems to be evidenced by their finding that feedback comments varied in terms of the pattern of response. Comments differed in terms of 'type' of comment, where on a student's work they were written, and what they were written with (with some tutors using red ink yet others shying away from this).

Other authors point to further specific pressures mediating tutors' assessment practices. Hextal argues that marking does not take place in a political or social vacuum, rather it is 'a highly specific and individualistic labour' (1976: 65) and it is logical to assume that different tutors will respond to the multiplicity of contextual 'pressures' in different ways. For instance, it is suggested that tutors' concerns about students' reactions to feedback will influence its provision (Allen, 1998; Bowman Smith, 1993). That is to say, tutors may give grades and feedback that they feel will produce a reaction that causes them the least trouble. Or in other words, there will be a concern to provide grades or feedback that is least likely to be challenged by the student (Allen, 1998). There may also be a tendency or temptation (whether conscious or unconscious) to provide grades and feedback that adhere to the assumption that 'assessment outcomes

will reflect the pattern of a normal distribution curve' (Winter, 1993: 92). Furthermore, an individual tutor's assessment behaviour may also vary over time. For example, there is research to suggest 'that the same examiner may give very different marks to the same piece of work on different occasions when the mark given the first time is not remembered' (Bligh, 1990: 132). And since both grading and providing feedback require subjective, qualitative judgements of work, rather than being an exact science, the advice and guidance a tutor may choose to articulate in their feedback comments is possibly just as likely to depend on their mood at the time of assessing a student's work as it is on who the tutor is.

It seems then that there is enormous variation in whether, and to what extent tutors respond to students' writing. And while Wiliam (1998) argues that such differences in teacher evaluations are of little consequence in a strictly formative assessment if the resultant feedback from the teacher leads to gains in learning (see also Black & Wiliam, 1998a), feedback is likely to convey a range of both intended and unintended messages and be mediated by a range discourses, values and beliefs. Differences may occur between tutors both across different subject areas (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988) and *within* disciplines (Barnett, 1997), as well there being the potential for the same tutor to respond differently to a similar piece of work on different occasions. Moreover, such differences may not go unnoticed by students. For example, the students in Read & Francis' (2001) study certainly were of the opinion that different tutors assessed their work in different ways.

The language of assessment criteria

Mary Lea (1994) suggests that in considering why HE students may struggle with written work, consideration must be given to structure and form of language, the particular features of subject specific discourse, the nature of an idealised academic discourse, and students' experiences of non-academic language. A concern with the language of assessment has only relatively recently become a growing focus of both research-based and non research-based education literature (for example, see Hinnett & Weedon 2000; McCune, 1999). However, there is evidence from previous studies to suggest that this is an important issue. For example, Hinett (1995) found that students were confused about assessment demands, that students and tutors may have different ideas about what constitutes 'good' work based on different beliefs, values, ideas and expectations about higher education, and that feedback often can elicit powerful emotional responses (Hinett, 1998). Similarly, Ivanić et al. (2000: 47) argue that:

> 'Students receive an immense variety of types of response to their writing, all carrying different messages about university values and beliefs, about the role of writing in learning, about their identity as a student, and about their own competence and even character'

Below, I explore the literature on issues of academic language and meaning, and some implications for the effectiveness of formative assessment. I then examine literature relating to specific 'problems' of language as a potential barrier to students' responses to assessment feedback.

According to Entwistle, 'effective communication depends on shared assumptions, definitions, and understanding' (Entwistle, 1984: 1). Yet language is inevitably complex, imprecise (Winter, 1993), and based on individual interpretations. For

example, Baynham (2000) suggests that all learning contexts are constituted through particular social and discursive practices, which may not be apparent to students.

And so while Radloff & de la Harpe claim that in HE, it is assumed that 'there is understanding and agreement of what it means to study among and between both students and lecturers' (1999: 2), the results from a number of studies (Chanock, 2000; Orsmond et al., 1996, 1997, 2000; Ivanić, 1998; Lillis, 1997; Street & Lea, 1997; and Hounsell, 1987) suggest that students may experience problems interpreting academic language and understanding expectations, particularly in relation to assessment. For example, research at Lancaster University found that 50% of a sample of students were unclear as to what the criteria for marking were (Baldwin, 1993).

In a study by Hartley & Chesworth (2000) more than two-thirds of their students admitted to (at least sometimes) experiencing difficulties with written work in their first year. More specifically, Hartley & Chesworth's (2000) findings (which seemed to apply equally to male and female students as well as mature and traditional entry students) pointed to their students experiencing problems in the production of written assignments, resulting from both 'institutional failings' and 'difficulties of interpretation'. For instance, over of quarter of their questionnaire respondents reported 'difficulties with knowing what was wanted' by tutors, while just over one-fifth reported 'difficulties with different tutors within the same subject matters having different requirements'. Also, Hounsell (1987) and Hartley (1980) found that students on different courses had developed and held different 'conceptions' of what essays are and what essay writing involves. And McCune (1999) and Hounsell (1997) argue that students' conceptions of essay writing affect their *interpretations* of tutors' feedback comments.

Hounsell draws on Rommetveit's (1979) notion of an 'architecture of inter-subjectivity' to account for this. Rommetveit (1979) pays attention to the social context of communication and argues that communication involves shared understandings, which tend to be tacit and taken-for-granted. Consequently, Hounsell claims that (1987: 114):

> 'where students conceptions of essay-writing are qualitatively different from those of their tutors, communication cannot readily take place because the premises underlying the two disparate conceptions are not shared or mutually understood. Students misconstrue a tutor's comment or guidance or fail to grasp the import of these because they do not have a grasp of the assumptions about the nature of academic discourse being conveyed to them'.

The students in Sue Drew's (2001) study suggested that not knowing what was expected of them was linked to anxiety and uncertainty and the students wanted support from tutors to provide guidance to avoid this. Further empirical evidence comes from research by Read & Francis (2001), involving interviews with undergraduate students. The researchers explored the difficulties students experience in understanding the tacit conventions of academic writing (see also Lillis, 1997). They found that the students in their study experienced difficulty finding out from their tutors what was expected of them for their essay writing, despite that fact that the universities from which the respondents were drawn provided advice and guidance on essay writing and had mechanisms in place for communicating expectations and standards (including published criteria and 'study skills' courses). The majority of the students simply seemed to gradually 'pick-up' from their tutors what was expected of them over time, while a large proportion just claimed to 'work out' what these expectations were in the absence of advice. So while more formal procedures for communicating essay-writing

criteria seemed to have little impact, the students took on board advice from their tutors in a 'piecemeal' and 'unsystematic' way while at university. Yet, this is not a satisfactory situation because even by the time they had graduated, many of the students had still to grasp the conventions of essay writing or the 'rules of the game' (Read & Francis, 2001).

But why might students not 'grasp' the nature of academic discourse, or fail to 'interpret' correctly academic expectations? Are expectations not articulated clearly? In discussing criterion-referenced assessment, Knight (2000) argues that concepts such as 'critical analysis' are difficult to define (and reach agreement on the definitions). Moreover, criteria are inevitably 'subject to social processes by which meanings are contested and constructed' (Knight, 2000: 244; see also Bligh, 1990) and therefore these meanings cannot be assumed to be stable. And confusion may be heightened through the structure of modular degree programmes where criteria for assessment can vary extensively across courses and between disciplines and subject areas (Creme & Lea, 1997; see also Lea, 1994). And this may be compounded if Clark & Lorenzini's (1998) assertion is accepted that the way universities communicate expectations and standards of assessed work is often unclear.

Sadler (1989) argues that the difficulties and inherent subjectivity involved in evaluating students' performance render the process of both explicating and 'internalising' assessment expectations problematic. For Sadler (1989), evaluating performance for many tasks requires qualitative judgements to be made since rarely are there either correct or incorrect answers. Three important characteristics outlined by Sadler (1989) as either always or sometimes constituting qualitative judgements are, firstly, that multiple criteria are involved, which interlock so that the 'overall configuration amounts to more than the sum of its parts' (Sadler, 1989: 124). Secondly,

that at least some of the criteria will be 'fuzzy' or, in other words, will be abstract constructs which have no absolute meaning independent of particular contexts. And finally, in order to make qualitative judgements, the underpinning rules for judging performance on a task must be known. This means that the rules for using criteria must be understood. Decisions need to be taken by both students and teachers as to which criteria are relevant and when to apply certain rules or even break them (which may be essential for creativity).

However, Sadler (1989) claims that these rules may be difficult to both grasp and articulate. Teachers may recognise a good performance, yet struggle to articulate exactly what they are looking for because conceptions of quality usually take the form of tacit knowledge (Sadler, 1989). And at the same time, this knowledge will remain relatively inaccessible to the learner. Simply publishing assessment criteria and lists of expectations will not, on its own, overcome problems of interpretation. Sadler (1989) identifies at least fifty criteria (which to some extent interlock and relate to subsets of criteria) for judging the quality of written composition yet suggests that only a small number of 'meta-criteria' will be published; leaving a much larger set of criteria, which can be drawn upon by the tutor as and when needed. Consequently, Sadler (1989) argues that students need to develop a body of appropriate tacit knowledge because the contextual meaning of criteria will not be immediately apparent. Moreover, the meaning of criteria may not be transferable to other contexts and cannot be grasped without experience of context-specific examples, which possess their properties (Sadler, 1989). According to Sadler, 'A novice is, by definition, unable to invoke the implicit criteria for making refined judgements about quality' (Sadler, 1989: 135).

Is it possible to ever produce criteria that are transparent and unambiguous? If language is inevitably complex, implicit and underpinned by tacit discourses, it may be

46

impossible to ever define assessment criteria with complete clarity since these definitions involve the use of language which itself may require further clarification. Albeit writing some years ago on assessment issues in secondary education, Desmond Nuttall (1984) points to a tension between political desires to make assessments comparable across different contexts and the wish to render them sufficiently specific to enable reliable and valid judgements to be made. To achieve reliability and precision, criteria must be broken down into increasingly specific descriptive units. However, this necessitates that they are related to the particular context of each assessment, reducing their generic relevance and transferability to other contexts. On the other hand, if criteria are to retain their generic character, descriptions of quality standards will remain broad and therefore open to interpretation by both teachers and learners. If this is the case, reliability and validity of judgements of quality will be difficult to ensure. In today's HE institutions, it seems that this tension remains unresolved, with the latter scenario dominating and both tutors and students left to make their own subjective judgements about the interpretation and application of assessment criteria. These judgements will, in turn, be driven by a range of contextual factors (such as tutors' prior experiences of their own education as described earlier in this chapter (see Tomlinson, 1999)).

More recently, Ecclestone (1998) has borrowed the term 'spiraling specifications' from Wolf (1995) to refer to the potentially infinite process of increasingly detailed clarification of the language of criteria. Moreover, Ecclestone (2001) has since questioned the assumption that the availability of explicit learning outcomes and assessment criteria is a sufficient condition to help students know what is expected of them and to increase the reliability of tutors' judgements of student work (Ecclestone, 2001). Ecclestone argues that 'common interpretations' of the requirements of, and

criteria for assessed work will not necessarily follow (ibid.). So while there may be evidence that students recognise the importance of things like 'argument' and 'analysis' form their assessed written work (Read & Francis, 2001; Drew, 2001), they may not necessarily fully understand what this requires them to do. For instance, Wiliam (1998) argues that there is much evidence that learners do not understand what teachers value in their work. Moreover, he supports the view that it is naïve to assume that teachers and learners will interpret published assessment criteria in the same ways (Wiliam, 1998). And from her case study on assessment and moderation procedures for degree classifications, Ecclestone provides evidence that criteria are not inherently meaningful or easily articulated and are subject to a range of interpretations (Ecclestone, 2001). Moreover, she sees these interpretations as 'situated'. For example she found that assessors' interpretations differed depending on their level of expertise on particular topics (Ecclestone, 2001).

Another important finding from Read & Francis' work (op. cit.), suggests that issues of 'power' may also be important in considering academic language and perceived assessment expectations. They noted two consequences of a perceived (on the part of the students) unequal power relationship between students and tutors/academics in terms of the knowledge each possess and their relative status as 'novices' and 'experts'. Firstly, some students felt that their own viewpoints were worthless and, secondly, they felt that when they did present original ideas through argument and analysis, these needed to be tailored to accommodate what they had picked-up as being different tutors' subjective views and expectations. They believed that tutors would not assess their work objectively, that they had to 'follow the party line' (as one student in the study put it), and that, in some cases, it may be better not to express any viewpoints at all if they were not clear what the each tutor would want to see.

Understanding the language of feedback

If the language of assessment is problematic, then there are also likely to be problems in communicating assessment expectations through feedback comments (as has already been alluded to in the preceding section). Dylan Wiliam (1998: 10) neatly sums up the problem: 'if a teacher tells the student that she needs to be "more systematic" ... that is not feedback unless the learner understands what "being systematic" means otherwise this is no more helpful than telling an unsuccessful comedian to "be funnier"'.

If a student fails to develop an appropriate understanding of what is required of them, this is likely to be reflected in their work. However, feedback on this work, no matter how well intended and carefully constructed, is unlikely to remedy the situation. As Hounsell (1997) argues, students' misconceptions about what is required of them may persist despite tutors telling them what they want, because the students do not share the premises of the tutors and so are unable to grasp the messages that the tutors are trying to convey to them. As a result:

> 'Divergent conceptions may present a formidable obstacle to feedback: conventional attempts to guide students, whether through general guidelines or comments on specific essays, may founder because the exigencies of communication - a complimentarity of premises between tutor and student - are unfulfilled' (Hounsell, 1987: 118).

And he goes on to suggest that students may become:

> 'locked into a cycle of deprivation as far as constructive feedback is concerned. Since feedback fails to connect, it comes to be viewed as insignificant or invalid, and so is not given considered attention. At the same time the activity within which it is offered is seen increasingly as

unrewarding, and so it is approached perfunctorily, thus rather lessening the likelihood that a more appropriate conception might be apprehended' (Hounsell, 1987: 117).

It is perhaps not surprising then that over a third of the sixteen students in Orsmond et al.'s study (op. cit.) indicated a preference for verbal feedback, with nine of them clarifying that the value of verbal feedback is in the opportunity it provides to encourage discussion and questioning between the student and tutor (ibid.), which may help clarify expectations. And in an earlier study, Orsmond et al. (2002a) found that focusing discussion between students and teachers through the use of exemplars allowed a 'common language of understanding' to be developed and for students to be reassured about the purpose of feedback, and that this resulted in effective feedback. Others have also advocated greater discussion between tutors and students as a way of overcoming problems of unclear and implicit assessment criteria and expectations, and making feedback more meaningful (for example, see McCune, 1999).

Gaps in the literature

The recent growth in research on the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education has lagged behind the growth in interest in this area. While there have been a number of articles and books discussing the importance of feedback for student learning and the possible problems tutors may face in using feedback to effect learning gains, far fewer research studies on students' responses to feedback have been identified. Those that have done this suggest that students do value formative assessment for learning and the crucial role that feedback can play in this process. And they support the view that students may face considerable difficulties making use of

feedback in the face of, for example, inconsistencies in the advice they receive and a lack of time to respond to comments. However, I have yet to uncover a comprehensive study of students' responses to feedback that not only encompasses all the factors involved in the feedback process but also how they may interlock.

Also, despite some notable exceptions (for example, Hinett 1997; 1998), few links are apparent between students' responses to feedback and, at a theoretical level, definitions of feedback and conceptual models of formative assessment as a process of communication. This is of little surprise since 'feedback' remains relatively under-theorised. Understandings of feedback as a form of communication have, in the education context, moved on from more mechanical models derived from early systems theories of communication, to consider the importance of what the tutor does and how the student may respond within a social context, yet as Black & Wiliam (2000) admit, a comprehensive theory of formative assessment remains elusive.

More research is required to explore further HE students' attitudes toward feedback and how they respond to it (and the extent to which the learning context is a mediating factor). Salient factors need to be identified and their interconnections systematically explored. And this needs to occur with an awareness of the implications for our conceptual understanding of feedback as a form of communication.

In particular, there is a need to further develop an understanding of not just *if* students respond to feedback, but *how* they respond and to what effect. There is also a need to explore the wider context within which feedback occurs (considering notions of, for example, power and discourse within education settings) and relate this to issues specific to assessment feedback. For example, how does the student's ability to grasp the language of assessment mediate patterns of response to feedback?

My research therefore began by addressing the following questions:

1. What are students' experiences of written assessment feedback?

2. To what extent do students pay attention to the feedback they receive?

3. How do students respond to feedback?

4. What factors mediate students' responses to feedback?

By addressing these questions, I hoped to develop further issues raised by this review of the literature and, ultimately, to present an explanatory framework for understanding assessment feedback as a form of communication that takes account of the social contexts within which it occurs.

Chapter 3 - Methodology & Method

Introduction

Particular attention needs to be paid to accounting for my 'methodology' in order to detail, discuss and justifying a research process aimed at addressing the questions posed in the previous chapter, and the approach 'driving' it. In this chapter, I discuss how the methodological approach I have taken stems from an inter-play of guiding ontological and epistemological beliefs, personal experience, and my particular interests in the research topic. I then go on to describe the research methods employed in this study in relation to the underlying methodology.

Underpinning theoretical principles guiding this research are based on distinct ontological and epistemological premises. As such, they hold important implications for the research process in terms of both approach and method. Such assumptions are not always made explicit in research projects, yet there seems to be a growing acceptance that, at the very least, researchers should be more open and honest about guiding 'assumptions', which will inevitably influence research (whether they are based on a commitment to a particular strand of theory, or simply a product of the researcher's identity, values and beliefs) (Gelsthorpe, 1992). And, as Layder suggests:

> 'it is better to be consciously aware and reflective of one's theoretical assumptions and prejudices than to imagine that a researcher starts afresh every time she or he begins a piece of research' (1998: 111).

The following sections address two key questions:

1 What is the relationship between my methodology and underlying theoretical assumptions?

2 What is the relationship between my methodology and the research topic? (Or, how does my understanding of the topic under investigation mediate the methodology underpinning this research?).

Methodology

Theoretical assumptions

> 'There are different kinds and levels of social life with which the researcher deals. Some are more objective, such as items involving some kind of quantification or hard description; some are more subjective, like individuals' emotions, values, beliefs and opinions; and some are impressionistic, as in one's representation of the 'climate' of a situation, or of the 'mood' of a group of people' (Woods, 1999: 6).

Social life is complex and the learning context is no different. Educational sociologists and others engaged in educational research have sought to investigate, understand and explain a wide variety of issues in HE, often addressing fundamental questions such as 'how do students learn?', 'how do students study?' and 'what do students understand by learning?'. Attempts to answer these questions have involved a variety of competing approaches underpinned by different assumptions about the nature of human behaviour. In particular, in the sociology of education, shedding light on actors' beliefs, understandings and behaviour has been dogged by the 'problem' of structure and agency. To simplify, this involves a question of whether social reality can be either reduced to individuals' everyday activities or simply understood in terms of 'emergent properties that are irreducible and causally efficacious vis-à-vis agency' (Willmott, 1999b: 5; see also Hartley, 1999). And this seems to have been reflected in what Shilling (1992) sees

as a divide in educational research between the study of large-scale phenomena at the macro level (for example, national education policies) and case studies of individual learning contexts, which has only served to maintain an analytical dualism and render it difficult to adequately conceptualise and account for processes involved in education.

Willmott's (1999b) work challenges this analytical dualism. In a study of a 'failing' school, he shows how teachers' interactions with school inspectors are shaped by an interplay between their own abilities to transform the situation and the structural constraints outside of their sphere of influence. For Willmott (1999b), while individuals reproduce the school through their daily activities, they are also affected by what they (re)produce. Actors within particular social positions find that these positions are structured in particular ways that are tied to power, authority and control. For example, a teacher cannot act in contravention to certain rules without attracting some kind of sanction. For my own research to avoid the trap of analytical dualism, I required a framework, which is sensitive to all levels of social life.

Within Sociology, authors such as Giddens have attempted to overcome the structure-agency dichotomy. Giddens' (1984) theory of 'structuration' attempts to bring together concepts of agency and structure by conceptualising them as both part of the same thing. However, he has been criticised for the way he has 'conflated' structure and agency and denied the autonomous nature of the power of social structures (Willmott, 1999b). More recently, Derek Layder (1997) has provided an alternative approach to bridging the theoretical gap between structure and agency by proposing his theory of 'social domains'. He presents a framework within which the multi-layered nature of factors that influence human action can be identified. For Layder, social behaviour is situated within four social domains. These domains are summarised in Table 1. Each domain is autonomous to a certain extent, yet at the same time they interact with, and

are interdependent upon one another (ibid.). This approach recognises agency as relating to the inter-subjective construction of the world through the 'meanings, motivations and reasons that people give to their behaviour' (Layder, 1998: 143), while structure relates to the notion of a social world constituted by 'social structural or systemic variables' (ibid.).

TABLE 1. Layder's 'domains' of social life

Psychobiography	Actors' psychological dispositions, feelings, emotions, and attitudes are at one level where behaviour is determined and understood. According to Layder (1997: 2), 'we can grasp a person's unique individuality only by understanding their identity and behaviour as it has unfolded over the course of their lives, and is currently embedded in their daily routines and experiences'.
Situated activity	The domain of situated activity 'is characterized by face-to-face transactions between people' (Layder, 1997: 3). In terms of HE, for example, the way in which students creatively and reflexively interact with friends, colleagues, and teachers, and the outcomes of these interactions, is a crucial level at which their behaviour can be understood.
Social Settings	The domain of 'social settings' refers to the 'particular settings that have specific location and social organization' (Layder, 1997: 3) such as employment settings with formal rules and hierarchical structures or family units where rules and structures may be less formal (but just as influential). The domain is 'characterized by a concern with (reproduced) social positions, practices and discourses as well as forms of power and control'.
Contextual Resources	At a more macro level, the very nature of actors' social and economic positions within a capitalist society, and the political climate, will play a part in determining behaviour. The domain of 'contextual resources' refers to these factors.

An important implication of this theoretical framework for thinking about the factors influencing student behaviour in the context of HE is that neither psychological dispositions nor, for example, institutional practices will alone determine student behaviour. Rather, specific forms of connection between factors at various levels of

structure and agency will constitute a context within which particular behaviour emerges.

For Layder (1998: 144-145):

> 'The theory of social domains insists that while there are no pre-given aspects of social reality which are completely independent of human agency, there are major features of society that are preconstituted and historically emergent. These represent ongoing 'external' conditions which confront people in their daily lives ... [and] have an intrinsic link with the internal micro-world of the interpersonal encounters that contribute so much to the routine features of everyday life. Thus there are many aspects of the social world which are preconstituted (systemic phenomena generally) that exist in tandem with, and bear a complex relation to, the active doings of subjects in their situated encounters'.

I have chosen to adopt this framework as underpinning my methodology for the flexibility it offers in exploring all aspects of the learning context. This flexibility is particularly appealing in light of my previous experiences of educational research and personal experiences of higher education. It is perhaps important to explain this point a little more.

Personal experiences and conceptions of the research topic
Research usually presupposes a question. The nature of this question affects both the 'answer' and how this answer is sought.

> 'Research, therefore, requires some characterisation of that which is to be researched into - an account of the situation or the problem. How we

describe the world affects the nature of the enquiry through which we seek to understand it. Describe, for example, human beings in behavioural terms, and the subsequent research will seek to produce a science of behaviour' (Pring, 2000).

As in all research, prior experiences can affect the way the researcher understands the topic under investigation. It would be complacent to ignore my own experiences and their influence. Firstly, it must be recognised that I came to this research project with prior research experience within educational settings. For instance, my research into student retention in further education allowed me to develop an appreciation of the complexity of the post-compulsory education context (see Higgins, 1998). I quickly became aware that student 'drop-out' rates could not be understood nor explained by reference to any one factor. There seemed to be a multiplicity of reasons for students 'choosing' to discontinue their college studies, where different combinations of a plethora of explanatory factors seemed to play a part in accounting for the phenomenon. Moreover, these factors seemed to be interrelated yet at the same time could be considered as separate. Student 'drop-out' was not simply a result of the students' subjective values, beliefs and perceptions, but neither was it a result of the institutional constraints of the college alone (at a more objective level). Factors at different levels combined to influence behaviour. For instance, the structure of the college could not be conflated to student perceptions of it, nor could purely structural forces explain students' subjective interpretations and perceptions. I realised that there was a need to be able to accommodate the interplay of both objective and subjective factors implicated in college life.

So what of assessment feedback? My own experiences of being an undergraduate during the 1990s and, in particular, of being assessed and receiving assessment

feedback, allowed me to consider the factors which shaped and guided my behaviour. I reflected on how my personal responses to tutors' feedback comments were mediated by my personality, my academic ability, my relationship with tutors and my perceptions of what was expected of me at a subjective level. But I also considered how, at a more objective level, my behaviour was mediated by the rules and regulations of the university, the time constraints imposed on me by the university timetable, the economic climate of the day (and consequent pressure to ensure I obtained a 'good' degree) and the need to balance a desire to explore un-assessed subject areas out of personal interest against the need to meet prescribed criteria to 'earn' the marks I required. On reflection, I believe that the objective 'constraints' which I experienced inter-played with my own subjective desires, preferences, perceptions, and so on. On the one hand, these objective and subjective 'forces' were intertwined in shaping and guiding my behaviour, yet on the other hand, each was autonomous and relatively independent. I could do no more about the rules and regulations within which I had to work than I could about the wider economy, yet at the same time, my subjective preferences could not be accounted for by these objective factors alone any more than my interest in my subject could be explained purely by reference to the structure of HE or the assessment system. So, as with my later research on student retention, I realised that structural influences needed to be recognised as existing alongside those pertaining to my own agency (at a subjective level).

I therefore reflected at the beginning of this research on how a student's prior experiences of assessment, the organisation and nature of the institution, and the wider political and economic climate might all be potentially salient factors in mediating the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in HE. Of course, I was aware that certain factors might have more explanatory significance than others. For example,

in the case of an institution, which makes little provision for giving students formative feedback, it is the structure of this feedback provision that should perhaps be the focus of attention. That is to say, a student's propensity to read feedback or their approach to assessment (perhaps developed from prior educational experiences) would not have an immediate impact on their use of tutors' comments if these comments were limited to one or two words. However, where one factor might seem dominant, it is likely that other contextual factors also play potentially mediating roles. The key point is that I believed from the outset that the process of giving and receiving feedback must be understood as 'situated' within its social context. And this is certainly the picture an overview of the literature of assessment feedback painted (see Chapter 2), where (for example) the structure of assessment (including when and how students receive feedback) along with students' motivations (and notions of 'consumerism'), their understanding of assessment criteria, and tutors' provision of feedback, are among a plethora of factors cited by a range of authors as important determinants of the effectiveness of feedback.

Implications of underpinning assumptions for research

Again drawing on the work of Derek Layder, the implications of assuming the ontological significance of both structure and agency aspects of social life can be outlined. There is a need to accept that social research must be concerned with both pre-constituted objects *and* aspects of reality that are produced by human agency (Layder, 1998), and this suggests that researchers must employ methodological strategies which enable them to access subjective pre-dispositions and meanings of subjects' everyday 'life-worlds', *and* the reproduced, objective, structural, systemic aspects of social reality in order to grasp the complex nature of human behaviour 'by

60

simultaneously tracing the inter-connections between different domains without neglecting the differences between them' (Layder 1998: 177). Researchers then, must be willing use as many different data collection techniques as possible in order to maximise the possibility of exploring all dimensions of social life (this is *not*, however, the same as methodological relativism since the point is to accommodate the useful aspects of a diversity of tools rather than abandon systematic method; method *must* remain systematic and rigorous).

Guba & Lincoln (1994) support the pragmatic use of research methods since they regard them as distinct from what they refer to as 'research paradigms', such as positivism, critical theory and constructivism. The implication being:

> '... both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm. Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 105).

However, the theoretical approach outlined above *necessitates* and *justifies* the use of different research strategies, rather than simply allowing for it. For example, it implies the need to use both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. To illustrate, positivism has traditionally been regarded as being concerned with the discovery of observable and measurable 'forces' and as requiring a quantitative approach to research, while interpretivism, concerned with the subjective meanings people bring to their natural settings, has been seen to be better served by qualitative methods. Yet the framework I have adopted attempts to shed light on both observable

(objective) *and* subjective features of social life. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative approaches have contributed to this research.

Layder (1998) proposes an 'adaptive' approach to social research, underpinned by the principles of his domain theory. He argues that the access that quantitative and qualitative methods afford to either structure or agency is vital. He does not, therefore, reject a quantitative approach or a qualitative one. Rather he argues that they pose fundamental problems to the development of explanatory theory when utilised in *isolation*. For example, quantitative methods often involve inflexible surveys and closed questions, and the design of these techniques necessitates the prior establishment of the 'conceptual parameters' of the research (Layder, 1998). As such, there is a danger that the data generated may favour hypothesis-testing rather than theory generation. And the employment of a pre-determined conceptual framework can prove inflexible in the face of 'changing ideas and emerging data' (ibid.: 43). Conversely, although Glesne & Peshkin argue that generally qualitative approaches allow for a research process, which is 'evolutionary, with a problem statement, a design, interview questions, and interpretations developing and changing along the way' (1992: 6), Layder argues that they often lead to extensive, descriptive data that suffers from the lack of organising concepts and prior theoretical ideas to guide and shape the research.

The two approaches can, and need to be adopted in tandem if theory is to guide research, yet be flexible to emergent data and developing theoretical ideas (Dermott, 2000). Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative methods together allow the different levels of social reality to be accessed; exploring the different domains of social life enriches theoretical explanations by accessing the 'bigger picture'. And Cohen et al. argue that such an approach is particularly suited to educational research when a more 'holistic' view is sought (Cohen et al., 2000).

Triangulation

Combining (two or more) methods of data collection in such a way is commonly referred to as 'triangulation' (Cohen et al., 2000). As already indicated, this is an important feature of an 'adaptive' approach to research, so perhaps a little more should be said about it. The term triangulation is often used to refer to research that uses two or more methods. Despite the tendency for educational research studies to reflect a dichotomy in approaches at the level of methodology (prioritising either a qualitative or quantitative approach, with qualitative approaches often dominating), there is evidence, at the level of method, that multi-strategy approaches do take place. For example, in a relatively small-scale analysis of journal articles from the British Educational Research Journal (from 1997-1999), Niglas (1999) found that (according to his definitions of qualitative and quantitative methods) over one-third of the articles employed a 'mixed' approach to data collection, leading to the tentative conclusion that 'at least on the level of research practice the move has been made toward peaceful coexistence' between different approaches (Niglas, 1999: 18). Moreover, a triangulated approach to data collection in educational research has been advocated by a number of authors (for example, see Hartley & Chesworth, 2000; Parlett & Hamilton, 1972).

However, it is not often the case that researchers use triangulation in the strictest sense of the term - that is, by using two or more methods originating from different methodological approaches or traditions in an equal manner. More often than not, research will, for example, use qualitative methods merely as a precursor to a main quantitative survey, which systematically 'measures' aspects of a phenomenon found to be relevant in this preliminary phase. True triangulation must be seen (as advocated by Layder (1998) and Bryman (1988)) to be not only a combination of different methods, but of different epistemological approaches.

63

Together, qualitative and quantitative methodologies can allow theory generation to occur alongside hypothesis-testing, thereby enabling a productive, ongoing dialogue between theory and data. But there is a further advantage in that data produced by one technique can be used to check against that of the other methods, and this inevitably adds validity to the findings as well as enriching explanations.

Another advantage of course, relates to the discussion above about a priori values, beliefs and commitments inherent in all research. Rarely in the real world is quantitative or qualitative research objective, independent and value-free. And this can lead to confusion and criticism when researchers make claims to the contrary. But through true triangulation, and therefore an open recognition of the epistemological and ontological premises underlying different approaches, underpinning assumptions and values can be made explicit since there is a neither a dogmatic commitment to one approach or another.

Methods

Timetable for research

The programme of research reflected the practical constraints I encountered, since opportunities to interview students were limited by the university timetable and assessment dates. But it also reflected the implications of adopting the approach to research described in the previous section, which helped to inform both *when* and *how* I collected data. As already discussed, this framework suggests that theorising and data collection should occur together and in equal measure. That is, concepts and ideas should guide data collection and analyses, yet at the same time be sensitive to new data and be open to reformulation in the light of new evidence (Layder, 1998). As a result, my own ideas and insights gleaned from the literature review, informed, and were subsequently informed by initial data collection (a process illustrated in Figure 1, Chapter1). While the literature review suggested particular topic areas to investigate (such as students' ability to interpret feedback comments), initial findings suggested a need to explore new areas.

Of course, the process of research does not always mirror idealistic intentions. And practical difficulties, pragmatic decisions, and compromises mediated my research. These are not discussed here, but are dealt with in the following sections as they relate to the specific methods of research I employed.

Sampling

My initial intention had been to select a sample of degree programme units, with sufficient student numbers to allow a useful amount of quantitative data to be generated. I also required the units to be utilising assessment methods that would reflect the focus of this project. In other words, they would involve written course work assignments and tutors would be expected to provide written feedback on this work. At the same time, I wanted the units selected to vary as much as possible in terms of, for example, subject, level of study, type of institution, and so on. I also wanted student diversity within the units in terms of, for instance, age, gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity. I felt that such diversity would be important since different contexts might lead to very different student experiences and patterns of behaviour. However, I quickly realised to that I would need to restrict my focus to two units since it would have been impractical for one researcher to deal satisfactorily with the enormous amount of data that would have been generated. In other words, quality concerns took precedence over a desire for quantity.

Having studied course documentation from a number of units, I selected two 'suitable' units, which I thought would still provide two very different contexts within which to explore students' experiences and understandings of assessment feedback, as well as their responses to this feedback. The modules differed in terms of institution and subject area. One was a level one Business unit at a pre-92 university in the north of England, the other a level one Humanities unit at a post -92 university, also in the north of England.

Course documentation

Course and unit documents were collated and these provided detailed information on the stated aims of each unit (and the course of which it was part). They also provided information on the unit learning outcomes, objectives, regulations, assessment requirements, assessment criteria (and so on). Since this documentation was available to the students before the start of the units, I was aware of the information and guidelines the research participants had access to (even if they did not actually refer to this information). This provided me with an understanding of the help, advice and procedures the students could make use of. Course and unit documentation also provided me with insights into the structure of the degree programmes the students were studying and, therefore, the nature of particular learning contexts, which were the focus of my research.

Analysis of student assignments and feedback comments

My personal experiences of feedback (having studied at university for a total of four years prior to undertaking this research) and an initial review of marked student work (referred to in Chapter 1) had provided me with insights into the kinds of written feedback students might typically encounter and, while I planned to discuss with students their experiences of feedback, I felt that a more 'objective' analysis of written feedback comments would help me to understand the nature of this feedback. My review of the literature revealed previous attempts to develop 'typologies' of assessment feedback (see Ding & Ecclestone, 1997; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). I therefore decided to see if I could develop my own typology of tutors' comments, feeling that this would

present an ideal opportunity for a structured review of the feedback received by today's students.

The typology of tutors' feedback comments was developed from an analysis of copies of recently marked student assignments, covering a range of assessment tasks within a variety of subject areas. Each assignment was accompanied by feedback comments from the tutor who had marked the work. It must be noted, however, that the selection of student assignments was pragmatic. While I hoped the development of a typology would offer useful insights into the type of feedback students might expect to receive, it was not intended to be the focus of my research efforts. Therefore, the process of collecting marked work for analysis was opportunistic in nature rather than systematic, reflecting a desire to maximise the number of examples of feedback I could collect. It must also be noted that while my analysis included feedback from a range of learning contexts, the typology should be treated as, and remains provisional. It was intended as a 'guide' rather than a definitive indication of the kinds of feedback students receive. A far more rigorous and comprehensive review of written feedback to students from across the UK, as the basis for a typology (which would constitute a significant research project in itself), would be required for greater confidence in its representativeness. Over 150 assignments were included in the final analysis, accompanied by feedback comments from several tutors. This feedback was analysed in terms of the 'type', 'focus', 'tone' and 'quantity' of the comments.

Student interviews

Ten students from each of the two units were selected at random and approached to take part in the interviews. All of these students, except one from the Humanities unit consented. Therefore, nineteen students in total participated in the interviews. These were held at times and locations convenient to the students. Since the participants all preferred to speak to me on days when they needed to be on campus, the interviews took place in seminar rooms (which I booked in advance), usually when the students had time to spare between lectures. I advised the students that the interviews would last for about 1 to 1 ½ hours. In the end, the interviews were between one and two hours in length. The interviews were conducted toward the end of semester two when the students had some experience of feedback in HE.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature and so the interview guide provided just a general outline of the issues that I felt were important to explore (based on issues raised in Chapter 2 and ideas about potentially fruitful topics areas). Neither the order of the topics to be covered, nor the wording of specific questions was pre-decided. This allowed me to respond in a flexible manner to each interview situation and to adapt both the sequence of questions and the wording of the questions as seemed appropriate (Patton 1990). I was therefore able to capture students' own accounts of their experiences and understandings of assessment feedback (Patton, 1990) while at the same time keeping respondents focused on the topic in hand (Kvale, 1996).

For Cohen et al., 'The interview is a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise' (2000: 279), therefore it would be naïve to assume that my own identity did not impact on the interview process. For example, it must be recognised that interviews do not take place in a political or social vacuum and that factors such as

hierarchical relationships (particularly within a HE setting), and differences of gender and skin colour will potentially mediate the interview process and influence the responses obtained (Mies, 1991). However, some contest the extent to which this negatively impacts on the interview process. For example in feminist writing authors have claimed that power relationships should and can be 'put to one side' (Oakley, 1981). Others argue that the effects of hierarchical relationships are inevitable *and* in many cases desirable (Hammersley, 1992). While still others suggest that differences of gender or ethnicity between researcher and subject do not always mediate the responses of an interviewee and that, even when they do, the effects are sometimes positive (Rhodes, 1994).

Although impossible to be sure, I felt that my gender and ethnicity did not impact significantly on the interviews. The only factors I felt had any impact were my age (I was only a few years older than many of the students) and my 'student' status (I was not considered to be a member of staff and the students seemed to consider me as 'one of us'). On the one hand, this was an advantage as the participants seemed open and honest in their responses. This was evident in their willingness to make disparaging remarks about certain members of staff (if I had been perceived as 'one of *them*', I am sure the students would have been more cautious and less open). However, there was also a price to pay. Some of the students assumed that I shared their experiences, beliefs and understandings. For example, responses were occasionally curtailed with remarks of "well, you know what I mean don't you?". Consequently, I had to ensure that I probed for fuller responses to my questions and did not make assumptions (even when I *thought* I did indeed know 'what they meant').

The Student Questionnaire

A questionnaire was administered to all students on both units. The questionnaire allowed me to generate quantifiable data (Bryman, 1988) and to identify general trends in light of the themes emerging from the interviews. The questionnaire was designed to explore a number of areas. These included the students' expectations, experiences and views regarding written assessment feedback (including their responses to it). Yet, it also reflected broader issues (some emerging from the literature review as potentially important) such as how the students approached both learning in general and assessment in particular, their motives for engaging with HE, and their views on what assessment demands of them (see Appendix I).

The questionnaires were handed-out to students during lectures (toward the middle of semester two). I attempted to collect completed questionnaires before the end of each lecture in order to maximise the response rate. Despite encountering practical problems of administering the questionnaire and obtaining returns during these sessions, I was able to get 94 responses (from 45 Humanities students and 49 Business students) from 122 students enrolled on both units.

Reliability and validity of these methods

By triangulating my methods, I was able to assess the validity of my findings by comparing data on the same topic from more than one source. I do not intend to begin reporting results in this chapter. However, patterns identified by the questionnaire data (for example, students' propensity to read feedback comments) were reflected in the interview data (and vice versa). I would therefore claim that the conclusions I have

drawn from my research are valid since they are supported by data from more than one source. Moreover, a number of the findings from both sources of data (such as students' desire for feedback, despite difficulties they may face utilising it) reflect findings suggested in other empirical studies (while developing the issues they raise further). While my questionnaire provided vital data on patterns of response, and wider trends among students in relation to particular views or reported behaviours, it was the interviews with students that provided the more detailed and interesting insights into these patterns. I therefore feel it is important to elaborate on my attempts to ensure the validity and reliability of the data yielded by my conversations with students.

In the interview setting, it is often a lone researcher whose responsibility is to elicit and make sense of what the interviewees say. The obvious dangers to validity relate to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and making assumptions regarding the participants' responses. Fraenkel & Wallen (1993) provide a 'check-list' of procedures for enhancing the reliability and validity of qualitative educational research, and I believe I followed those appropriate to my particular research study. Importantly, I ensured that the interviews were captured on audiotape (which I subsequently transcribed). By doing so, I was able to reflect on, check and reconsider my interpretation of the interviewees' responses on numerous occasions following the interviews, which would have been difficult if having to rely on memory or hastily taken notes. Researchers should have greater faith in findings based on careful and reflective interpretation of data than findings based on 'snap judgements'. In addition, I was able to compare responses of different participants, particularly in terms of descriptions of their experiences of feedback. While discrepancies in these descriptions would not necessarily have meant that the data were invalid (merely reflecting different perceptions), the similarities I encountered suggested that I was 'getting at' genuine

experiences of feedback shared by a number of students. Furthermore, I was able to 'share' my interview data (once anonymised) with colleagues. This provided a useful way of checking my interpretations of student responses against those of more experienced researchers.

Ethical considerations and confidentiality

An important issue in research for Cohen et al. (2000) relates to ethical considerations. This is an issue that I have taken great care to address. The identity of all respondents remained confidential and participants were made aware of this. Interview responses were anonymised and names were not sought from questionnaire respondents. Care has been taken to ensure that no data from respondents reveals their identity (or those of other people they may have referred to) to any outside parties. Even though the risk of respondents suffering negative consequences from the information they provided is minimal, it is good research practice to eradicate this potential completely.

Access to marked assignments again raised issues of confidentiality, particularly since it would have proved impractical to contact the students who had produced the work to gain their permission for me to use it for research purposes. However, course administrators were happy to provide me with copies of student assignments in the knowledge that I was not interested in the identities of the students, and on the understanding that I would not use students' names in any research reports, nor would I allow anyone else access to the students' work.

Chapter 4 - Phase I results

"I have discovered that I will get my degree, not because of university

but in spite of it"

[Comment on a student questionnaire]

The following provides relevant contextual information on the two course units, which were the focus of this phase of the research, and on the participants who took part.

The Business unit

The level one Business unit was an optional unit available as part of a three-year modular degree programme at a pre-'92 institution. Those opting to take the unit were predominantly studying for a Business degree but students studying for other related degrees (e.g. economics) were also eligible to choose this unit. The unit ran in semester two of the academic year.

Documentation

Students were provided with documentation outlining the aims and objectives of the unit and details of how they were to be assessed. This information was available to the students before the unit commenced and before they were required to finalise their choice of units for the semester. During the semester, the students were provided with

handouts. These handouts covered each unit topic area, including notes for each topic, plus a list of key references to relevant journal articles and books.

Methods of assessment

Students were assessed on three separate pieces of written work:

1. An individual assignment (essay/report)

2. A group assignment (written report)

3. A portfolio (including written pieces of work, e.g. book reviews, critical evaluations etc.)

Successful completion of the unit required a pass mark in each of the three assessments.

Assessment criteria

To aid students in the completion of the assessment tasks, students were provided with a list of assessment criteria (based on university assessment guidelines). These criteria indicated that students would be graded on evidence and quality of the following:

- Critical analysis and use of appropriate conceptual frameworks
- Understanding and exposition of relevant issues
- Structure and logic of arguments
- Awareness of nuances and complexities
- Use of data and examples (and how these are referenced)
- Evaluation and synthesis of source material
- Evidence of independent research

Also available to the students was a list of the "top 22 bad things to do" when completing an assignment. This list was developed by the staff teaching on the unit and focused on issues of referencing, structure, presentation, English, and clarity of

expression. The intention was to help the students avoid common 'pitfalls' in the production of written work.

The Humanities unit

The level one Humanities unit was an optional unit available as part of a three-year modular degree programme at a post-'92 institution. Students taking this unit were predominantly studying for a degree in English Literature, but students studying for other degrees (e.g. Drama) were also eligible to opt for this unit. The unit ran in semester two of the academic year.

Documentation

Students were provided with documentation outlining the aims and objectives of the unit and details of how they were to be assessed. This information was available to the students before the unit commenced and before they were required to finalise their choice of units for the semester. The students were provided lists of key references.

Assessment tasks

Unit assessment consisted of an essay midway through the semester and a two-hour exam at the end of the semester. The students had a choice of questions (from a pre-selected list) to answer for the essay, reflecting all topics covered in the first half of the unit. The timing of the essay allowed feedback to be given to the students, which they could subsequently use to help them prepare for the exam.

Assessment criteria were pre-determined by the both the school and the university in line with specified programme outcomes. Some additional criteria were set at the discretion of unit teachers. These criteria were given to the students prior to assessment.

Essays were assessed against the following criteria:

- Interpretation of, and response to the essay question
- Understanding and use of relevant contexts (e.g. literary; historical)
- Structure of the essay
- Use of close textual reference
- Persuasiveness of the interpretation
- Technical accuracy
- Use of appropriate critical terms and concepts in analysing the text(s)
- Prose style
- Presentation (neatness, legibility)
- Use of secondary critical materials

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to 122 students from both units (as described in Chapter 3). 94 responses to the questionnaire were gained, giving a response rate of 77%. 45 respondents were studying on the Humanities unit (at the post-92 institution), while 49 were studying on the Business unit (at the pre-92 institution). This is a good response rate, facilitated in part by the manner in which completed questionnaires were collected (students completed and handed them in during class contact time, rather than taking them away and possibly forgetting to return them). Moreover, an almost equal number of Business and Humanities respondents allowed useful comparison between the two groups of students. All respondents were UK students except four who were 'overseas' students (one student failed to provide this information). The breakdown of

the participants in terms of age and gender is shown below (Table 2) for all respondents, and also groups of respondents by unit of study/institution.

TABLE 2. Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

	Humanities	*Business*	*All participants*
Age range	18-63 yrs	18-23 yrs	18-63 yrs
18-20 yrs	69%	96%	84%
21+ yrs	31%	4%	16%
Mean age	25 yrs	19 yrs	21.8 yrs
Male	22%	53%	38%
Female	78%	47%	62%

The age distribution within both units was similar (with the majority of respondents between the ages of 18 and 20 years), although the mean age of the Humanities students was slightly higher, reflecting a wider range of ages present. It was decided that there were too few students aged 21 or above to render testing for differences in response by age meaningful (only 15 of the 94 students were 21 years or over). Likewise, differences between overseas and home students could not be explored in a meaningful way due to the small number of overseas students (although such differences might provide interesting avenues for future research).

As reported in the following sections of this chapter, a few differences in patterns of response by unit of study were identified. However, it must be remembered that all Business students attended the pre-'92 institution, while all Humanities students

attended the post-'92 institution. Therefore, I cannot discount the possibility that the type of institution was the key factor behind these differences, rather than nature of the units (although interview responses point more toward the latter and the students' reasons for studying the unit). The data yielded no significant differences in the responses of male and female students either within each unit or across the two units.

The interviews

After initial analysis of the questionnaire data, I interviewed students from both units (see Chapter 3 for details). Questionnaire data were analysed using the SPSS software package (various versions). This analysis preceded, and subsequently informed the design of the interview guide. However, findings from the both sources of data are presented in tandem so that key emergent themes can be explored where questionnaire data complement interview data.

It is worth noting that the interviews with the Humanities students yielded more data than the interviews with the Business students. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. However, most of the Business student interviews took place *before* those with Humanities students, and I suspect that my relative inexperience as a researcher led to poorer quality interviews resulting from less confidence to 'push' students for more in-depth responses to questions. As my experience and confidence grew, the interviews seemed to improve and yield better quality data. I must also recognise that the semi-structured nature of the interview schedule gave me certain freedom in how I worded questions, and this may have evolved and improved as I learned what wording was better understood by the students and led to richer responses.

Main themes

Analysis of the data generated a number of useful organising themes and sub-themes. The main themes are in many ways interrelated yet presented here as separate to aid clarity. They are, of course, brought together in the Chapter 5, where they are discussed in detail. The six themes are:

* ❖ Wanting feedback

* ❖ Using feedback

* ❖ Experiencing feedback

* ❖ Motivation

* ❖ Approaches to learning & assessment

* ❖ Understanding the language of assessment criteria & assessment feedback

Findings are presented below. The few differences between the Humanities and Business students (in terms of both questionnaire and interview responses) are only indicated where they arise.

Using feedback

The most common question I have been asked when talking to colleagues about my research is, perhaps not surprisingly, "what *do* students do with the feedback we give them?". It is this question then that this chapter addresses first.

Reading feedback

- All but one interviewee claimed to always look at the feedback comments their tutors provided:

    'I always look forward to seeing what they had to say'.

    '... I read all the feedback'

    'Normally I get the grade ... and the tutor's assessment, read the comments and ... see what comments he's made on the essay'.

- The questionnaire data suggest these responses reflect a wider pattern. 97 % of questionnaire respondents claimed to usually read tutors' comments and 82% claimed to usually 'pay close attention' to the comments they received.

- Data on the time spent reading tutors' comments, however, suggest the respondents did not tend to spend a great deal of time reading comments, with the majority (83%) spending between 5 and 15 minutes reading their feedback. This may not, of course, tell us if they refer back to feedback comments on more than one occasion, nor does it reveal the extent to which respondents reflected on what their tutors had written.

- Some interviewees admitted that the grade made a difference to their propensity to read their tutor's comments:

'I suppose if you did really well you'd be less inclined [to read feedback] wouldn't you?'.

'I got 60 odd in my essay which was quite good in my class so I felt, I was really just happy that I'd done well and sort of, like, the mark meant more to me than any of the comments ... but I think if I'd maybe done worse I would have paid a lot more attention to the comments to help'.

'I'd probably sort of read it and if it was really good [the grade] I'd say "fine, I don't need to look at it" ... but ... I'd be more inclined to read it if my mark was really bad'.

I return to the impact of the grade on student behaviour later in this chapter when I report on student motivation as playing a role in students' approaches to assessment and responses to feedback. However, in general the questionnaire data and interview responses are indicative of a tendency for the students to, at the very least, *usually* look at the comments their tutors gave them.

Responding to feedback

Discovering that the research participants usually read feedback comments does not, of course, fully address the question of what students do with this feedback and its impact. Look at the extent to which the students seemed to make use of feedback comments and the picture becomes less clear.

- The questionnaire data suggest that 50% of the students 'usually use' the feedback from previous assignments to help them write the next one. However, 22% disagreed that they use feedback for future work and 28% neither agreed nor disagreed that this is the case.

- Taken at face value, these figures are ambiguous. Yet if the much larger proportion of students who claimed to read and pay attention to feedback is considered, along with the general consensus within the HE literature that formative feedback has

enormous potential to improve student learning (see Chapter 2), then these figures suggest a problem of significant 'under-use' of feedback. At the same time, however, the suggestion that at least half of all students attempted to use tutors' comments seems to contradict popular perceptions that the vast majority of students do little or nothing with feedback.

- As for the interview data, while there is evidence of variation between students in how they responded to feedback comments, a common response to seemed to be one of simply 'bearing comments in mind' or of merely being 'aware' of past comments when writing a subsequent assignment:

> *'I probably would have read it [the feedback] so it would be in the back of my mind, but I wouldn't refer to it really closely or exactly or anything. I would probably be aware of what I had to do, but not really, it wouldn't be, like, in the forefront of my mind or anything'.*

> *'I just try to take in what they've said as best you can, like, and, um, that's obviously a pointer for doing things in the future properly'.*

> *'I would have it [the feedback] in mind for the next one [essay], but whether I was doing it consciously or not, because I would obviously be trying to do well, so they would be in my mind for the next time you did one, and you've got something to say that the way you were setting out your essay was weak, then that would be in your mind when you were setting it out, so you would have to improve somehow and you would have to think about that'.*

> *I try to bear them in mind when I'm doing them [assignments] in future, like if it said something like "you're too ... in the way that you've written it" then I'm sort of trying to think, trying to be, I do try to use them, like, for the work I do afterwards'.*

In summary, my findings seem to indicate that while the students read the feedback their tutors provided only half attempted to make use of it. Moreover, those who did attempt to use this feedback did not seem to do so in a particularly thorough or systematic manner. Why is this? The following sections help to shed light on the students' responses to feedback and factors mediating these responses.

Wanting feedback

While the students I questioned seemed to read their tutor's comments, were they really interested in receiving feedback? After all, the apparently limited extent to which they made use of it might suggest a level of apathy toward commentary on assessed work.

In actual fact, the overwhelming evidence suggests that the majority of participants wanted and expected to get feedback comments on their work.

How much feedback do students want?

- There appeared to be a perception among the students interviewed that receiving feedback is a matter of 'fairness'. That is, if the student has made an effort to complete an assessment task, it is only fair that the tutor makes an effort to provide feedback:

  > *'... I mean it seems only fair really when you've spent the time writing the essay they should give you some feedback back really'.*

  > *'I suppose for the actual assignment, 'cause you spend so long doing the assignment you want to know exactly what was wrong with it'.*

- But the students were not naive. They recognised that tutors may have heavy workloads and that this can, in practice, limit the amount of feedback provided:

  > *'I suppose it is because they can't write a whole essay on the back of it [the assignment]'.*

  > *'I know your teacher's got 30 or 40 essays to mark so they can't think of something to say on all of them'.*

- Nevertheless, students clearly expected to get what they regarded as 'sufficient' feedback:

'I know the workloads of the tutors are so bad, but sometimes you've put so much effort into it and they've just put a few lines about it. Sometimes you feel a bit disappointed that they've not written more'.

'I would expect a good amount of feedback – fairly lengthy. Not pages, but a few paragraphs on what I've done wrong in the essay and what's good as well'.

'... the minimum I think you should get is a grade and at least three or four comments on why you got that grade, how you can improve'.

- These findings are reflected in the questionnaire data. 67% of questionnaire respondents expected to receive at least one paragraph of written feedback comments at the end of their assignment, with only 10% expecting less. But again, there is an indication that expectations were realistic, with only 6% of students expecting 'at least one side' of comments.

What kind of feedback do students want?

Comments that are merely descriptive were derided:

'It's no good just getting the essay back and them saying "this is good, but it's not organised well enough" because I know I've put good stuff in the essay and I can see it's not well organised'.

'... it's not any help at all just writing on it that you haven't done enough work because that doesn't achieve anything'.

- The interviewees expressed a desire for formative evaluations of their work. They wanted tutors to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their work, but they also placed importance on comments that provide guidance for improvement:

'... you get little comments in the margin but I expect to get them more fully explained at the bottom so you can look down and see that you've done something that they don't agree with or they think isn't very good, then you can look at the back and see that they've explained it a bit more, and, like, the overall idea of where you're at really and how you can get better'.

'I think it's good to get the pluses – the good points, but to me to just get a mark is not enough. I think one wants to know the weaknesses as well

as the strengths and where they can mend the weaknesses. I mean if you don't know where you're going wrong, how can you put it right? It's wanting to know where your weaknesses [are] and it would be nice if you could have a little bit of guidance. I mean you can be totally on another planet and unless you get some guidance regarding what's expected from you, what avenues you need to follow, I mean you're not going to get any better are you?'.

'[I want feedback] Telling us where we were wrong and like helping us and telling us how to change it to make it right"

- Not surprisingly, the perception amongst the students interviewed, and also amongst the majority of those responding to the questionnaire (82%), seemed to be that feedback comments can, at least potentially, be useful for helping them identify what they are doing right and wrong and therefore improve their learning and performance in assessment:

  'I think it would be helpful to know ... where you are going right and where you are gonna get a mark for the future... you'd know what not to do but you'd also know what to do to make sure you did it for a future assignment'.

- Comments were particularly valued if relevant for forthcoming examinations:

  '... part of writing the essay question in the exam is having the right technique and whilst it would be useful to say that "yeah, you're bringing in good parts outside the subject and it's good that you've brought in this", it would also be good to know "well, don't ever use this language in the exam 'cause it's gonna count against you"'.

  '... if I've the wrong concept on topics or subjects and they pointed it out to me then probably during the exams I wouldn't make the same mistake again'.

  'If they could have offered us more comments before the exam it's very helpful'.

- There was also a recognition that feedback comments are likely to take on increasing importance as the frequency of high stakes assessment increases after the first year of the degree:

> *'I think definitely [I would like to receive more feedback] next year when it matters. I suppose, yeah, this year so that we know what to do next year and how to do it right'.*

- Finding out what to do seemed important as well as what not to do (only 32% of questionnaire respondents disliked comments that were 'critical' of their work, while 82% found 'critical' feedback helpful):

> *'[I want to be given feedback on the] good points obviously but really mainly focus on what could be better 'cause you've got so many essays you've got to write and some students need help in knowing what you've got to improve and things and where your strong points are and where your weak points are so you know where to work'.*

> *'[I want feedback] where you could get something from it. It's not just a comment, it's, you know, you can follow-up what they're saying, you know, like even though it's a bit of a criticism, you can follow it up to say, you know, where you are and you feel like it's fair and you know where to go next to improve'.*

> *'I think it's a lot better if they tell you you've done something wrong and how you change it rather than just telling you you've done it wrong because then you're kind of lost a bit because you don't know what to do'.*

> *'... when someone says "oh good, smashing, brilliant", you think "well, I got it right". I'd rather they said "not a bad effort, but it could be better, this is what you want to look for". That's what would be better'.*

- As will be discussed in later sections of this thesis, what students understood by the term 'critical', 'criticism' and 'critique' is of crucial importance. The interview responses of these level one students suggest they understood 'criticism' to mean the pointing out of weaknesses and failures. An assumption is being made here that this is how many of the questionnaire respondents also interpreted the word 'critical'. This may be a false assumption since to be 'critical' can, of course, simply mean to engage in critiquing a piece of work (which may have both negative and positive connotations).

- Interviewees were particularly concerned with feedback focusing on generic features of their work, particularly features such as 'level of analysis', 'academic argument' and 'structure':

> *'I would like them [feedback comments] to be more general about the entirety of the essay - how it's laid out and how the argument has been formed and how to make it more clear, things like that'.*

> *'... the argument you're making - they should make a comment on it'.*

- A common desire was to have a *combination* of types of feedback comment to cover all bases and/or feedback focusing on a range of aspects of the assignment:

> *'I want the grade because that's really, that's the best indicator of how well you've done and where you are. I would also want, I would want the specific comments that they make to be in the essays, in the margins of the essays, and so then they could put things about your essay in general, about the structure, the tone and the layout at the end. That would be brilliant because then you could get all three ideas together'.*

> *'... sometimes just ticks in the margin, for some people that just doesn't mean anything to them, whereas if they get comments and feedback on different aspects that shows you ... what your strong and weak points are, it makes you think about your essay more ... rather than just writing comments vaguely on the essay'.*

- Moreover, it seemed crucial for comments to be specific:

> *'I've had a few [specific comments on the assignment], mostly on things like spelling ... [but] An essay's 2,000 words, so if they make just one point it could relate to anything ... if they've put "poor use of quotations", why is it poor? Is it 'cause it's too long? Have I mis-quoted it? Have I written it properly? If they just put "poor use" you want to know why ... If they just say "poor use" but you don't know why it's poor then it's really quite pointless. But if they say because it's too long or it's not relevant, if they say why it's bad or good then it really helps, but if they just say it's bad or good then you don't know which bit. There may be so many reasons why it's bad, so they need to be specific'.*

> *'I'd like it to be more specific about actual bits in the essay rather than just a general comment or reflection on the whole thing so you knew what bit was good'.*

- This is reflected in the questionnaire data. Students were asked to rate the importance of feedback comments (from a list derived from a typology of feedback,

which I return to in subsequent sections of this chapter). The top three 'types' of comments rated most important were comments that tell the student what they have done badly, comments that explain the student's mistakes, and comments that suggest how the student might improve their work.

- The questionnaire also asked the students to rate the importance of feedback in terms of 'focus' of comments (again, using a list derived from the typology). The top three comments rated most import related to 'argument', 'level of critical analysis', and 'tutor's overall impressions'.

- Interestingly, there was also a strong desire to receive verbal feedback and to engage in face-to-face discussion with tutors (albeit accompanied by a perception that tutors might not have sufficient time to do so):

> 'I think it would have been better if you had actually sat down and chatted to her [the tutor] ... And you can understand that they've got a lot to do, but sometimes, especially that this is, like, one of your first few essays, and you really maybe just want to sit down and say "look, am I on the right track?"'.

> 'Idealistically, I'd like to sit down with the tutor, but I appreciate that it's not realistic and you have to understand that'.

> 'I also think that you should sit down with your tutor and actually go through the essay with it if it's, I mean, if it's a good essay it doesn't have to be great depth, just saying "well done, this looks good, maybe you could have improved here". If it's not so good then I think you should sort of go sort of one-to-one with the tutor and just go through it so he [the tutor] can sort of help you that way'.

> 'I need to sit down and talk [with the tutor], it's not just something they could just show me [with feedback comments] on every essay'.

To summarise, it seems that it would be wrong to think the students involved in this research were anything other than enthusiastic toward the role that feedback could play in their learning and in improving performance in assessment. Moreover, they had particular expectations as to how much feedback they should receive (as a minimum),

which types of feedback comment would be helpful, and what aspects of their work tutors' comments should focus on. In addition, there was a desire to supplement written feedback with verbal advice and guidance from tutors. But did the students' experiences of feedback meet their expectations?

Experiences of feedback

- A common complaint from the students I interviewed was that feedback is inconsistent in terms of the quantity, the types of comments received and their focus:

  '... they [feedback comments] differ between tutors. I mean [my tutor is] pretty encouraging but last semester ... [the tutor] was incredibly harsh. I mean I got this grade but she ripped it apart as well and a lot of other people said that too ... I mean maybe that's the way she just picks out criticism but it just seemed like it wasn't so encouraging'.

  '... some of them [feedback comments] were useful and some of them weren't'.

  '... From what I understand from my peers, I think that tutors vary with the amount of feedback they get'.

  '... the feedback I've got on essays has been good. There's been enough in the paragraph to help me but it's just on the [other assignments] it's been a bit vague. There wasn't enough to use for other work'.

- Further evidence of inconsistent feedback from a source other than the student interviews is apparent from the typology of feedback comments I developed (as described in the Chapter 3). While it would be wrong to generalise from this typology, it is at the very least *suggestive* of the kinds of written feedback students might typically receive. Figure 2 presents the typology as a framework in terms of types and foci of comments identified. To clarify further what each 'type' of comment means, Table 3 provides a brief definition of each.

FIGURE 2. Framework for the typology of feedback comments

Type of comment

| Advisory suggestions |
| Regulatory instructions |
| Rhetorical questions |
| Descriptive observations |
| Praise |
| Direct criticism |

| Whole assignment | Layout | Referencing & resources | Writing style | Specific subject | Use of evidence | Structure | Critical analysis |

Focus of comments
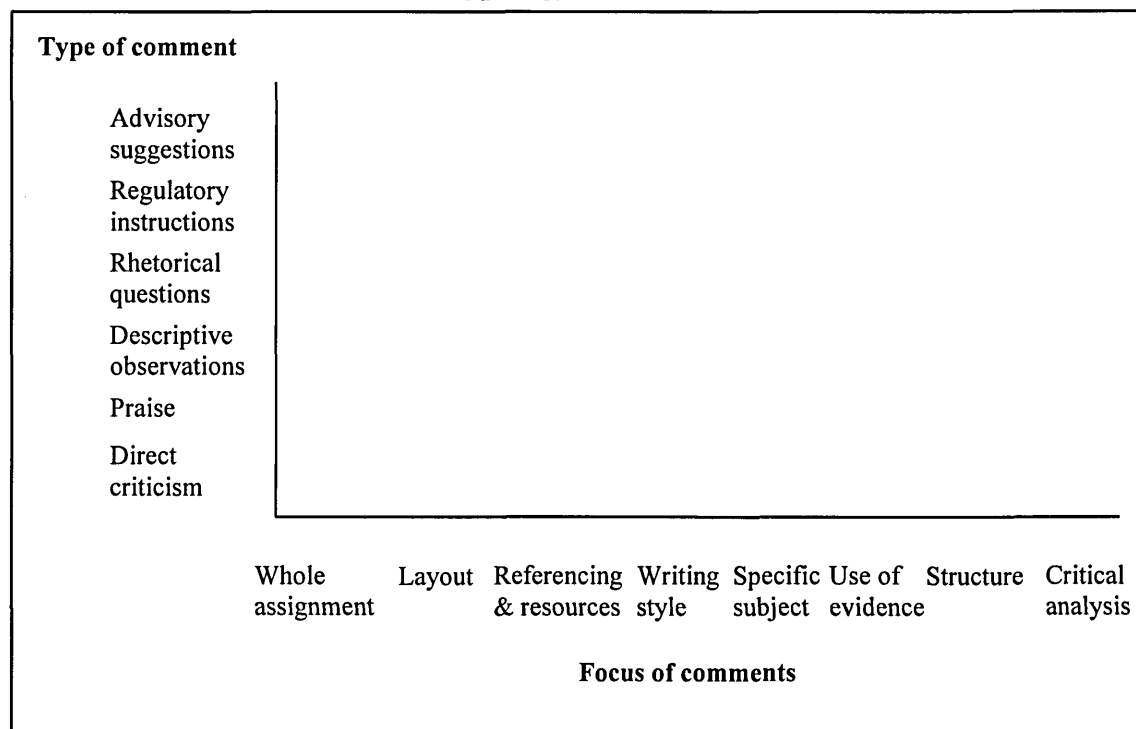
TABLE 3. 'Types' of tutor comments from the typology of feedback

Type of comment	Definition
Regulatory instructions	Directive comments that instruct the student what to do (or not to do) in future.
Advisory suggestions	Suggestions as to what the student needs (or needed) to do, what they could or should have done, or what they could or should have avoided doing. The comments range in specificity.
Descriptive observations	Statements that describe or summarise an aspect of the student's work and in doing so, imply that this is an area that has been done well or poorly by calling attention to it.
Rhetorical Questions	Questions that invite consideration from the student and in doing so imply an aspect of the work that the student could or should have improved or could or should have avoided.
Direct criticism	Comment using words of disapproval to imply that a student has performed poorly in some (or all) aspect(s) of their work.
Praise	Comments using words of approval to imply that a student has performed well in some (or all) aspect(s) of their work.

- Samples of written feedback comments from three different tutors were coded in terms of the types and foci of comments constituting the typology. Almost all comments fitted the typology, suggesting that it may be an accurate representation of 'typical' feedback. Mapping the feedback of the three tutors (tutors A, B and C) onto the typology revealed significant differences between them. These differences are summarised below and illustrated in Figure 3

FIGURE 3. 'Mapping' samples of comments to the feedback typology

Type of comment								
Advisory suggestions								
Regulatory instructions		B		C				C
Rhetorical questions								
Descriptive observations								
Praise	A	A	B		C			C
Direct criticism								
	Whole assignment	Layout	Referencing & resources	Writing style	Specific subject	Use of evidence	Structure	Critical analysis

Focus of comments
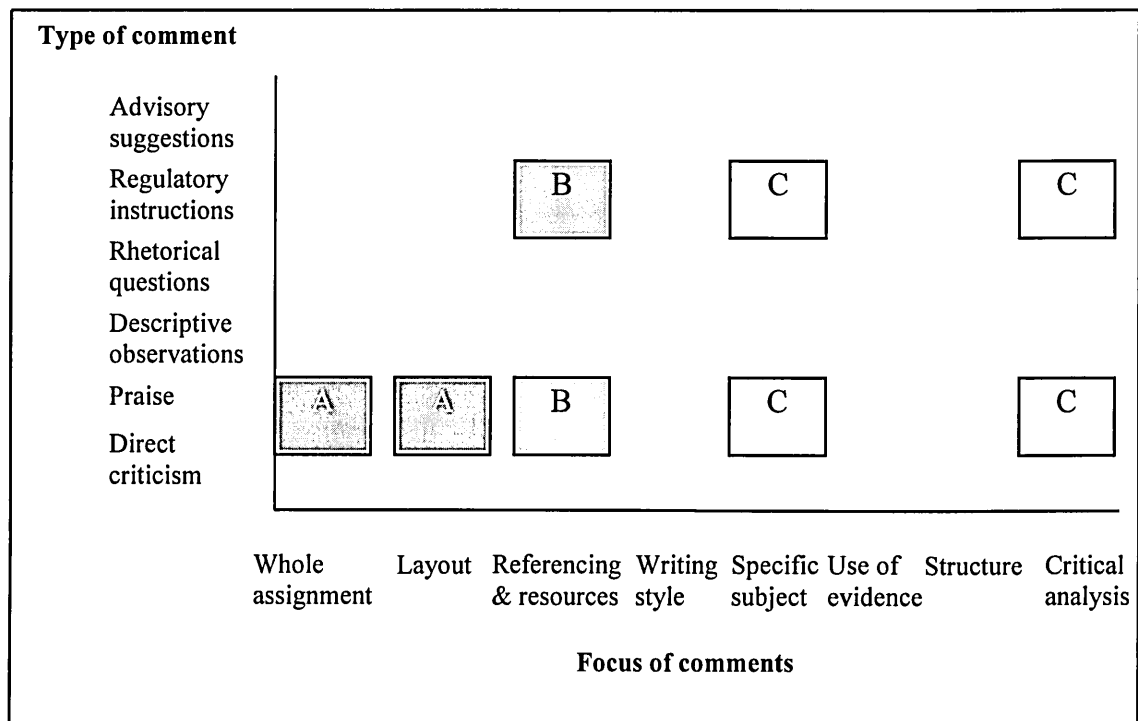
- While the development of the typology identified a range of 'types' and 'foci' of feedback comments, the majority of comments took the form of either 'praise' or 'regulatory instructions'. This could be taken as indicating some consistency between the three tutors. However, each tutor tended to focus their comments on very different aspects of the student's work. So looking at the type and focus of comments together reveals variations between the tutors in the kind of feedback they tended to provide. For example, the vast majority of tutor B's comments were either regulatory instructions or praise about the students' referencing, while tutor C's

comments were similar in type yet almost all focused on subject-specific content and the student's level of analysis, therefore resulting in very different feedback.

- It should also be noted that quantity of feedback provided by each tutor varied. For example, tutor A provided on average 2 comments per essay (rarely was this length exceeded), while tutor C provided an average of 5.5 comments per essay (usually about a paragraph of feedback).

- And, when considering the problem of inconsistency, the issue of tutors' handwriting should not be ignored, as indicated by a number of interviewees and the 42 % of questionnaire respondents who agreed that feedback comments are often difficult to read:

> *'I also have a lot of comments that are very difficult to read. The ones I've had have had to be translated ... there's usually a lot of scrappy sentences which I can't read which is a bit annoying'.*

> *'... a couple of times you have to kind of look at it a couple of times and then eventually you realise "ah, that's what it says!". But I've got terrible writing myself so I'm used to reading it'.*

- While comments seemed to be somewhat inconsistent, more often than not the student interviews revealed negative experiences of feedback, particularly in relation to comments being perceived as 'vague' and too 'general':

> *'Some comments are quite vague and they leave you thinking "well, have I done it right? Have I done it wrong?"'.*

> *'I think they [the feedback comments] were kind of general. It didn't, like, say a specific part ... [it was] a bit kind of vague. I can't remember exactly what was written down, it seemed to be kind of a general comment'.*

- As such, students complained that while their tutors' would often identify an area of weakness in their work, their comments failed to explain why and in what ways an aspect of their assignment was weak:

93

'It was more content than structure really and it was just saying about "your very argumentative" or something, but that was kind of vague as well really because it didn't say why or where I went too far, it was just a vague comment'.

'... some of it was like "this line is immature" which wasn't particularly useful in any way ... and the worst of it, the problem was that she [the tutor] didn't specify what was wrong with it, she just said "this line isn't right", "this is wrong", "this is very good", "this introduction is unstructured", but she didn't say how it had become unstructured'.

'When they just write at the bottom of an essay or just on the cover sheet "good point here", "good point there", you feel a bit disappointed ... Even if it's a bad essay you think "why is it bad?". You've got so many questions you just don't get to ask them'.

- Nor did comments suggest how the students might improve:

'I think sometimes feedback's a bit waffly. Like I said, that one I should have done differently, it didn't say how differently or anything, so it's not very specific about what you should have actually done, it just said you should have done it differently'.

'I've had ones [feedback comments] that have been very vague ... I've got things like "your essay is as good as far as it goes" and things like that and it's not particularly helpful because you don't, it doesn't tell you how far you could have gone if you know what I mean. It just says "your essay is good as far as it goes, well done", and it's, like, a comment that's not particularly useful'.

- The interviews suggested important implications of feedback being 'vague' (or at least perceived as such by the students I spoke to) and relatively brief. Firstly, the students felt that they were 'kept in the dark'; they were not able to discern from feedback comments how they were 'getting on':

'It [the feedback] was very brief ... Just sort of "you should have taken it from this approach" ... I still don't understand what I did wrong'.

'We recently did [assignments] where you only got a short paragraph on each piece of work and I think we should have got more. They pointed out the bad and good points but didn't develop it enough so you didn't know exactly what you'd done wrong or what was good'.

'Um, well the one I'm thinking of I got a three on the, er, [marking] scale and then the comments sort of said that I hadn't really approached that part correctly so I just didn't know why I got a higher mark for it when I hadn't done it properly'.

94

'I got given back a straight 2:2 by the lecturer who said there was nothing wrong with it ... I said that all my essays were around the 2:1 area and he said "well, there's obviously some way you need to break-out of that area, but I don't know what it is". I think that's actually what he said. So I didn't really get any constructive criticism'.

- A consequence of this was that often the students did not know what they should do to perform better in future, which, in turn, could impact on a student's propensity to refer back to past comments when beginning a new assessment task:

'If they're [feedback comments] critical and say "this bit wasn't very good" then I use that. So on the next essay I'll concentrate part of the time on improving that area, but normally it just, it depends. If they really say "look, this was awful, don't do this again!" then you will obviously try to focus on that. But normally, like I said, a lot of the comments are so general you think, sort of, "do they really mean that?"'.

'... I think if they say "this part wasn't very good", of they just say "it wasn't very good" and leave it open-ended then you think "OK it wasn't very good", then you just ... you don't go back there ... you could have been almost there, but you just don't know. So if they say why it wasn't very good or why it was good then that's useful but if they just put general comments saying "no, this isn't very good" or "well done, that point was good", you just don't relate to them again'.

- This can also have a negative effect on students' motivation to improve:

'If you've done badly, it's such a kick to your confidence. You need to really work on things and sometimes a few comments in the box just doesn't motivate you enough to do better. It doesn't point you in the right direction enough'.

- The perceived vagueness of comments seemed to compound a feeling that comments were often impersonal:

'It was just they [the feedback comments] were really quite vague. You thought that really the teacher could have written them on anybody's essay. I mean some of the time they did relate it well - "well done for using this specific quote", but a lot of them were just very vague and general. You know, is she [the tutor] just trying to fill the box in or is she actually writing about my essay?'.

'[I dislike] general comments that could be applied to just anyone's essay like "well done", "good effort". I know they might mean it half the time, but a lot of the time you're just thinking "are you writing that down just

to fill the space in the box 'cause you can't think of anything else to say?" ... half the comments just seem like they're pulled out of a hat sort of thing and they could apply to most things, I don't think that works ...[you feel] they're writing them down because they have to fill in the box and it's not going to help you at all'.

'... they [feedback comments] didn't [seem to] apply to your essay ... it's just a general "well done", you know, she [the tutor] could have pulled it out of a hat, sort of just fobbing you off, just didn't seem personal to my essay. I mean it might have been, it might just be me, but I thought at the time that she was just "oh, well done", you know ... I feel like she didn't write a comment that was directed at the essay I'd just written. I can't remember what comment it was but she just sort of like, well it could have been written about anyone's essay, it was sort of just "good use of quotes blah, blah, blah". You know, it's a certain vague comment and you're like, "ah, do you really mean that or are you just saying that?"'.

I think they should be more personal really 'cause quite a lot of the comments are similar to what other people got, you know, just reproduce them. So in a way, if they were more personal and direct then it would be more helpful'.

- Clearly then, feedback was perceived negatively if it did not provide the students with enough information to be helpful, if it was too impersonal, and if it was too general and vague to be of any formative use. Conversely, examples of feedback, which were specific, informative and constructive, were praised:

  'The other two [marked assignments] I got, I got really, really good constructive criticism on them ... about the content of what I'd done'.

  'One of my essays gave quite good feedback. It picked-up on the good points of the essay. It looked at one aspect I hadn't done and looked into how I could change that. That was useful'.

- However, comments could be *too* specific in the sense of focusing narrowly on assignment topics and lacking relevance to any other work:

  'It's a bit difficult to carry [the feedback] on into your next essay because they're very concerned with that one essay, like "I don't think that your point here is backed-up" or something like that. You can't say "oh, next time I make that point I'll back it up" because you're probably never ever going to make it again because you'll never be doing that text'.

  '... normally they just write about what you've written about and they don't comment on your structure or things like that'.

96

- This is a problem seemingly compounded by the modular structure of degree programmes where many students study a diverse range of short units. If the feedback they receive does not help them to improve generic skills, but is instead focused solely on subject-specific aspects of assignments, then feedback can be rendered irrelevant for subsequent work on other units. This may be responsible for a general perception that feedback and assessment are not part of an ongoing, developmental process:

> '... There's a little bit of starting again involved. It's not an idea of doing an essay, getting feedback and moving up doing an essay. It's sort of doing an essay, getting feedback and doing another essay and getting feedback on that. They're very clipped sections, sort of units of feedback that don't seem to carry on to each other'.

> 'It's such a hard thing to be helpful in a way because quite often when you've written an essay you don't want to go back to it because, so you'll just take, you'll just look at the mark and read, I suppose you do look through the essay and read the feedback to see what's said that's good so you go "ah, I did that right" ... You think "right, I've got that out of the way, what do I do next?"'.

- Also, if feedback is not timely - for instance, it is not available until a significant time after the assignment has been handed-in - then the effort involved for the student in going back to the assignment, which by this time may seem distant and remote (especially if a pass mark has been gained), might not seem worthwhile. This was indeed the case for many of my research participants.

It seems then, that the students' experiences of feedback were often at odds with the feedback they wanted, hoped for, and felt they were entitled to expect. By exploring the student experience, a number of areas of 'mismatch' in particular have been highlighted. For example, while the students wanted comments that were specific, they often experienced comments they perceived as 'vague', and while they hoped for guidance on how to improve, they rarely felt the feedback they received provided them with this. The student perspective has also identified further 'barriers' to students' effective use of

feedback comments. For instance, they seemed to experience inconsistent feedback in terms of quantity, type and focus. Also, they often perceived comments as merely pointing out good and poor aspects of their work without explanation as to why these aspects had been judged in this way. Furthermore, they were not always able to easily read their tutor's handwriting.

The questionnaire and interview data, however, suggest further factors as mediating students' responses to feedback. Some of these relate to the different ways in which the students themselves were motivated to study, which in turn relate to how they approached both learning and assessment. These findings are reported below.

Motivation

In some of the HE literature (see Chapter 2), there is a suggestion that a barrier to the formative potential of assessment feedback may relate to the changing context of HE and to students' motivates for engaging with HE. Students were implicitly characterised as becoming instrumental consumers of education who would only be interested in feedback when it 'spoon feeds' them answers for future work. Therefore, it seemed to me important to look at my research participants' motives for studying and how these affected their responses to feedback.

Engaging with HE

Both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for studying were given for engaging with HE by the interviewees. The main reasons given by students from both units in interview responses were 'to gain qualifications and improve employment prospects', 'to enjoy the

98

social life', and 'because they enjoy learning about the subject'. Meanwhile, over 75% of questionnaire respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to the following statements:

- "The main reason I came to university was to gain qualifications".

- "I am at university because I enjoy learning".

- "I came to university to expand my knowledge of the subject".

• While interviewees and questionnaire respondents often gave more than one reason, the pursuit of qualifications was prioritised by most (92% of questionnaire respondents gave this as a main reason for going to university):

> *'I suppose because it gives you a better opportunity to get a better job in the end, and more and more employers are asking for degrees now'.*

> *'I couldn't really get a job without a degree - not the sort of job I'd want to do'.*

• A desire to gain qualifications (as a main reason for engaging with HE) was more apparent from my interviews with Business students than Humanities students, perhaps reflecting the more vocational nature of a Business course. This pattern was also evident from the questionnaire data with 96% of Business students offering this as a main motivation compared to 87% of Humanities students (the high number of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' responses in both groups rendered it inappropriate to measure the statistical significance of this difference between the two groups)

• 71% of questionnaire respondents agreed that a motive for entering university was an enjoyment of learning. A large number of interview respondents also offered 'enjoyment of learning' as a reason for engaging with HE. Most of the interviewees indicated a desire to engage with learning for the enjoyment of it, and the majority indicated an enjoyment of the subject as a motivating factor in completing

assessment tasks. However, interest and enjoyment seemed, for the interviewees, to be dependent on the particular topic they were studying and/or being assessed on.

- Again, there were differences between the two units; while 85% of Humanities students agreed that they were at university because they enjoy learning (- '... *it just comes down to your personal enjoyment ... just because you like [name of subject]'*), only 59% of Business students responded in this way (a Chi-square test revealed the difference to be significant ($X^2 = 9.0$, $\underline{p} = 0.011$)) (- '*I could enjoy myself a lot better by not doing the degree'*).

- Tied to this was a view expressed by most students that they were at university to engage further with the subject. 84% of questionnaire respondents agreed that (among other reasons already identified) they were at university to do this. 89% were Humanities students and an almost equally large proportion (80%) were Business students. It is not clear, however, whether this reflects a belief among the students that a sound knowledge base was required to attract higher grades or an intrinsic interest in the subject (or indeed both).

- For a large majority of interview respondents, the social side of university life was also cited as important as (or nearly as important as) the pursuit of qualifications (unfortunately, the questionnaire did not incorporate an item on this):

  '... *I wanted to experience the social life I suppose as well'*.

  '... *There was also the idea of getting away from home for the first time and the social life'*.

So, in general, while a relatively high degree of extrinsic motivation for going to university is evident from the interview and questionnaire data, there is also evidence of intrinsic motivation, with many of the students having had a number of potentially competing motives for engaging with HE.

Approaches to learning and assessment

All but one of the interviewees revealed the ways in which they approached learning and assessment. Although I had not intended to 'measure' students' learning styles or quantify their approaches to learning, the interview responses did provide data *indicative* of approaches to learning (as defined by Entwistle, 1987) and revealed ways in which the students approached assessment tasks. It seemed important to explore these approaches as literature outlined in Chapter 2 implied that they might hold implications for students' understandings of, and responses to feedback. Moreover, the students voluntarily (and unprompted) talked at length about the ways in which they approached learning and assessment. And, given that these issues emerged strongly within the context of an interview focusing on their experiences and views of assessment feedback, I felt it wise to entertain them as salient, particularly given the exploratory nature of the research.

- In terms of assessment feedback, half of all questionnaire respondents claimed they were more likely to read their tutors' comments if they received a poor grade. If this is indicative of a certain level of 'instrumentality' then it is also indicative of a key characteristic of a 'strategic' approach to learning. This was reflected in the interviews, where a number of students on both units made this feedback-grade link.

- Some differences between the two student groups were apparent, with nearly two-thirds of Business interviewees, but only one-third of Humanities interviewees suggesting a link between the grade received and attention to feedback. A similar pattern can be seen from the questionnaire data where 58% of Business student respondents yet only 40% of Humanities students agreed that they were *more* likely to read feedback comments if they received a 'bad' grade.

101

- One important characteristic of a deep approach to learning is a desire and attempt to engage with subject matter analytically and to develop one's own ideas and arguments. The questionnaire data suggest that this characteristic was relatively common among the students surveyed. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of all questionnaire respondents claimed to try to produce an 'original argument' when producing an assignment, while 86% placed great importance on 'critical analysis' in assessment. A concern with these generic skills may reflect a deep approach to learning and assessment.

- Independent learning, in terms of seeking out and using original sources, is also regarded as a characteristic of deep learning. Only 13% of questionnaire respondents claimed to mainly rely on lecture and tutorial/seminar notes to help them complete their written assignments, while 62% claimed to usually use a wide range of sources. Moreover, 72% tried to use evidence to support the points they made in their work - a further feature of a deep approach.

- Yet again, it is interesting to note a difference in the pattern of response between the two sets of students. 47%of those claiming to try to produce an argument were Business students compared to 82% of Humanities students. The difference is significant (X^2 = 11.4, p = 0.003). This might reflect a perception among the Business students that their own arguments were less relevant, and a perception among the Humanities students that argument was central to their subject (it may also reflect a different understanding of what 'argument' means).

In summary, a degree of instrumentality was apparent among my research participants, consistent with 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning. Yet characteristics associated with a deep approach were also relatively prevalent, perhaps reflecting a

tension between balancing the need to obtain a degree in a competitive job market, while at the same time being intrinsically motivated to engage fully and critically with the subject.

Understanding the language of assessment criteria and assessment feedback

A further barrier to feedback suggested in the literature relates to the notion that students might fail to understand the academic discourse(s) underpinning assessment criteria and the language of feedback (see Chapter 2). The implication is that students may fail to understand both feedback comments and the assessment criteria on which these comments are based.

- A common concern among the students interviewed was that comments were frequently 'vague' or 'too general'.

- Often feedback comments mirror the academic language used to express assessment criteria.

- Only 33% of questionnaire respondents thought that they understood these criteria.

- This was reflected among the interviewees. As one student noted:

    'I haven't got a clue what I'm assessed on'.

Chapter 5 - Discussion (Part 1)

This chapter discusses the findings from the first phase of the research, which subsequently guided a second phase of data collection (reported in the following chapter). In doing so, it contributed to a developing explanatory framework described in Chapter 9.

As has already been clarified, this phase of research was relatively exploratory in nature. The questionnaire covered a wider range of issues and, although an interview guide was used when speaking to the students, the interviews were structured only loosely. I had no hypotheses to test at this point. I was aware of the literature on assessment and gaps in this literature but, given the overall scarcity of research on assessment feedback, I felt it was inappropriate to impose limitations on the research at this stage. Rather, I simply sought to address the following general questions from the student perspective:

1. What (if any) feedback do students want?

2. What (if any) feedback do they receive?

3. How do students respond to feedback?

4. What can explain students' responses to feedback?

A number of important findings emerged from my analysis of the data. In the previous chapter, I found it appropriate to organise these findings under 6 broad themes:

❖ Wanting feedback

❖ Using feedback

- ❖ Experiencing feedback

- ❖ Motivation

- ❖ Approaches to learning & assessment

- ❖ Understanding the language of assessment criteria & assessment feedback

Here, I discuss the findings within these categories in relation to each of the questions I was hoping to address. In doing so, I relate them back to the literature and discuss their significance (I discuss further the generalisability of the findings in Chapter 9).

1. What (if any) feedback do students want?

Wanting feedback

While literature on assessment often focuses on the 'type' of feedback most likely to encourage 'deep' learning among students, or on efficient ways for its delivery (which is often the case in 'how-to-do-it' textbooks), less is known about students' desire for assessment feedback (despite some notable exceptions identified in Chapter 2).

University staff across a range of institutions expressed personal views to me during the course of this research, but these views were based on anecdotal evidence rather than systematic research. Often opinions were somewhat cynical, with many lecturers bemoaning student apathy toward, and disinterest in feedback comments. However, findings from my student interviews paint a more positive picture as well as moving beyond mere anecdotal evidence.

Students want 'sufficient' formative feedback

I asked all interviewees how much feedback they felt they should be given. All offered a view. Most responded in general terms – they desired a 'good amount' of feedback. Others were more specific – 'at least three or four comments'. The questionnaire generated quantifiable data. The majority of respondents desired 'at least one paragraph of written comments'. This seemed to reflect a minimum expectation. Few, however, expected much more than this, perceiving there to be constraints on tutors' time as a result of heavy workloads.

My findings suggest that the participants both desired and expected formative assessment feedback. This is because they recognised its potential to help them improve on future performance, particularly where it may be relevant to forthcoming high-stakes assessment (such as exams). This supports MacKenzie's (1976) research, which, although somewhat dated, suggests that students see the marked assignment as the most important part of the learning process and consider tutors' comments vital. It also supports the work of Drew (2001), Cooper (2000) and Ding (1998), where students appeared to recognise the formative potential of feedback.

Students want evaluation, guidance and specificity

Reflecting the value the students placed on receiving feedback comments to help them improve, the participants in this phase of the research emphasised the efficacy and utility of assessment feedback. While they wanted evaluations of their work, they also desired guidance on how to improve. For many of the students, evaluative information needed to focus on both negative and positive aspects of their work, and be accompanied by advice that could be carried-over to other assessment tasks. Moreover,

the students wanted this feedback to be specific and clearly linked to particular skills or knowledge, reflecting the findings of Johnson et al.'s (1993) research.

'Critical' comments

A further finding from the interview data (and supported by the questionnaire data) is that the students participating in my research valued comments critical of their work. However, I had given insufficient consideration to what students may mean or understand by the term 'critical' when designing the questionnaire and initial interview guide. Consequently, this finding is ambiguous - its implications rest on how the students involved in the first phase of the research defined the term. On the one hand, in everyday use, 'criticism' has negative connotations, yet in the academe, it simply relates to the notion of 'critique' - an analysis of the merits of something, which can invoke both negative and positive judgements. It seemed from the interview responses that the majority of students expressing this opinion were using the term in its everyday sense. However, at the time of analysing the data from this first phase of the research, I was simply able to note that the students wanted their tutors to provide them with comments specifying poor and/or good aspects of their work while at the same time explaining/justifying these judgements and offering useful advice and guidance. It was not until the second phase of data collection that I became aware of the significance of students' understandings of terms that have both an 'everyday' and, an arguably more refined and subtly different, 'academic' meaning. This issue is explored further in later sections of this thesis.

Comments focusing on 'analytical' aspects of work

A further finding is that a majority of both interview and questionnaire respondents valued feedback highly if it focused on the level of 'argument' or 'analysis' contained within their work. These terms are synonymous with a 'deep' approach to learning (see Entwistle's (1987) definition of 'deep' learning presented in chapter 2), espoused by many academics as *the* approach to learning HE should foster among students. These terms, and others related to them (such as 'understanding', 'synthesis of ideas', and 'interpretation'), were prominent in the published assessment criteria (for both the Business and Humanities units).

Reasons underpinning students' desire for written comments

The fact the students seemed to want feedback on their work may reflect a strategic instrumentality of the type identified by authors such as Becker et al. (1968) in *Making the Grade*, with students wanting feedback as a way of discovering what future actions will yield the best marks. It may also be indicative of a culture of consumerism in HE, with students expecting 'value-for-money' or a minimum level of 'service'. Furthermore, that the students wanted specific advice and guidance on how to improve could be interpreted as the students wanting to be told exactly what to do to obtain marks. This would reflect a view that students expect tutors to instruct them on how to achieve good grades, rather than accept feedback, which encourages reflection on learning and some effort on the part of the student (as suggested by Swann & Arthurs, 1998).

However, I would question these interpretations based on other findings relating to student motivation and learners' approaches to assessment, which I elaborate on later. For instance, while seeking feedback on, for example, 'analysis' and 'argument', might be regarded as a strategic attempt to seek 'cues' about what will attract high marks, it could also be seen as the students adopting a deep approach to learning and assessment and wanting tutors to engage in their work on an analytical and discursive level. Further still, it could stem from particular difficulties grasping the meaning of such terms and a consequent desire to develop a better understanding of what HE expects of them (this is an issue also explored later in this chapter).

Opportunities for verbal feedback

Interestingly, a number of the students I interviewed also desired opportunities for verbal feedback, reflecting a belief that a dialogical approach to information and advice on performance would be helpful. Yet these students appeared resigned to a view (rightly or wrongly) that tutors' workloads render this unrealistic. Interestingly, it has been argued that tutors may be sceptical of students' appetite for feedback if they do not seek opportunities for further discussion of marked work (Swann & Arthurs, 1998). Yet this finding suggests that the students I spoke to may have wanted face-to-face discussion about their work, but may have been unlikely to seek such contact since they assumed it would be unavailable to them. In the second phase of my research, I explored students perceptions of the role of the tutor, and the resulting data offers further insights into why students might be reluctant to seek the kind of help they feel could be potentially rewarding.

To summarise the main issues around the question of what feedback students want, the students participating in my research seemed to want and expect written comments on their work. This is consistent with the findings of a number of other studies (for example, see Hyland, 2000a). Moreover, they desired comments, which were sufficiently specific and formative as to prove useful for future endeavours. They also wanted comments specifying the poor and/or good aspects of their work (and a justification for the tutor's judgements), and feedback focusing on 'analytical' and 'interpretative' facets of their assignments. In other words, they wanted more than simply the tutor's assessment of their work in terms of 'good' and 'bad' judgements - they wanted to be told *how* it was 'good' or 'bad' and what they could do to improve their performance. Conversely, we can also see from the interview responses that the students were averse to vague, descriptive comments, which lacked information on improvement. These findings suggest then, that the students wanted the kind of feedback advocated by other researchers as leading to improvements in learning. This is the kind of feedback Johnson et al. (1993) found to lead to better performance - 'learning-oriented' comments, which provide targeted, descriptive information on how to perform.

In later sections of this chapter and thesis, I shall discuss further student motives for seeking feedback and the implications for improving student learning through formative assessment. Yet the fact that most of the students in this study wanted feedback at all is a simple yet crucially important finding. That they were, at least potentially, receptive to feedback comments runs counter to a view that students' have little desire for tutors' comments. This leaves open the possibility for feedback to play a role in student learning.

2. What (if any) feedback do they receive?

Experiences of feedback

Inconsistency of feedback

Many interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback they received. The first problem seemed to one of variability between tutors. My findings suggest that feedback is often inconsistent both qualitatively and in terms of quantity (also reported in Higgins et al., 2000 (See Appendix II)). This reflects the findings of other studies (see James, 2000, reported in chapter 2). Inconsistency (as apparent from samples of marked work I analysed) cannot simply be explained in terms of differences in the quality of students' work. Firstly, it was apparent that the comments of the three tutors I looked at demonstrated a tendency for each to provide distinctive feedback in terms of quantity and focus of comments. Secondly, students interviewed had formed the impression that different tutors offer qualitatively different feedback comments. Nor can inconsistency be attributed to the particularities of different subject areas or type of assessment since two of the sets of comments were from the same unit and related to the same assessment task. This finding is consistent with authors whose research or assertions point to variations in feedback provision between tutors (Ding, 1998; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Hounsell, 1987; MacKenzie, 1974). Variations in tutors' workloads and the time they are able to set aside for marking work will inevitably contribute to differences in the feedback they offer. But perhaps more interestingly, the literature suggests that feedback varies as a result of tutors' implicit values, beliefs and experiences (see Ivanić, 2000; McCune, 1999). I look at this latter issue in greater depth when discussing findings from the second phase of data collection, where I explored students' experiences of variable feedback in relation to their perceptions of tutors having different and elusive views and preferences.

111

My research recognised the importance of looking at feedback from the student perspective. Energies were focused primarily to this end. A limitation of this approach, however, is that I did not have the resources to complement my extensive 'student' data with quantitative and qualitative data exploring tutors' rationales for providing feedback. However, the development and application of a feedback typology, while not revealing the attitudes, beliefs and values of tutors, did allow me to describe the outcome of actual feedback practices. Moreover, this was achieved by looking at concrete examples of feedback rather than relying on students' subjective descriptions of the feedback they had encountered.

'Vague' comments

From the interview data, it became clear that students often perceived feedback comments to be 'vague', lacking specificity, failing to explain areas of weakness or good performance, and not offering sufficient advice for improvement. This is in direct conflict with the kinds of feedback comments the students wanted to receive, suggesting a mismatch between student expectations and their actual experiences of feedback. This finding holds implications for students' use of comments, not least because they felt unable to act on comments failing to offer what they regarded as clear guidance. Moreover, Brown & Knight (1994) argue that students require information on performance to motivate them to learn. So while they feel 'in the dark' about how they are doing, the effort they put into their studies is likely to be diminished.

My findings also suggested that 'vague' comments were linked to a perception that feedback was 'impersonal', as if tutors were not engaging with their students on an individual level and, worse still, that they were 'jumping though hoops' or 'going

through the motions' rather than offering considered views on the students' work. This seemed to lessen the extent to which comments were taken seriously and, in turn, the propensity for the students to regard them as relevant to their work. Hounsell (1987) was referring to the 'exigencies of communication' when claiming that students may come to see feedback as 'insignificant or invalid' because it fails to 'connect' with them. However, a lack of 'connection' also appears to stem from comments regarded as disingenuous because of their generality. Not only then is there a danger that comments perceived as vague will not have a positive impact on student learning, but more than this, such feedback may have negative effects.

3. How do students respond to feedback?

The propensity of 'read' feedback

The students I interviewed readily professed to reading feedback comments on a regular basis (a finding supported by the questionnaire data). This is consistent with findings elsewhere from other learning contexts (Hyland, 2000a; Taylor, 1993). It is also significant because, again, this is a positive sign for the future role of feedback in student learning. Not only is there evidence that students might want feedback, but also that they are likely to make the effort to 'pay attention' to it.

The questionnaire data are not appropriate for examining what students understood or meant by 'reading' comments (only indicating that the students tended to spend between 5 and 15 minutes doing so). Unfortunately, the interview data from this phase of research adds little more information, other than to indicate that the students tended to look through the comments on their work when it was returned to them and some were more or less inclined to do so depending on the grade accompanying their work. I

decided that what it means for students to read comments is an issue that required further exploration in a second phase of data collection. The relationship between the grade received and the students' propensity to pay attention to feedback was also given greater attention during the second phase of research (although it is also addressed to some extent when I discuss student motivation below).

'Bearing comments in mind'

Even less clear was from the evidence generated by the first phase is how (or if) the students made use of assessment feedback. Exploring the nature of students' use of feedback is complex and problematic and requires 'in-depth' investigation. The exploratory nature of the first phase of this research enabled a wide range of important issues to be identified, but this was at the cost of barring each from being investigated in depth. That a large proportion of students claimed to simply 'bear comments in mind' for future work may imply a passive response to their tutor's comments, with the students doing little with the feedback they were given. This is consistent with Ding's (1998) finding that led in part to the conclusion that the students in her study did not seem to use feedback well. However, prior to the second stage of data collection, I was cautious about assuming that this form of response reflected poor utilisation of feedback; I saw no reason to assume that merely reflecting 'unconsciously' on feedback comments would be more or less effective for student learning than consciously working through feedback comments at the point of writing a subsequent assignment. In other words, while the data indicated the prevalence of a relatively unsystematic application of feedback comments, at this stage of the research, a clear understanding of the meaning and impact of assessment feedback on student learning remained elusive. Moreover, studies by Orsmond et al. (2002b) and Hyland (1998) suggest that there may

114

be differences in students' use of feedback, which this phase of data collection was not sufficiently sensitive to due to the breadth of issues I was attempting to explore.

'Under-use' of feedback

While it is difficult to draw conclusions about the *nature* of students' responses to feedback from the findings reported in the previous chapter, there is a strong indication that feedback comments are under-used (as opposed to used 'well' or 'poorly'). The questionnaire data indicate that while most respondents claimed to pay attention to, and read their tutor's comments, only around one-half claimed to usually use this feedback. While this figure challenges common assumptions that today's students do nothing with the feedback they are provided with, it nevertheless raises concerns about the role feedback can play in improving student learning. If we also consider the extent to which the students seemed to want comments and value their formative potential, then there must be reasons why far less of them attempted to utilise feedback. Possible explanations have already been alluded to in the preceding sections of this chapter. These are explored in greater detail below along with additional reasons apparent from other aspects of the interview and questionnaire data.

4. How can we explain students' responses to feedback?

Poor quality feedback?

I have already revealed that the students perceived comments to be inconsistent (a perception which is borne out by my comparison of samples of feedback) and in many cases 'vague', as significant in relation to their responses to their tutors' comments.

Here I discuss the quality of feedback in relation to students' expectations of it and claim that the gap between expectations and actual experience poses a potential 'barrier' to the efficacy of formative assessment.

There is a consensus in the literature on the importance of formative assessment feedback in student learning (for example, see Brown & Knight, 1994). Students need feedback on their performance if they are to learn, not just in terms of a grade, but in the form of advice and guidance. 'Vague' feedback will not fulfil this function. If feedback is not clear, is misunderstood and/or cannot be associated with future courses of action and potential changes in practice, then it cannot be considered effective guidance or advice. As Ramaprasad (1983) noted, information can only be considered feedback if it is acted on by the recipient (see chapter 2). While this assertion can be questioned in the way that it is does not allow for feedback information to exist yet be rejected or resisted, it nevertheless reflects the point that information on which students are simply *unable* to act cannot be considered effective formative feedback. Before discussing this point further, it must be recognised that students' *perceptions* of feedback may vary in different situations, at different times, and may depend on how they feel about the tutor or the subject. So, what is 'vague' and lacking specificity for one student may be perceived as clear, thought-provoking, and useful by another (I discuss further how students' perceptions of feedback may be mediated by motivations and approaches to learning below and in Chapter 8).

Nevertheless, while differences in student perceptions must be recognised, it is clear that some comments are not all that helpful. For example, it is very difficult to argue that the following comment (a genuine comment, and the sum of feedback one student received with a mark a little short of a 2:1 degree classification) is rich with priceless

information on the student's progress and invaluable as advice on how to improve:

'Satisfactory effort'.

And it is reasonable to expect that a student reading a comment such as this will struggle to act upon it as there is barely any information to inform future practice (of course, the student could make an appointment to meet with the architect of this feedback to discuss their performance further, but that is not the point). Feedback must give students information they can make use of, yet some comments do not provide this. And complaints about the quality of feedback are not restricted to this study. Taylor (1993) noted that common student complaints included feedback being insufficient, not comprehensive enough, unhelpful, not timely, and illegible (certainly, the latter was also a problem for many of the students I surveyed).

Producing assessment criteria and feeding back to students is problematised by a raft of social and contextual factors as suggested by a number of authors. For example, Hargreaves et al. (2000), using Tunstall and Gipps' (1996b) feedback typology to explore teachers' feedback strategies in primary education, discovered a range of strategies adopted by different teachers as different times. Moreover, these strategies seemed to depend on each tutor's beliefs about how children learn (Hargreaves et al., 2000). My own feedback typology, with which I analysed samples of feedback comments, has revealed similar differences in tutors' feedback practices. So, while HE students' perceptions of feedback do seem to play a role in how (or if) they try to make use of feedback, factors such as tutors' perceptions about the role of feedback and the motives of their students may lead to feedback that is inherently unhelpful.

We see from the literature that such perceptions are likely to influence the feedback that is provided, which in part accounts for students' divergent (yet often negative)

experiences of feedback. Tutors will give feedback for different purposes (Hyland, 2000a), with some providing evaluative information without guidance for improvement. Others may be reluctant to expend much energy writing feedback because a) they see little point in commenting on work where a good grade has been achieved (see McKenzie, 1976); b) they fear feedback may foster student dependency; c) as already noted above, they believe that students should be proactive in receiving feedback if they feel it is required; d) they are sceptical as to whether students will pay attention to comments (Ding, 1997); and/or e) they may not be comfortable challenging students if they are marking work on a topic peripheral to their main subject expertise (MacKenzie, 1974). Moreover, the literature review revealed how authors such as Prosser & Trigwell (1999) and Tomlinson (1999) point out that factors, such as prior experiences of the world and of teaching, plus implicit ideas about what should happen in a learning context, will mediate tutors' practices. It would therefore be expected that these practices are divergent as a matter of course and for quality to vary.

Structural explanations

A number of structural barriers to the efficacy of formative assessment feedback are suggested by the literature. Just two of these seem to be borne out by my findings. Both relate to organisational factors, particularly the university timetable and the modular degree structure. The first problem relates to the timeliness of feedback. There was a perception among the students interviewed that by the time marked work was returned, it seemed remote and lacking relevance and their interest in the feedback had waned. Secondly, and in relation to this, the modular degree structure can render feedback irrelevant, since different course units may not be sufficiently similar for feedback to be carried over. The previous chapter shows how interview respondents

saw assessment tasks as separate units and therefore regarded feedback as '*clipped sections ... that don't seem to carry on to each other*'. This is compounded by the fact that each unit is likely to be taught be a different member of staff whose feedback practices may vary and who will also be unaware of any particular difficulties a student might have had identified by work on a previous unit. The fact that many students saw assessment tasks to some extent as self-contained packages, involving '*a little bit of starting again*' is of concern if, as is argued in the literature, assessment should be part of a continuous learning cycle (Brown & Knight, 1994), with the concept of feedback essentially 'circular' (Di Stefano et al., 1967).

It is interesting to note that the fear that students have little time to reflect on feedback because of their workloads (as suggested by Hounsell, 1984 and MacKenzie, 1976) is not supported by my findings. At no point did any of the students I interviewed suggest that this hindered their ability to respond to feedback.

These structural factors highlight how, when assessment feedback is explored in its social, political and organisational context (as discussed in Chapter 2 and also in Chapter 3 in relation to my underpinning theoretical framework), a variety of factors mediating assessment practices can be identified. While some of these relate to actors' subjective intentions, choices, beliefs, and so on, others link explicitly to organisational constraints (beyond the control of individuals). Of course, it must be remembered that all 'levels' of social life are likely to be (to varying degrees) intertwined and interrelated.

The literature review revealed a tendency for models of teaching and learning to draw on the concepts of 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning. I do not intend in this thesis to provide a detailed critique of Ference Marton and Roger Säljö's (1976) work, nor do I wish to discuss the variety of ways in which these concepts have been adopted and adapted elsewhere. Rather I wish to introduce into my discussion the characteristics of these approaches (as defined by Entwistle, 1987) as a useful way of exploring the different ways students engage with the learning context and what motives, and subsequent 'strategies', may mediate their views, experiences of, and responses to assessment feedback. Both Biggs (1999) and Entwistle (1987) make the link between approaches to learning and learner motivation. In particular, Entwistle (1987) suggests that 'strategic' and 'surface' approaches to learning are correlated with extrinsic motivation, while a 'deep' approach is correlated with intrinsic motivation (Entwistle, 1987).

Many of the students expressed extrinsic reasons for engaging with HE, including a desire to gain a higher qualification and improve employment prospects. Yet at the same time, intrinsic motives were also in evidence (for example, in their reasons for entering HE). There were some differences in the extent to which intrinsic and extrinsic motives were apparent between the Business and Humanities students, yet these might partly have been mediated by difference in learning context (with extrinsic motives linked to the more 'vocational' nature of the Business unit). Nevertheless, the majority of students on both units gave more than one reason for entering HE. In other words, while all interviewees had the goal of gaining a 'good' degree and therefore of obtaining particular grades, for a few students this goal was the only important goal, yet for the majority, other goals were nearly as, or equally important.

This is reflected in the data on 'grade-dependency' – that is, the propensity for the students to pay attention to feedback in the light of a 'good' or 'poor' grade. The implication of considering the literature on motivation and approaches to learning in relation to assessment feedback is to suggest that students driven primarily by an extrinsic, grade-orientated motivation are unlikely to feel the need to pay close attention to feedback comments if they are satisfied with the grade awarded for their work. Conversely, if a perceived 'poor' grade has been obtained, there will be greater incentive for such students to focus on feedback as a means of improving future performance. It is true that my questionnaire data suggest that around half of the students are likely be *more receptive* to feedback if their grade expectation has not been met. That is, for some students the extent to which feedback 'matters' depends on the grade awarded for the assignment. However, note the emphasis on 'more receptive'. This does not mean that they will necessarily be unreceptive to feedback if their target grade has been met, rather that if they perform particularly badly, their awareness of the importance of the grade will compel them to consider the feedback a lot more carefully (as elaborated by a number of interviewees). Note also that half of the questionnaire respondents did *not* agree that the grade would affect the extent to which they paid attention to feedback. This seems, then, to reflect more of an awareness of the importance of the grade, rather than total grade-orientation. Moreover, it challenges both popular assumptions regarding students' instrumentality and increasing consumerist behaviour and assertions identified in the literature review suggesting that students adopt increasingly utilitarian behaviour, driven solely by a desire to obtain the best possible marks. Such assumptions imply that the student will only be interested in comments telling them exactly what to do to improve their grades rather than exhibiting an interest in feedback, which engages with their work in a way that promotes a more reflective approach to learning.

Consequently (and consistent with McCune's (1999) findings), aspects of a deep approach to learning could be seen alongside surface and/or strategic elements, representing a limited instrumentalism or, perhaps more accurately, a 'conscientious consumerism' (as I argue in Higgins et al., 2002a (see Appendix III)). It should not be a great surprise then that the students wanted to receive feedback and valued its formative potential since all three approaches to learning imply a need for feedback on performance. Students displaying 'strategic' and 'surface' characteristics will want information to help them successfully complete assessment tasks. Meanwhile, students showing 'deep' characteristics will want to develop their understanding of the topic. What are interesting, however, are the implications that these motives and approaches to learning hold for the demands students place on assessment feedback. The results in this first phase of research suggest that the students placed competing demands on feedback. For example, on the one hand, there is evidence that the students wanted specific advice on how to improve their performance to obtain higher grades (a 'strategic' concern), while at the same time, many wanted guidance on more generic aspects relating to 'higher order cognitive' skills (Biggs, 1999) such as 'level of analysis' and 'argument' (reflecting a 'deeper' awareness of, and engagement with learning).

The language of assessment and feedback

The literature adopting more sociological approaches to understanding assessment show it to be an inherently 'messy' social practice (see Pryor & Torrance, 2000) and the creation, application and interpretation of assessment criteria to be problematic. In particular, the very language of assessment that feedback draws on may pose fundamental problems for students. Issues raised in the literature review, particularly in

more recent publications (although tending not to be based on empirical evidence) suggest that the academic discourse(s) underpinning assessment may not be readily grasped by, or connect with students (for example, see McCune, 1999). Nevertheless, it was still surprising when only a third of questionnaire respondents were confident enough to claim that they understood the assessment criteria (which I knew had been provided to them) on which they were assessed.

This raises a crucial question – if feedback refers to aspects of a student's work such as the 'structure', 'style' or 'level of analysis', how will students make sense of it if they are uncertain what these terms mean? For instance, a comment such as "Be more critical" may not be inherently meaningful to students who do not have a clear conception of the term 'critical'. How are they to respond if this meaning is not clear?

There is insufficient data from this first phase of research to address this latter question. However, the question of why comments may not be inherently meaningful can be considered here. The students often found feedback comments to be 'vague'. While some comments are clearly lacking in specific information ("satisfactory effort"), it is highly unlikely that this can explain such a pervasive feeling among the students I spoke to. After all, most of the comments I analysed did make reference to various aspects of students' work and in many cases offered (albeit) brief suggestions as to what the student should do to improve. Rather than providing comments bereft of advice, 'vague' comments are more likely those that comment without elaboration ("be more critical"). Why do tutors not elaborate on such comments? The literature identified in Chapter 2, referring to academic literacies and tacit discourses, has arisen by authors questioning an assumption of transparency (with its roots in early theories of information).

Assessment feedback language closely reflects institutional discourses on assessment, which, since I completed my data collection and analysis, has been found by other

authors (see Randall & Mirador, 2003). More specifically, Baynham's (2000) suggests that learning contexts are constituted through particular social and discursive practices. He argues that these may not be readily apparent to students (ibid.). This is consistent with the difficulties experienced by the students involved in the first phase of my research in terms of 'working out' what tutor's expected of them. Feedback then, is likely to be underpinned, to a large extent, by what Hounsell (1987) describes as a 'tacit' academic discourse(s), mediated by implicit values and beliefs. Many students' (inexperienced in the ways of HE in general, and different disciplines in particular) may misunderstand the messages that tutors' comments convey since they will struggle to access these discourses due to their 'taken-for-granted' and 'hidden' nature. This may then explain my findings and also those of Karen Hinett (1995), which suggest that the students in her study were confused about assessment demands resulting from differences in tutors' and students' views on what constitutes 'good' work, underpinned by divergent beliefs, values, ideas and expectations.

Summary

By attempting to answer the initial research questions, key points from this discussion chapter can be brought together to begin to construct a narrative around the students' experiences of, and responses to assessment feedback. This developing narrative is as tentative and provisional as the initial phase of research was exploratory. In fact, it illuminates more (and different) questions than the research initially set out to answer. But this does not matter, as the primary concern of the first phase of data collection was to allow themes to emerge in an unrestrained manner rather than impose an unnecessarily narrow and inevitably limiting research focus. In fact, the theoretical and methodological framework guiding this research (as outlined in Chapter 3) suggests that

an openness to emerging data is healthy, particularly where the research is on a subject on which little previous research exists. It is through an exploratory phase of research that I was able to inform the focus of further empirical work and delve deeper into the issues suggested as salient by initial findings.

What students want and expect from feedback is mediated by individuals' personal hopes and aspirations and, in turn, their motivation and approaches to learning. The students seemed to be conscious of the need to balance the importance of obtaining qualifications to compete in the job market with an intrinsic interest in engaging with their subject. As such, the students could not be seen as adopting an increasingly surface approach to learning and assessment, rather a more pragmatic and 'grade-sensitive' approach internalised alongside more desirable approaches. It may be difficult in the light of relatively high graduate unemployment (or under-employment) and increasing competitiveness for graduate jobs, for students not to have 'one eye on the grade'. Yet my initial findings suggest that they also recognise the central importance of formative feedback for their educational development. This places competing demands on assessment feedback, with students wanting evaluative information on their performance along with specific advice and guidance on how to improve and a desire for comments to focus on critical and analytical aspects of their work.

Such demands are unlikely to all be met all of the time. Modular degree programmes inhibit the role of feedback as part of a cyclical learning process. Meanwhile tutors' workloads and the timeliness of feedback also pose barriers. Inconsistent comments (in terms of quantity and quality) and student's perceptions of 'vague' feedback render feedback problematic. However, the very nature of the academic discourse(s) underpinning assessment is also raised as significant for understanding students'

responses to feedback in relating findings from this phase of the research with more recent higher education literature.

The student-focused nature of my research - that is, research based upon students' own perspectives - has allowed me to organise, build-upon, and develop themes emerging from the literature and to both compliment and challenge existing thinking. For instance, while there do indeed seem to be some barriers to the use of feedback which are both structural in nature and a result of poor and inconsistent tutor comments, assumptions that students are simply grade-orientated, instrumental and unconcerned with formative feedback are over-simplistic. But, following the first phase of research it was also apparent that a better understanding of the student-feedback and student-tutor relationship was required whilst recognising that there are complex tensions between students' motivations, their approaches to assessment, the variable feedback they are presented with, and their attempts to utilise comments.

To develop further an understanding of assessment feedback there was a need to construct a clearer picture of *how* exactly students use feedback. This became the focus of the second phase of data collection where I investigated in greater detail students' abilities to make sense of, and respond to assessment feedback within a particular learning context. In doing so, I explored further how tensions between being grade-sensitive and being motivated by a desire to engage with HE at a 'deep' level are played-out in students' lives. The approach taken to this second phase of data collection is outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 - Methods (Part 2): Returning to the field

Further notes on methodology

The first phase of the research was necessarily exploratory given the paucity of research on assessment feedback from the student perspective. Moreover, the methodological assumptions underpinning my approach highlighted the need for research to be sensitive to the multi-layered nature of social life and the range of factors mediating human behaviour. So, unlike early theories of both communication and feedback, I approached this research with the view that feedback is a process of communication occurring within particular social settings. In other words, I regarded it as a 'situated activity' (Layder, 1997). That is, it is an activity that involves 'encounters' between two or more people and, although not confined spatially or temporally (as Layder's definition implies), is tied to particular circumstances and practices.

This perspective on the topic allowed me to avoid limiting the breadth of the research, but at the same time it did limit its depth. In other words, openness to a wide range of potentially important factors implicated in the process of giving and receiving feedback came at the cost of investigating each in greater detail. I believe this approach to have been the correct way to proceed however. For example, while I could have focused the student interviews on one or two specific areas of interest, this would have prevented other potentially salient issues from being revealed. It was more appropriate to first identify the most important issues to the students before attempting to look at them in greater detail.

Findings seemed to justify this approach. The exploratory phase of research shed light on important questions regarding students' views on, experiences of, and responses to assessment feedback. It did so by revealing patterns of behaviour. For instance, it was

clear that the students I questioned were keen to receive and attend to formative feedback on their assessed work, yet there seemed to be a problem of significant 'under-use'. The scope of this phase of the research pointed to a number of important factors as influencing how, and to what extent students acted upon the their tutors' feedback. These included student motivation, the variability of tutors' feedback, the perception of comments being 'vague' and lacking specificity, and an apparent uncertainty regarding the demands of assessment tasks. However, more detailed discussion about *how* exactly such factors might come together to explain students' responses to, and understandings of feedback remained relatively speculative, relying on areas of the educational literature for clues. A more focused phase of data collection was designed to address this.

The intention for the second stage of the research was then, to explore the issues emerging from the first phase in greater depth. At the same time, the complexities of the feedback process as a socially situated activity gave further direction to my research. The theoretical framework underpinning my work on feedback (drawing on Layder's theory of social domains) asserts that an understanding of socially situated activities must be predicated on an awareness and appreciation of the social practices, relations and discourses that characterise them. I therefore also proceeded with sensitivity to these important social dynamics.

The second phase of data collection

The learning context and research participants

The initial exploratory phase of research was focused on identifying issues important to understanding the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in HE. To this end, I surveyed a relatively large number of students across different learning contexts in order to elicit as many views, experiences, values, beliefs and insights (and so on) around the topic as possible. The aim of the second phase of research was, however, different. Having identified key issues I wished to explore further, my intention was to take a more 'in–depth' approach. I was no longer interested in general patterns of student response (which a questionnaire would have enabled me to 'measure'). Rather, I wished to concentrate on particular issues and develop a deeper understanding of how certain factors (such as students' abilities to grasp the language of assessment) played-out in their lives and mediated their responses to feedback.

Researchers are limited by time and resources and have to make decisions about how they go about their investigations. My position was no different. In view of what I wanted to get out of this stage of the research I traded breadth for depth. I chose to focus on a relatively small group of students within a particular learning context so that I could pay greater attention to each participant's views on, and experiences of feedback in light of earlier findings. Taking students from the same learning context also allowed me to see how each behaved in a similar setting and to trace and account for any subtle differences between them. Furthermore, this approach enabled me to investigate the factors mediating the students' responses to feedback in relation to the particular social dynamics characterising this setting.

The danger of sampling a small number of students from the same learning context is that it is difficult to generalise from any findings. However, I felt this was a risk worth taking for two reasons. Firstly, without a more focused approach to this phase of the research I felt that I would be unable explore important issues in sufficient depth. Secondly, the first phase of the research had already shown important findings to be broadly applicable to students from two very different learning contexts and, since the second stage of the research continued to explore the important issues raised in this first phase, I was able to assess the extent to which they were also applicable to a third setting.

The unit I chose as the focus for the second phase of the research was selected for both practical and research reasons. I feel it is important I elaborate on these. Firstly, I wanted to avoid either a Business or Humanities unit and, at the same time, recruit students at either level two or three. This would potentially provide further grounds for generalising from any findings similar to those emerging from the first phase of research. Also, I felt it would be interesting to compare the experiences of level one students with more experienced learners. In addition, the unit needed to involve written assignments, which were marked and returned to students (although my discussions with the students were not going to be confined to their experiences of assessment and feedback on that unit alone). And finally, it was important that the member(s) of staff responsible for the unit would provide me with sufficient access to conduct my research effectively (I sought access to the students, to teaching staff, to student records, and to unit documentation). At the same time, I was keen to avoid interference from the staff in this process or having onerous demands placed on me (for example, by staff offering access in exchange for teaching or for regular written reports on my progress). These conditions were established as broad criteria for selecting a unit. The search for an

appropriate unit, which met these criteria, was not going well until a colleague suggested the name of a lecturer as someone who might be willing to help. This lecturer proved to be interested my research and prepared to allow me unconditional access (within reason) to a unit she was running the following academic year (during semester one). Moreover, this unit met all of my search criteria and so it became the focus of my research. The unit in question was a Psychology unit at one of the two institutions involved in the first phase of the research.

I attended the second lecture of the unit and was given time to explain to the students the aims and objectives of my research, and to recruit participants. I had selected the names of ten students at random prior to this. I read out these names and asked if they would be willing to participate. Eight of the students on this list had attended the lecture (approximately twenty students were present in total). These students all agreed take part. However, I sought a further two participants to reach my target figure of ten. This was borne out of a concern to ensue that I would be able to collect sufficient data to be useful since previous research had taught me to expect at least one or two participants to withdraw from the research later due to attrition. The unit tutor assisted me by asking if there were any other students who would be willing to take part. Two more students came forward and agreed to participate.

I decided that semi-structured interviews with the students would yield the kind of data I required - qualitative data on students' views on, and experiences of feedback. However, I had been made aware of another research tool - repertory grid technique -, which would potentially generate further important data. I outline this technique below and explain the rationale for using it in this phase of the research. I then describe the interview process. Despite the fact that interviews constituted my primary source of data (as evident in Chapter 7), I dedicate a little more space in this chapter to my

discussion of repertory grid methodology. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have already dealt with what I believe to be the most important issues relating to my use of interviews in Chapter 3 (which are also relevant to this phase of the research). Secondly, discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing are well rehearsed in research methods literature. Thirdly, repertory grid methodology is less familiar to many people than interviewing. And finally, use of the technique for research on assessment feedback constitutes a unique departure from other research studies and its potential application to further research on this topic (and educational research in general) may be of interest to other researchers.

Methods

Repertory grids

What are they?

Repertory grid methodology is based on George Kelly's personal construct theory. Personal construct theory asserts that individuals make sense of their environment by developing constructs of people and the world around them. For Kelly, grids of personal constructs, known as repertory grids, can be elicited from individuals and used to explore their construct 'systems'. These reflect an individual's stance towards the world (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Kelly found it useful to think of personal constructs as bi-polar and hierarchically linked. So, for example, where individuals develop personal constructs of their friends and family, these might include bi-polar constructs such as 'friendly-unfriendly' or 'likes me-doesn't like me'. Kelly does not seem to offer much in the way of an explanation for the origin of constructs, rather he acknowledges that past experiences and environmental factors play a part. So while the

elicitation and analysis of repertory grids can illuminate the ways in which individuals understand and perceive aspects of the world around them, other research methods may be required to develop an understanding of the origins and nature of these constructs.

Repertory grids consist of both personal 'constructs' and what are known as 'elements'. Constructs are people's personal constructions of the world around them, while elements are the groups of 'things' in the world to which particular constructs refer. For example, elements could be the people an individual encounters on a day-to-day basis in the workplace, and the constructs might include 'lazy/hardworking', 'short-tempered/easy going', or 'witty/boring'. Kelly initially used people as elements, but other researchers have since used such things as 'situations', 'occupations', 'feelings' and 'places' (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Any group of things can be used as elements as long as they are familiar to the participant and that they are 'representative of the pool from which they are drawn' (ibid.: 13) (after all, how can participants have developed constructs of elements they have no experience of?). For example, if the researcher wants to find out about somebody's constructs of their close family members, it would be of no use to include as elements distant relatives who are unknown to the participant.

Using repertory grids for research on assessment feedback

My initial findings revealed that the students regarded some feedback comments as useful while others were seen as vague and of little use. They also suggested that some students might have difficulty making sense of assessment criteria, which often underpin the language of feedback. In light of this, I felt that repertory grid technique offered the possibility of shedding light on the meaning of assessment feedback for

students in HE and of complementing my interview data. Furthermore, and to my knowledge, repertory grid technique has not previously been used to investigate this topic. I therefore felt that adopting this research tool would afford my work the potential to contribute to methodological development as well as empirical and theoretical development in this area. I therefore decided to generate repertory grids for analysis around 'typical' feedback comments. This was not easy, as I describe below.

Repertory grids, once constructed, are 'scored' by participants prior to analysis by the researcher. Each element is usually rated on a scale of one to five against each construct. For example, if elements are 'family members', and if one of the bi-polar constructs is 'someone I can trust' / 'someone I cannot trust', participant are asked to rate each family member (elements) against the construct. A score of 1 would mean that the particular family member is very much like someone the participant can trust and 5 meaning the family member is not very much like someone they can trust (or is very like someone they cannot trust). A score of 3 would indicate that the participant is either unsure about whether they feel the family member is trustworthy or that they do not consider them to be either particularly trustworthy or untrustworthy.

When constructing repertory grids, both elements and constructs can either be elicited from the participants or be pre-selected by the researcher. This depends on the context of the research and the researcher's aims. Taking the example above, the researcher might not know which family members are familiar to the participant and so the elements will be elicited from them. Conversely, the researcher may already know which family members will be suitable for elements and/or may want to explore constructs for particular family members. In this case, the elements might be pre-selected by the researcher. Similarly, constructs may be pre-selected if the researcher wants to pursue very specific research questions (for example, questions relating to the

perceived trustworthiness or friendliness of certain family members). However, since it is usually a person's own, individual constructs the researcher is primarily interested in, it is suggested that free-elicitation of constructs from the participants be adopted if at all possible (Pope & Denicolo, 1993). That is, constructs should be generated by the individual rather than be supplied by the researcher. I was interested in discovering *what* students' constructs of assessment feedback might be. I therefore decided that I needed to ***elicit constructs*** from the students themselves. At the same time, I decided to ***pre-select the elements*** since I was interested in comparing students' constructs of the same set of elements. However, this proved problematic.

I initially looked to lists of generic assessment criteria on which to base the elements, as this seemed to offer the best way of deriving feedback comments familiar to the students. While lists of assessment criteria on their own might not have yielded useful elements, my previous analysis of feedback comments and the development of the feedback typology had suggested that the language of assessment criteria proliferate tutors' feedback to students. I was also aware that the participants' degree course constituted a context within which they were likely to have received written feedback comments on a regular basis. If these participants were as likely to read comments as the students from the first phase of research had indicated, then elements in the form of comments based on such criteria might prove familiar to the students. I was unsure, however, whether they would be truly meaningful to the students (given earlier findings on the extent to which students claimed to understand assessment criteria), but speculated that the students might perceive them in interesting and potentially revealing ways. However, I did not know how well this would work, as I could find no other research studies using repertory grid technique in this way as a point of reference.

Having decided to use assessment feedback comments as elements, I had to choose a selection of comments. As pointed out above, it is important for elements to be representative of the 'pool' from which they are drawn. However, my prior analysis of samples of marked assignments revealed a high degree of inconsistency between tutors in their provision of feedback, with comments differing in length, tone and type, and also in terms of what aspects of students' work they focused on. This presented a sizeable challenge - how to ensure the elements chosen were representative. In reality, a truly representative sample could not be chosen, rather the sample was selected to be as representative as possible, given that the pool from which they were drawn was far too large to ever be known. Therefore, examples of feedback comments, which seemed most common in light of my own experiences of feedback and the earlier analysis I had carried out on samples of students' work, were chosen as elements. It was this analysis of marked work and the subsequent feedback typology, which suggested itself as the most appropriate framework for selecting a *broadly* representative set of elements (although there remained a danger that some of the elements would be unfamiliar to some of the participants).

The typology (the development of which is described in Chapter 3) was therefore used as a basis for selecting particular comments as elements for the repertory grids. This involved selecting real examples of feedback from marked work to represent the different 'types' and 'foci' constituting the typology. At the same time, I attempted to ensure that the comments selected reflected the assessment criteria found in the unit documentation. This documentation was given to the students at the beginning of the academic year (these criteria were similar to those found in documentation on both the Business and Humanities units, which were the focus of the first phase of research).

The criteria covered the following aspects of assessed work:

- Referencing
- Use of appropriate terms and concepts
- Technical accuracy
- Presentation

- Structure of assignment
- Use of secondary materials
- Understanding / reference to relevant context

- Interpretation
- Style of writing
- Critical analysis
- Subject specific knowledge

I also tried to ensure that the comments varied in tone. That is to say, I wanted some comments to be 'positive' in tone and some 'negative' - an example of negative tone would be "poor use of referencing", while a positive comment might read "well done, good effort".

The most representative range of elements based on my typology and the unit assessment criteria would have incorporated all combinations of type, focus and tone of comment. However, this would have yielded an unmanageable and impractical number of elements to present to the students (nor would it have made for easy data analysis!). A decision was therefore taken to limit the number of elements to 12. Each related to a different area of focus in relation to the assessment criteria (listed above), whilst ensuring that over the 12 elements, all 6 'types' of comment from the typology were represented (in either a negative or positive 'tone'). This ensured a certain level of representativeness, yet a series of subjective judgements (albeit informed) did underpin the process. Table 4 presents the comments chosen as elements.

TABLE 4. Feedback comments as elements for the repertory grids

No.	Focus	Feedback comment	Type
1	Referencing	"Use Harvard system of referencing rather than numbered footnotes".	Regulatory instruction
2	Structure of assignment	"While you make some good points, your structure makes it difficult to see them - a more logical order would have made you assignment more coherent".	Advisory suggestion
3	Interpretation	"Original argument, but should you have mentioned the literature on X without considering the literature on Y?"	Rhetorical question
4	Use of appropriate terms and concepts	"You have a very poor grasp of some important concepts".	Direct criticism
5	Use of secondary materials	"Introduction of journals rather than books would give the piece a more critical (rather than descriptive) feel".	Advisory suggestion
6	Understanding / reference to relevant context	"I like the way you locate your argument within a relevant context".	Praise
7	Technical accuracy	"Your grammar is good, but make sure you check spelling".	Regulatory instruction
8	Style of writing	"You have used a journalistic rather than academic style".	Descriptive observation
9	Critical analysis	"Be more critical!"	Regulatory instruction
10	Presentation	"You could make your work easier to read by improving your presentation".	Advisory suggestion
11	Whole assignment	"This is a very well written and extensively researched piece".	Praise
12	Subject specific knowledge	"You claim theory X is still widely accepted as true - are you sure?"	Rhetorical question

The students who had agreed to take part in this phase of the research provided me with their contact details. I intended to meet with each student on two occasions. The first session was to construct a repertory grid and the second to interview them. I booked rooms on campus and arranged to meet with each student in turn at a time convenient to them. These sessions took place during week two of the semester. As mentioned above, I had expected to 'loose' some students during the course of the research, and so I was relieved that of the ten students who came forward from the unit, eight completed a repertory grid. Of the only two who I was not able to see, one left the course soon after my initial contact, while the other repeatedly failed to turn-up at the agreed session time, despite repeated attempts to rearrange appointments. Despite my best attempts, I was unable to recruit additional students from the same unit at this late stage.

During repertory grid sessions (which lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour), I explained to the students the repertory grid process. Each student was asked to look at the 12 elements (feedback comments) I presented to him or her. This was to ensure that the elements were familiar to the students as the kind of comments they had experienced at university. None of the students found any of elements alien to them (giving further credence to my typology and suggesting that the students at least recognised the terms used in the unit assessment criteria).

Constructs were elicited from the students using the 'triadic' method. This involved showing each student three comments or elements (on 'prompt' cards) at a time and asking them to try to identify and describe a way in which two of the comments were similar and one different. For example, a student might suggest that one of the three comments was 'unhelpful' in contrast to the other two, which were seen as 'helpful'.

This would yield a construct relating to 'helpfulness', which, expressed as a bi-polar construct, became 'this comment is helpful' / 'this comments is unhelpful'. This process was repeated with different sets of three elements ('triads') until no *new* constructs were elicited. When eliciting the constructs, it was important to ensure that the students were as clear and specific as they could be. For instance, on a number of occasions, students differentiated comments as being 'good' or 'bad' and I had to probe for further details as to *why* the student felt the comment was good or bad. Once the process of eliciting constructs had been exhausted, a short break was taken to avoid fatigue setting in (for my benefit as well as the students). During this time, some participants discussed informally with me their experiences of HE, offering 'off-the-record' insights into their lives at university (others were happier to take a cigarette break!).

The second part of the session involved 'scoring' the elements against the bi-polar constructs in order to complete the grid. Participants were shown each element in turn and asked to rate them against all of the bi-polar constructs I had elicited from them (on a scale of 1 to 5). For example, a student would score element 1, "Use Harvard system of referencing rather than numbered footnotes", on a construct which might be 'this comment is helpful' / 'this comment is unhelpful'. In this case, a score of 1 or 2 would mean that the element (feedback comment) was perceived as being either 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful' (respectively), while a score of 4 or 5 would represent 'quite unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful'. Meanwhile, a score of 3 would reflect a perception that the comment was neither helpful nor unhelpful (or that the construct was not seen as relevant to the particular element). This process was repeated until all elements had been scored against all constructs. After this scoring process, repertory grid sessions were concluded by asking the students if they had further comments or questions. I thanked them for their time and arranged to interview them at a later date.

The students' repertory grids were analysed following the sessions using SPSS (various versions). In other studies, grids have been analysed in the presence of participants and the results discussed with them immediately after this analysis. However, there was insufficient time to adopt this approach as many of the students had lectures to attend. Also, I was not confident of being able to accurately analyse the data in a short space of time, as I had no previous experience of the repertory grid technique. Nor did I feel this would be appropriate, as I needed time to reflect on the grids in order to consider any implications for how I should approach my interviews with the students.

Student Interviews

Toward the end of semester one, and after analysing the repertory grids, I contacted the participants again to arrange a follow-up interview. The intention was to explore in greater depth the key issues arising from the first phase of the research (while remaining sensitive to any new emerging themes). At the same time, I was prepared to allow sufficient flexibility in the interviews to explore the results of my repertory grid analysis as and when this seemed appropriate. I hoped that by discussing their personal constructs of feedback in relation to their experiences of, and views on assessment and feedback, the students would be drawn into reflecting on, and talking in-depth about particular issues. These included their motives for engaging with HE, their perceptions of the role of their tutors and their own role in their learning, their views on assessment and feedback, their understanding of assessment criteria in relation to feedback comments, and their responses to feedback.

Of the eight students who had completed a repertory grid, I was able to interview seven as one of the participants repeatedly failed to turn-up for an arranged interview. The

interviews were tape-recorded (with the students' permission) and later transcribed for analysis. Unfortunately, my recording equipment failed on one occasion and I had to rely on my written notes of the encounter. Therefore, in Chapter 7, I was unable to report direct quotations from this student. Nevertheless, the student's views as recorded in my notes were taken into account. This number of participants seemed satisfactory for the purposes of this phase of the research, which was not to generate data from a large, statistically representative sample in order to identify trends with which to generalise from. Rather, the intention was to build on, and complement data from phase one of the research and investigate the experiences and views of a small group of students within a particular learning context. I wanted to explore the particular dynamics mediating their understandings of, and responses to assessment feedback as a form of communication. It was hoped that by doing so, I would be able to further illuminate the social and communicative dynamics mediating this process. The intention was to explore and highlight the nature of 'using' written feedback comments and develop an explanatory framework for understanding students' responses to feedback.

The interviews again took place on campus at times convenient to the students. I believe that the issues regarding the interview setting and my identity as a researcher discussed in Chapter 3 are applicable to this phase of the research. Particularly noticeable again were the students' perceptions of me as a student/researcher and as 'one of us'. This perception may have been strengthened by the fact that the age gap between myself and the level three students was even less than it had been when I interviewed the level one students (in some cases the participants were either the same age as, or slightly older than me). One comment from an interview exemplifies this,

where the student was expressing a view that lecturers are often unable to empathise with students:

> '*I think they [lecturers] think that you can base your life around it [the degree course] rather than go to the pub. And if they'd been actual students like you've been [nodding in my direction], kind of getting drunk like three nights a week ... you've got that kind of social aspect of going to university as well. If you don't understand that then you expect different things*' (Student).

Although I would like to have insisted that my dedication as an undergraduate student was greater than this, the student probably had the measure of me. Nevertheless, this did highlight a serious issue. That is, the danger that the students would *assume* I understood their experiences and in so doing fail to elaborate their responses. Recognising this as a potential problem, I was at great pains (as in the first phase of the research) to push students toward full answers to my questions.

The questions guiding the interview process were related to the students' reasons for being at university; why they chose to study Psychology (and the particular unit I had chosen to focus on); how they approached learning and assessment tasks; what they understood by assessment criteria and the language used in feedback comments; what they perceived to be the roles of the tutor and their own role within the learning context; what kind of feedback they wanted to receive and why; how they had experienced assessment feedback; and how they responded to this feedback. At the same time, the students were afforded the opportunity to raise, discuss and explore any other issues they regarded as important to them.

To assist data analysis, a qualitative research software package QSR NVivo was used. There are issues associated with using computer software of this kind relating to the extent to which the software influences analysis. There is also a belief among many that it implies a grounded theory approach to research. It is therefore important to make clear that I do not feel that the use of this package affected my analysis. Software can be used in different ways (Crowley et al., 2002) and, in my case, I simply used NVivo to file, store and organise my interview data, while using a more traditional 'paper and pen' method for all other aspects of analysis.

Documentary analysis

As in the first phase of the research, I examined the aims of the unit and degree course in general, including learning outcomes, objectives, regulations, assessment requirements, published criteria (and so on). This was important because my guiding theoretical framework suggested that students' and tutors' behaviour will, to some extent, be mediated by institutional rules, regulations and constraints.

Reliability & validity

While I again used more than one method of data collection, the data generated by the interviews and repertory grids were very different, and although complementary, were not addressing the same questions in the way a questionnaire and interview might. Therefore, the grounds for 'checking' interview responses against repertory grid data to enhance validity are questionable. However, the data generated in this second research phase could be, and were, compared with the findings of the first phase, and it was

certainly the case that a number of findings from both phases of research were similar. This indicates a degree of validity and also suggests that conclusions based on new findings might also be valid. In addition, issues raised by findings from other studies in the educational literature (while explored in greater depth in my research) provide a further indication of validity where they are essentially similar in nature to those raised by my own findings.

In specific relation to the interviews, I attempted to ensure reliability and validity via similar procedures used in the first phase of data collection (for example, by tape-recording interviews and comparing colleagues' interpretations of the data with my own). These procedures have already been outlined and discussed in Chapter 3.

There is, however, a further issue to consider. As reported in chapter 3, Niglas' (1999) analysis of the literature suggests that educational research is achieving a greater balance between qualitative and quantitative methods than has been the case in the past. However, this does not necessarily equate with a greater balance between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research for the explicit purpose of examining *both* objective and subjective features of social life. Rather, a mixed-method approach is, in most instances, simply about using methods such as questionnaires to generate quantifiable data, while also employing methods such as interviews to gather qualitative data. In both cases, the data provide insights into actors' subjective views and experiences. Yet this is not the same as the researcher observing, tracing and describing *actual* practices. Rather, there is a reliance on research participants' claims and assertions to shed light on particular phenomena. It is therefore true that educational research in general, and research in higher education in particular, can be criticised for a tendency to be over-reliant on self-report data. Certainly more needs to be done to address this issue.

My own research is open to similar criticisms, since my results are to a large part founded on such data. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that not *all* of my methods yielded self-report data. The development of my feedback typology (described in chapter 3), and my analysis of a sample of written feedback comments (presented in chapter 4), allowed me to gain an insight into the feedback students *actually* experienced without relying solely on what they *told me* they experienced. Moreover, findings from my analysis of tutors' comments are consistent with my analysis of the interview data (in relation to students' descriptions of the feedback they received). This does at least *suggest* that some confidence in my findings, where they are based on self-report data alone, is warranted.

Ethics and confidentiality

As in the first phase of research, the identities of all respondents remained confidential and, while I showed interview transcripts to colleagues in order to discuss my interpretation of the data, I ensured that these had been first been anonymised. Where I have quoted participants in Chapter 7 and felt the need to use names to differentiate between the responses of particular students, I have used pseudonyms. All due care was taken to ensure that no data could reveal the identity of respondents to outside parties.

It was also important when using student quotations in my findings to guard against members of university staff being identified, particularly where comments from the students regarding teaching and assessment practices have the potential to cause embarrassment. While it is entirely possible that a particular university, school or course unit could be identified by deduction, I feel that sufficient care has been taken to protect the identity of individual members of staff. At all times I have removed names,

replacing them in the text with such terms as '[name of tutor]'. More than one lecturer taught on the units involved in this research. Also, the students referred to their experiences of their degree course in general (not confining their responses to a particular unit). Consequently, I feel that it would not be possible for anyone to guess the names of any staff members the students were referring to. Of course, where a particular lecturer was consistently praised for their teaching and assessment practices (as was indeed the case in this research), I passed this on to the lecturer in question as useful feedback. Where the opposite was true (which again occurred), I did not feel it would be appropriate for me to be quite so forward (although had I felt that the interviews revealed particularly damaging, unethical or illegal behaviour I would have brought this to the attention of my director of studies).

Chapter 7 reports on the findings from this second phase of research. I then discuss these findings in Chapter 8, referring to the findings from the first phase, my discussion of these findings and appropriate educational literature.

Chapter 7 - Phase II results

This chapter reports the results from the second phase of data collection. I outline results from the student interviews and my analysis of the students' repertory grids. The interviews provided an in-depth exploration of the student experience and constituted the primary method of data collection. The repertory grid analysis yielded supporting data.

The learning context

Documentation

The participants in this phase of the research were recruited from an optional level three unit run in semester one of the academic year. Only students at level three were able to select this unit. All participants were studying for a degree in Psychology. Prior to selecting the unit, the students had access to documentation outlining its aims, objectives, content, learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, and 'assessment strategy' (indicating how the students were to be assessed). At the beginning of semester one, the unit tutor gave the students further documentation on these areas, plus details of the seminar, tutorial, workshop and lecture programme. They were also given brief guidelines for essay writing (see below), plus a recommended reading list.

Assessment tasks

The students were assessed on 100% coursework. This involved two related tasks:

1. An oral presentation of a case study (worth 40% of the marks available)

2. A reflexive essay (2,000 words) based on the case presentation (60% of the marks)

Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria were provided by the unit tutor and set-out in documentation. According to these criteria, student case presentations were to be assessed on:

- Content (reference to key issues, debates and literature; substantiation of arguments by evidence; reasoned and critical approach).

- Structure (logical ordering of material; coherent line of argument).

- Clarity (clear language, presentation, and elucidation of points).

- Ability to present a substantiated argument in a time constrained situation.

Meanwhile, the essay was to be assessed against the following:

- Knowledge and understanding of key issues, concepts and cross-disciplinary debates.

- Critical reflection on theory, research methods and evidence.

- Demonstrates links to contemporary ideologies, policies and debates.

- Clearly structured, coherent and substantiated line of argument.

- Accurate grammar and punctuation.

- Critical self-reflection on the process of conducting the case study.

In addition, students were provided advice on writing the essay (on approximately one and a half sides of A4 paper). Most of this advice (half a side of A4) explained how sources should be referenced (using the Harvard system). A few brief 'dos and don'ts' were listed under the headings of 'essay title', 'sources', 'substantiation of points', 'coherence, analysis and independent insight', and 'presentation.' For example, the advice relating to 'coherence, analysis and independent insight' suggested the following:

'Do not list issues without drawing out their connectedness to the focus of the essay;

Conceptual points should be linked to yield a coherent account;

The essay should be analytical and move beyond mere description of issues or debates;

There should be evidence of independent thought;

The essay should have an introduction and conclusion (seems obvious but often ignored)'.

[All criteria reproduced from unit documentation]

Participants

The following students were recruited as research participants from this unit. Pseudonyms have been used.

Name	Age	Route into HE
Anita*	21	Traditional A level route
Angela	46	Access course
Claire**	21	Traditional A level route

Justin	21	Traditional A level route
Lisa	32	Access course
Louise	22	A levels, including additional year to gain further GCSE qualifications
Robert	26	Access course
Sarah	22	A levels then a 'gap' year between college and university

* = Completed a repertory grid but did not attend an interview

** = Completed a repertory grid and attended an interview. However, direct quotations are not available from this student due to a failure in the interview recording equipment (as described in Chapter 6).

The repertory grids

As indicated in Chapter 6, the repertory grids were constructed from sessions with eight students. Seven of these also took part in the interviews (although quotations from only six were used for reasons already outlined).

The eight students were all able to derive bipolar constructs during the first session and to then score the twelve elements against each bipolar construct. When the grids were subsequently examined, it became apparent that the constructs elicited by each participant were either the same as, or very similar to, the constructs of the other participants (for example, two similar constructs were 'this is helpful/this is unhelpful' and 'this will help me/this will not help me at all'). It was therefore decided, prior to analysing the repertory grid data, to give similar constructs the same label (for example, 'this is helpful/this is unhelpful' and 'this will help me/this will not help me at all' were regarded as sufficiently similar as to warrant a common construct label, 'comment is helpful/comment is unhelpful'). The level of repetition and similarity in the freely

elicited constructs suggests that these participants shared similar personal construct systems in relation to the elements provided.

Examining the initial constructs also showed that some of the participants had elicited two constructs, which were almost identical. This was my first use of the repertory grid technique. A more skilled and experienced researcher might have been more sensitive to the elicitation of similar constructs and prompted the participant to re-evaluate the two constructs (quite possibly leading to the participant settling on one construct label instead of two). Unfortunately, such similarities were not noticed until elements had already been scored and grids completed. The possibility of combining a participant's scores for elements in relation to two very similar constructs was considered. Having discovered that the scores for each element in relation to similar constructs tended to be almost identical, the decision was made to do this. As a result, the number of constructs elicited by each individual was reduced. And since, in any case, some students had elicited less constructs than others, the number of constructs in each individual repertory grid ranged in the final analysis from three to five.

Ultimately, six constructs were identified overall. The constructs are listed and described below in order of frequency:

1. *Comment is helpful - Comment is unhelpful*

   The meaning of this construct is relatively self-evident. It was elicited by seven participants to differentiate comments they felt would be helpful from those they considered unhelpful.

2. *Comment is praising me - Comment is punishing me*

   This construct was used by six participants to distinguish between comments that

praised them, or their work, and those that seemed to constitute censure or punishment for deficiencies in their assessment performance.

3. *Comment is personal - Comment is impersonal*

Six students elicited this construct to differentiate comments they felt were directed at them as individuals from comments which seemed impersonal and could have been written about anybody's work.

4. *Comment is about conceptual aspects of my work - Comment is about technical aspects of my work*

Five participants elicited this construct to distinguish comments that focused on conceptual or theoretical aspects of their work as opposed to those which seemed to concentrate on technical aspects such as grammar and spelling.

5. *Comment is implicit - Comment is explicit*

Four participants perceived the meaning of some comments to be merely implicit. They elicited this construct to differentiate such comments from those they considered having a clear, definite meaning.

6. *Comment encourages me to reflect on my work - Comment does not encourage me to reflect on my work.*

This construct was elicited by four participants to distinguish comments they felt were encouraging them to reflect on their own work from those which did not seem to invite any form of reflection.

It was clear from talking to the students during the elicitation of constructs that the construct poles were not perceived in a neutral way. Four of the six constructs were viewed as 'positive' at one end of the construct pole and 'negative' at the other. That is to say, students had positive views of comments rated as helpful, personal, about

conceptual aspects of assignments, and as explicit. Conversely, the students held negative views about comments rated as unhelpful, impersonal, about technical aspects of assignments, and as implicit. Students' views of comments rated as 'praise' or 'punishment' (where this construct was elicited) were less clear as some of the students indicated that while praise was enjoyed, it was not always the feedback they wanted (in fact, one student welcomed censure as it was more likely to prompt improvement in her learning). And the situation was similarly unclear for comments encouraging (or not encouraging) the student to reflect on their work as not all students eliciting this construct thought that the encouragement of reflection was a useful tutor intervention.

The process of construct elicitation proved very revealing and, in itself, suggested some important findings. In summary, these are:

- The ease with which participants were able to elicit constructs further supports the view that the pre-selected elements were meaningful to them and representative of the feedback they had become accustomed to receiving.

- Repetition of, and similarities between participants' constructs (allowing constructs to be re-labelled to provide a generic set of six constructs) suggest similar construct systems in relation to the elements, and perhaps also to assessment feedback in general (with each construct occurring in between four and seven of the eight student grids).

- In order of occurrence, comments were perceived in terms of their **use value** (by seven students); in terms of **discipline** (by six students); in terms of **level of detachment** (by six students); in terms of **focus** (by five students); in terms **explicitness** (by four students); and in terms of the extent to which they **encourage reflection** (by four students).

- There was evidence of a general **positive attitude** toward comments regarded as **helpful, personal**, focused on **conceptual** aspects of work, and as **explicit**.

- There was evidence of a general **negative attitude** toward comments regarded as **unhelpful, impersonal**, about **technical** aspects of work, and as **implicit**.

- There was evidence of **conflicting attitudes** toward comments regarded as **disciplinary** ('praise' or 'punishment') and the extent to which **reflection** was encouraged.

I report further findings from the repertory grid analysis as and when they are relevant to the main findings emerging from my primary method of data collection - the student interviews.

Student interviews

1. Student motivation

- The students were all keen to 'do well' at university. However, it would be wrong to assume that this was out of a desire simply to gain a degree and improve their job prospects. A range of motives, both intrinsic and extrinsic, were apparent for engaging with HE in general, and studying Psychology in particular (and indeed the unit from which these research participants were recruited).

- Some students had particular career aspiration for which they required a degree in Psychology, while others felt under some pressure from their family to go to university. For example:

'... at the moment I'm just sort of concentrating on getting my degree done, you know, but yeah, I want to be a counsellor. Ideally I want to work in child counselling working in schools or something like that. So that's why I'm here basically' (Justin).

'I've two older sisters and I'm the first one to go to uni, I suppose it's, I don't know, I suppose it's a bit of like family pressure as well maybe' (Sarah).

- However, the students also *all* demonstrated a level of intrinsic motivation for studying Psychology (and particular units):

    'I've got like a lot of Psychology books at home so sometimes I'll just read about stuff anyway, it might not have anything particular to do with the course but just 'cause it's interesting, I won't actually like write anything down but I'll just like read it' (Sarah).

    'Well, I'm interested in the whole caboodle of it [Psychology], I am interested in it all ...I was really enjoying the Psychology on the access unit and I thought, I'll try for that ... I've not regretted doing it, it's, um, it's obviously been an eye opener, I mean I think everybody in their own way has got an interest in psychology, it's just not everybody pursues it, you know, it's human nature isn't it?' (Lisa).

- In all cases, a *range* of motives (both intrinsic and extrinsic) were apparent for studying at university:

    'I think I wanted to do, when I started Psychology it was really important for me to do it so it was approved by the BPS [British Psychological Society] 'cause I thought I might want to do Clinical Psychology so, um, I really wanted to, that was important to me 'cause I thought I wanted to, er, the first time I did Psychology was at college and some people said, oh god it's really, it's a bit heavy!, but I loved it and I really, really liked it and so, and I thought I'd become a psychologist and find out what's wrong with everybody' (Louise).

    'More people have got degrees these days apparently, so I think you need degrees to do well really, I don't want to be doing some kind of telesales job like, you know, millions upon millions of people do in this country, I've done it myself, it's not bad but it's not something I want to do, it's not something you'd call a career. By doing a degree it gives you that stepping-stone and also it's good experience as well, you learn lot's of different things and stuff, plus you get to lay in bed late ... I mean I've sort of wanted to do Psychology for a long time before I came here ... I've also sort of like wondered about things which Psychology teaches you. I remember when I was a little kid I was thinking about things like, where's the mind in the, where is the mind? 'Cause you've got a brain but where's all the processing going on? 'Cause, you know, you can't see inside a body, and that sort of whole essentialist thing. I was thinking

156

about that sort of thing when I was like six years old ... I've always wanted to question things like that though, where do people think and what?, just found it interesting really' (Robert).

- It is important to also note, however, that enjoyment in the subject was not stable and seemed to vary over the three years depending on the subject focus. For example, Justin claimed to have quickly lost motivation for the course while he found the early units and approach to the course uninteresting, yet his enjoyment of Psychology and intrinsic motivation returned during a 'critical moment' when he was introduced to an area of, and approach to the subject which interested him and which he found he could really engage with.

> *'I do [enjoy Psychology] ... there's certain things I really like, you know, there's certain things I really don't like. We did a lot of, the first and second year was loads of stats and loads of statistics and I just, I don't know, because I'm never going to go into research, it's something that's not, doesn't interest me, so I felt like the whole thing was a bit of a waste of time for me, do you know what I mean? ... [but] about half-way through my second year I was really kind of getting a bit pissed off with the subject. I thought, you know, there's really nothing for me in this. It weren't 'till we started doing about critical social psychology that I really found something I could get my teeth into and things and think, you know, this is something I really agree with and, I mean, that were the first thing that really started to make sense for me. So, I've been banging on about it ever since (laughs)'* (Justin).

2. Understanding assessment expectations

Students' use of assessment criteria

- All the students interviewed believed that meeting assessment criteria was vital for academic success. Moreover, all seven looked out for published criteria and tried to make some reference to them before handing in a piece of work. However, their use of criteria was retrospective. None of the students claimed to make revisions to their work at this point, using the criteria instead as a checklist against which to get a sense of how well their work would be received.

'I kind of follow that [published assessment criteria] as much as possible, um, when I'm like proof reading my essay after I've finished it, um, I try and sort of look through it with reference to that and, um, and try and, you know, see if I'm hitting all the criteria' (Justin).

'I have been through this [the criteria] before, you know, thinking yeah, I think that's OK, this is OK, and knowing what the weak points have been, but by this time usually the essay's almost finished, and you get to that point where you just think, tough!' (Angela).

Divergent understandings of key assessment criteria

- All seven students seemed to have come to some understanding of the meaning of assessment criteria, yet there remained a level of uncertainty about some criteria:

    'Academic argument? ... you don't really get things like that explained to you, you just assume that it means one thing. I don't know what I assume it means. I suppose you've got to use references' (Louise)

- Moreover, knowing how to actually meet these criteria, as opposed to simply developing a sense of what they mean, seemed to pose problems for the students:

    'I think I'm fairly comfortable with what they mean, I'm just not very skilled at doing them' (Lisa).

    'I feel pretty comfortable with the term ['academic argument'] yeah, and that's what I try and do. I don't know if I'm doing it right but the way I try and do it is, um, to, well the way I always seem to do it is to present this sort of empirical argument ... I don't know if I doing it right, I mean that's what I think of, you know, the critique or whatever your supposed to do. I don't know if I'm doing it right' (Justin).

    'I understand what they [criteria] need, it's just, you know, sometimes I think I've found it difficult to actually write the essay and do what's expected ... [I find difficult] the analysis and putting forward two different arguments and getting into that' (Angela).

- All of the students thought that **'critical analysis'**, as an assessment criterion, was of central importance on the degree course:

    'I suppose it's things like critical analysis, like they mention it a lot in lectures anyway ... and it's like sort of one of the main things in Psychology is to try and be critical' (Sarah).

158

- While most believed they had some grasp of this criterion, competing definitions of the term were offered. Robert believed that knowledge is contestable and, therefore, analytical skills are important in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of theories and ideas found in the Psychology literature, and to develop an argument based on the evaluation. This requires reading to be accompanied by understanding:

> *'You've got to weigh-up the evidence, weigh-up the evidence and just answer the question I think. Um, I mean you've got to be aware of limitations of some people's arguments and compare and contrast. I mean, that's why they have those words like discuss, compare and contrast, you have got to take those into account in your essay. Um, I'm trying to think of a, um, doing a lot a reading I suppose as well, but you've got to understand it at the same time ... it's more about your argument, you know, it's not the rightness or wrongness, it's about how good your argument is, you know, how well you evaluate what you've found and go through making sure that you've got like clear premises, you know, defined in your essay, and you come to a conclusion on the basis of what you're found'* (Robert).

- Sarah too felt that analysis involved a certain level of evaluation:

> *'... it's about showing both sides of every view'* (Sarah).

- But she understood the term 'critical' to have negative connotations, believing a critical analysis to involve finding ways of contradicting and discrediting ideas and theories presented in the literature:

> *'... it's about being ... like if one person says "this is really good", not just taking their word for it, and maybe trying to find evidence against it, like criticising it. So you're not just like analysing it, you're sort of critically analysing it'* (Sarah).

- This was an understanding shared by four other students. For example, Lisa stated that:

> *'I've kind of realised that to critically evaluate things you need to ... get a piece [of work] and pull it to pieces and kind of say, well, this is at fault, you know just criticising it, analysing it ...'* (Lisa).

159

All the students seemed to make a qualitative distinction between published assessment criteria and tutors' expectations, placing greater importance on the latter.

- Two of the students used the term 'rules' to describe these expectations. For instance, Angela argued that:

> '*... it's like they've [tutors] got the rules and you've got to work out what they are. It's um, yeah, it's not easy trying to find out exactly what you should be doing*' (Angela).

- These 'rules' were recognised as the tutors' rules and were related to tutors' views and preferences in terms of the 'content', 'style', 'structure', 'organisation', 'level of analysis' (and so on) of written assignments:

> '*... there's no set formula exactly for writing, so each tutor has their own preferred style, they want to see certain things*' (Lisa).

> '*... it is more about lecturers' particular interests ... there is some subjectivity in it, like different lecturers looking for different things*' (Robert).

- The students all felt that these rules have a significant impact on assessment. Two of the students claimed that variations between tutors determine how they will mark a student's work. Justin felt that tutors' preferences regarding content would lead to some being dismissive of his work, particularly in the context of heavy tutor workloads. Meanwhile Lisa believed that preferences regarding style would mediate how assessments were marked.

> '*... I do get the impression that there aren't sort of, as soon as they see, I don't know, Foucault mentioned, or something like that, they think, "oh bollocks", you know, especially, I mean I can see their point of view like when you've got a lot of stuff to mark, you know, and I don't think it probably gets read, you know, really properly, it just kind of, and they see some social constructionist [viewpoint] and they think, you know, "oh forget this", you know, "he's wandering off the point here", you know, but*

160

I don't know, I just keep writing them and hoping that the person reads it really properly and sees what I'm trying to say, you know' (Justin).

'... you feel there's no uniformity, I mean obviously each marker's an individual and they've got their individual preferences to writing styles, you know, if you can really flower something up with the language that they really like, and some tutors seem to prefer straightforward plain English kind of thing, and depending on your writing style you'll please some and not others' (Lisa).

- And four of the students felt that these idiosyncrasies led to variable feedback. For example, Lisa argued that:

  '... it [feedback] varies with the tutors, you know, everybody's got their own style and all the rest of it, some tutors will ... write extensive notes, some will write what seems silly comments, you know, not really to do with the essay as such, like "brackets here", and, blah di blah, kind of thing ... And some will just kind of put a tick at each paragraph, so it goes from one extreme to the other ...' (Lisa).

- Moreover, three of these students believed that a tutor's rules would sometimes be at odds with those of another, resulting in contradictory feedback (particularly where students have the experience of being taught and assessed by more than one tutor on the same unit):

  '... in our first and second year we had certain tutors and then they were marked by whoever at first and ... people were getting back their first piece [of work] and it was saying," you need to look as this", "you need to avoid this and that" ... so you do it differently the next time ... [and] you'd get it back the next time and you'd changed it and the next teacher would say, "well I don't want you to do that"' (Louise).

  '... because we're told, or we were told different, conflicting things, it did make it, it seemed silly the feedback that we got, very silly' (Lisa).

- There was a general feeling that both assessment 'rules' and the meaning of assessment criteria were hidden, elusive and rarely explicated

> '... *[The rules] for marking the essays, yeah, what they're looking for, it's, you know, like working in the dark sometimes ... it's individual's ones [rules]*' (Angela).

> '*You don't know half the time, that's the problem, you don't know what they want*' (Robert).

> '... *some of them [assessment criteria] are quite vague*' (Louise).

> '... *sometimes the tutors don't particularly explain it, they will just say, criticise, you know, be critical*' (Lisa).

- All of the students felt that tutors failed to make explicit what they expect of them in terms of assessment. All but one student felt that this resulted from tutors making assumptions about students' understandings:

> '*It [assessment expectations] comes across from the teaching although you don't explicitly get taught to do it, it's just kind of inferred all the way along, you just kind of pick up that that's the way to do it, you know, and that's the way to get the marks and stuff ... the essay writing you just pick it up I think. You do kind of get, at the end of the year there's usually like an essay, you know, a lecture on how to do your essay and stuff and what points to put in and they kind of tell you then to, you know, you need to have critical thought and stuff like that but, I don't know, it's not like we ever did a module in essay writing or anything, it's kind of assumed that you know what an essay is and how to write it ... I think it's just assumed that anybody who can get into a position where they're on a degree course can competently write an essay*' (Justin).

> '... *do you think people who set the criteria and mark work, do you think they kind of assume that you know what it means?*' (Researcher). '*Yeah. I mean they must do! I think otherwise they wouldn't use the criteria that they use. I think if you'd done really badly they'd probably assume you didn't know what it meant (laughs) 'cause you weren't addressing what they want you to address, but they must, yeah they do assume that*' (Louise).

- This point is perhaps highlighted by the fact that all participants were quick to praise a lecturer they had encountered in their first year. This member of staff had made

efforts to explain to students what was expected of them for assessment. However, this tutor constituted the exception rather than the rule:

> *'I think he [name of tutor] was really good in our first year, he was really helpful and we haven't had him since. I think he's probably, in that kind of way he was probably the most helpful lecturer we've had. He just either knew that people needed that kind of help for their first year, but then they sort of automatically think you don't need it after your first year 'cause you're in university, you know what your doing and you don't need that kind of feedback but I mean you do'* (Louise).

- With the students often frustrated by the lack of guidance on assessment 'rules' and assessment criteria, they felt that developing an understanding of the demands of assessment had simply been a gradual learning process and not necessarily a result of any feedback or specific advice:

> *'Um, if you'd asked me that [what is expected of students] in the first year I wouldn't have had a clue ... but I feel, yeah I feel I finally know what it's about but it's taken me a couple of years to get my head 'round it though ... It's just time and practice I think ... I mean I'm only really feeling comfortable with it now ... you know, in terms of like the critical analysis and that'* (Justin).

> *'... I did improve actually later on in like my final year [but] I don't necessarily think it was the feedback, I think I just got used to writing them'* (Louise).

Implicit and explicit feedback comments

By focusing at this point on my repertory grid analysis, possible implications of unclear assessment criteria and expectations are highlighted. Four of the students had elicited a construct around explicitness ('comment is implicit' / 'comment is explicit'). Interestingly, these students each rated half or more of the twelve feedback comments presented to them as explicit. However, three of the comments, which were repeatedly rated as such, referred to what the students saw as 'superficial aspects' of their work. Of these comments, "Use Harvard

system of referencing rather than numbered footnotes" and "Your grammar is good, but make sure you check spelling" were simply about referencing and grammar/spelling, while the comment, "You could make your work easier to read by improving your presentation" was interpreted by the students as being about neatness or legibility (making the work 'easier to read'). Meanwhile, the comments most often rated as implicit were those to do with more conceptual, and arguably important, assessment criteria (relating to 'critique' and 'analysis'). These comments - "You have a very poor grasp of some important concepts" and "Be more critical!" - fail to elaborate on weaknesses in a student's work and, without explanation, the students found their meanings to be unclear.

This distinction between different types of comment is reflected in the construct, 'comment is about conceptual aspects of my work' / 'comment is about technical aspects of my work'. Among the five students whose grids included this construct, there were broad similarities between them in how elements were rated against the construct. Those considered to be 'technical' in nature included five of the twelve elements and related to 'referencing', 'structure', 'grammar/spelling', 'style', and 'presentation'. Comments regarded by the majority of these students as 'conceptual' related to 'argument', 'concepts' and 'critique'.

3. The problems with written feedback

Tutors' obligation to provide feedback

- Despite the problems of getting to grips with assessment expectations, or perhaps *because* of these uncertainties, the students often tried to refer back to their feedback comments:

> '... *when I'm writing the next essay I'll look through [the feedback] and see where I've failed on the others [assignments] and try and improve what I did wrong ... and see what suggestions they made and try and improve on that*' (Angela).

> '*I have used that feedback to try and improve*' (Lisa).

> '*I always read the feedback and sometimes I might re-read the essay, like if I keep a copy of the essay I'll re-read it and try and relate to what they've said about it*' (Sarah).

- Moreover, while there was some evidence of sympathy for tutors in terms of understanding the pressures they face (such as heavy workloads) and how these pressures might hinder the level of feedback provided, all the students expected tutors to provide assessment feedback. Feedback on marked work was seen a part of the 'service' HE is obliged to offer. It was also seen as important to enable the students to monitor their performance, as well as being a potential motivator:

> '... *the way I see it now is like students are customers now and you should expect a service, you know, you expect a particular level of service, I really do ... It's like if you're buying a car you expect a certain level of service, you know, if you're paying for something ... [so] it's not very good when you don't get comments at all ... I've had a piece of work where I haven't had any feedback at all, and you just sort of feel like you're wasting your time a bit really if you just get a mark but you're not getting any feedback, you know, why you did well?, why you didn't do so well?*' (Robert).

> '*I think you always want to know how you've done don't you? ... I think it's in human nature, you want to know how you've done, how you are in literally like in the pecking order of society ... and to [compare it to] like other work that you've done in the past, see if you're like doing better ...*

I wouldn't like to just hand in an essay and just not know ... 'cause I've spent time doing it so I want to know how I've done ... [I] think it should be part of their [tutors'] role [to provide feedback], and maybe it isn't, they're just there to teach, but it's sort of like at school isn't it, like it's supposed to be like everything, like they teach you but they have to like help you, not just like give you the work and let you do it yourself, you need like that encouragement to tell you like whether you're doing the work right' (Sarah).

Structural problems

But the students were unhappy with their experiences of feedback. They often found feedback insufficiently timely and relevant to work on other units. The departmental mechanisms for returning marked work also caused difficulties.

- Feedback that was **not timely** reduced the propensity for all but one of the students to read their tutors' feedback comments:

  '... [Receiving marked work] seems to take a while sometimes, like at one time I think we were waiting for three research projects to come back, and I don't think I've got my last one back actually because, you know, the way the term ended and, I suppose if I pulled my finger out I could find out where to go for it [feedback], but, um, yeah, there's often quite a wait, and, you know, then if you're in the next semester anyway you might not have got those tutors anymore and you've got even more work to do so you don't follow it through' (Angela).

  'You don't see it [a marked assignment] until after you get back [the following semester], about four months I think it is, I mean, no, we handed them [essays] in over Easter, after Easter, like sort of say it was like May or the end of April and we got, I mean, my feedback in like September when I started back at uni. I suppose it's not very useful if you're thinking about doing dissertation work' (Louise).

  'I came back after Christmas, but they [feedback comments] were for my summer essays and they didn't have feedback until after the summer and I just didn't really care that much 'cause it was the next year by then ... It's like the essay we gave in last week, it's like, I don't think it's even going to be marked 'till like the beginning of December, but I like, I wanted to know sort of almost straight away' (Sarah).

- This seemed to relate to the modular nature of the degree programme, where feedback from a piece of work on one unit might be perceived as **irrelevant** if

166

received by the student when they had already moved on to a different unit (a problem compounded by tutors focusing their comments on the narrow concerns of their unit):

> '... often that's the end of that part of the course anyway so, you know, I'm sure the information would be good for later on but it's sort of gone, seems a bit of a waste of time' (Angela).

> 'I think they [tutors] all do it [provide feedback] to help you, I don't know, it's like sometimes a lot of modules you only do one essay anyway, so once you've got the feedback it's too late and you won't do that course again or that module, so maybe it's just habit, just telling you how you did, I don't think they mention like other units, it's just like what you've done for that one ' (Sarah).

- **Poor systems for returning work** at the departmental level were also cited as causing difficulties. Marked work was often left in boxes outside office doors to be collected by the students, but it was prone to go missing. It did not seem to take many experiences of absent feedback for the students to abandon attempts to seek out their tutors' comments:

> '... my experience is the papers just get trashed all over the place and sometimes it's difficult to find ... [so] I don't always go to pick it up to see what I could be doing better' (Lisa).

> 'I do [read comments] when they're available, um, but the availability of them's a bit of a problem. I mean, what bugs is they always say, hand in two copies of your work so one's there in case it needs to be assessed and the other can be handed back to you as feedback, but you never get that second copy back, you know what I mean? It's happened about once that it's been like available when I've gone to pick it up or whatever, um, and the feedback sheets, they're just kind of put out in a box and it's hard to find them and half the time they're not there and stuff with other people taking them and whatever. If I can find it I'll read them but actually, I mean, like in terms of last year's feedback sheets, I didn't really make that big an effort to go and find out about them because I'd just got used to not seeing them, so when the boxes were there I had a look through them on the half-chance that my thing would be in there but I handed-in about three essays and I could only find like one feedback sheet out of the three, so generally it's not really, I'll read it if it's there but it's not always available' (Justin).

However, when the students were able to obtain their tutors written feedback comments, there were further problems.

Inconsistent feedback

- All seven students indicated that they had experienced considerable variability in the feedback they had received:

> '... *what you get from different tutors is different. It should be more like a more standard thing 'cause like, I don't know, it's like some of them are really vague and other ones, the whole thing might be criticising what you've done without saying anything which is good, some of it might mention sentence structure of something ... I think it varies too much, even like not just between lecturers but the same lecturer as well*' (Sarah).

- As suggested above, a number of students made the link between variable feedback and tutors' subjective preferences (or 'rules') for assessment. As a result, there was a feeling that feedback was 'contestable', though in slightly different ways. Students such as Lisa, Angela, Louise and Sarah lost faith in the 'accuracy' of comments that appeared to offer conflicting 'instructions'. Meanwhile students such as Robert, Claire and Justin perceived variations in feedback as reflecting tutors' preferences for different approaches and theories within a subject where knowledge is inherently contestable. For the latter students, comments mediated by subjective viewpoints were seen as biased and dogmatic, while the former saw little point in attending to feedback, which offered contradictory advice:

> '... *depending on who marked them [assignments] and how they wanted them laid out, we got such conflicting instruction, "this should have been there", "that should have been that", and you couldn't please everybody all the time basically, and I just kind of got fed-up with it and thought, I just jacked it in, thought it was a waste of time reading it, and I've not been back since ... [It's] always contradicting, very, very confusing ... even when you've been told specifically to do something, to put in a*

168

certain section, somebody else marks it and they're kind of like, "what an Earth have you done that for?", you know, oh crikey!, and it's just, it just seemed like a waste of time getting any feedback from that' (Lisa).

'... we were finding that we would have lessons with one person and then somebody else would mark it and we'd get conflicting comments ... And it's, um, you lose a bit of confidence then in what they are telling you' (Angela).

'I've got right into social constructionism and stuff, you know, the more qualitative side of it [the subject] and that, and a lot of the lecturers here and the tutors and that, they're not great into that at all, it's very sort of quantitative, and I always try to bring a social constructionist argument into everything (laughs). I remember like one report we did and it was based on some, it was based on like Eysenck's personality thing and I basically think that the whole thing's a load of rubbish, do you know what I mean? So I went through it and did the report and, you know, there were no significant results and I sort of said what we could have done differently to maybe, you know, to maybe, why the experiment failed ... [but] what I got in the feedback was that I wasted time and space putting, writing about that when it was already an established and validated method of measurement and I just totally disagreed with that completely, do you know what I mean? ... I just thought, I mean obviously the person that sort of marked it, I don't know who it were but, um, I know there's a lot of people who don't like the social constructionist argument and stuff. I remember talking to one of the [name of Psychology unit] tutors about it and, you know, I think someone asked her opinion on it and she goes, oh well somebody's got to get it wrong haven't they?, and, you know, it's like a really sort of a bad attitude to have I thought ...' (Justin).

A lack of information

The students were also able to cite plenty of examples where feedback simply failed to

provide any useful information. For example:

'... I once got 69 [for an essay], last year, which is quite mean that they didn't give me 70' (Sarah).
'Did you get any advice on what was wrong?' (Researcher).
'No I don't think I did, I just got like, "really, really good", sort of thing, but why it wasn't good enough to get an extra mark I'll never know' (Sarah).

'... the worst one I got back, it just, um, had all my spelling mistakes underlined and something like, "satisfactory effort", written at the bottom, you know, and I thought, oh well that's good!, you know (laughs)' (Justin).

169

There seemed to be subtle differences between students in terms of the kinds of comments they valued most, which also mediated their experiences of feedback.

- Louise, Lisa, Angela and Sarah, were highly critical of comments that failed to give them specific instructions on what they *must* do to improve their work. Comments evaluating or discussing aspects of their work and/or offering different suggestions as to how they might have approached it differently seemed to be dismissed as 'vague' and/or lacking in sufficiently specific guidance:

> *'I think it [feedback form a piece of work] was about sort of like a paragraph about what I'd been, what was wrong with it and what I could've done, but it didn't really say what I should've done'* (Louise).

> *'I found I never really improved, I stayed at a standard level with them [essays] ... I don't know if it's necessarily a lack of feedback ... I did use the feedback [I received] actually 'cause I used to look at what I'd done wrong and try to change it ... [but] they didn't really tell you what you should have done, they kind of assumed that you should know what you should have done if you've done it wrong'* (Angela).

> *'... one [marked essay] I got back I didn't do very well in the essay so I read it [feedback] through, I suppose with quite a lot of concentration, 'cause I was confused about where I'd gone wrong, and I wouldn't say it was particularly useful in the sense that it was kind of like, you didn't really answer the question, and it went on about certain aspects of my essay, um, but I didn't really find it that useful'* (Sarah).

- Rather, these students wanted specific, detailed instructions on what exactly they needed to do to improve their work.

> *'I do like it [guidance and feedback to be] bang straightforward ... just straight in my face, concrete, like, "what are you doing?!", "do this", "do this" ... I would much rather they say, "this is a pile of crap, you're doing this wrong, you should have pulled this in, you should have explored that more", rather than a vague comment, I'd much rather have it in my face and then I know what I'm working to'* (Lisa).

- Interestingly, these students were the ones who referred explicitly to the comments shown to them in the repertory grid sessions to illustrate how comments can be 'vague':

> '... *subtle things like some of the comments on the [rep. grid] cards that we went through before, the vague, really vague stuff, you know, it's just so open to interpretation*' (Lisa).

> '... *Well it just, all it's [looking at rep grid element "Be more critical"] got is, "'be more critical", it hasn't got, um, It depends really 'cause like, it depends like what I've been given for the essay, "be more critical"? I'd presume it meant to be more critical of the theories, so it is helpful but it would have been more helpful if they'd said like, be more critical of like Freud or something, like more specific*' (Sarah).

> '... *that "be more critical" [comment from the rep grid], it's not particularly, well it's sort of useful, but if it's like a specific point then I'll maybe look at it and try and change it for next time or like know what I should've done differently*' (Angela).

It is worth noting that an analysis of Lisa's repertory grid revealed a significant negative correlation between the construct, 'comment is helpful' / 'comment is unhelpful' and 'comment is implicit' / 'comment is explicit' ($r = -0.612$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.035$). In other words, implicit comments tended to be regarded as unhelpful.

- Meanwhile, Robert, Claire and Justin wanted to receive more evaluative information and general suggestions on what *could* have made their work stronger.

> '... *good [feedback] was when I did this one about [name of topic] and, you know, it wasn't like too bad a mark, I was quite pleased. I didn't expect to, well actually I did put quite a bit of effort into it actually, and yeah, I thought I'd covered everything 'cause I tried to sort of, I tried to look at everything to do with [topic area] and I got my feedback and it was saying, you know, it's good but to improve it you could have looked at these areas as well. I mean that was really useful 'cause, you know, I'd had a decent mark, and it was also saying room for improvement so it's like showing that, you know, the lecturer's doing the job ... 'cause they're saying like this is what else you could've included, and it's something I'd never heard of, I mean we didn't even cover it in the lectures, but I mean, I suppose that's not the point, you've got to find it out for yourself* (Robert).

' ... you want, you know, what you've done right and, you know, if there's
room for improvement ... it [feedback] gives you an idea of where you've
gone wrong I suppose, you know, for next time you sort of think, well if I
do it this way I might do better, it's as simple as that really' (Justin).

Helpful & unhelpful comments

Again returning to the repertory grid analysis, these preferences seem to be reflected in the comments these student thought would be helpful. Louise, Anita, Lisa and Sarah found the comments "Your grammar is good, but make sure you check spelling" and "You could make your work easier to read by improving your presentation" to be helpful. Also, Louise and Sarah both perceived as helpful the comment, "Use Harvard system of referencing rather than numbered footnotes". Yet Robert, Claire and Justin found the first of these comments to be of little use, and both Claire and Justin also regarded the second comment as unhelpful. At the same time, three of the five comments rated as helpful by Robert did not involve the direct instruction favoured by Louise, Anita, Lisa and Sarah. Rather, the comments he regarded as helpful gave more evaluative information - "I like the way you locate your argument within a relevant context", "Original argument, but should you have mentioned the literature on X without considering the literature on Y?" and "You have a very poor grasp of some important concepts". Claire also found these last two comments helpful. Meanwhile, Justin regarded the comment, "You have used a journalistic rather than academic style", to be of help.

Suggestions for improvement in the form of evaluative comments on work are very different to specific instructions on what must be done in the future; the former invite the student to consider alternative approaches to work already completed, which the student can then attempt to learn from, while the latter 'tell' students exactly what to do for future work. This distinction is important, as is discussed in the following chapter.

4. The importance of verbal guidance

'It's good to have someone you can talk to' (Sarah).

- A significant theme emerging from my conversations with the students was the high value they placed on verbal advice and guidance from their tutors. A number of the students had positive experiences of obtaining verbal feedback. Justin described one such occasion:

> *'I was doing, it was the first piece of qualitative research that we'd done and I'd put loads and loads of effort into it, I'd done loads of reading that wasn't necessarily part of the course, do you know what I mean? I did like lots of stuff ... and it was all off my own back and that. I'd really tried hard at it ... and then I got it back and got something like 50 or something or 40 something, it were crap anyway the mark I got. So I went to see [name of tutor] about it and she sat down with me for like about an hour and went, you know, proper went through it all with me and it was really useful ... [and] she went through sort of how to do it properly and that, how would be the best way of doing it... [so] verbal feedback, that can be really useful'* (Justin).

- Verbal guidance was also valued by two of the students for the **'human encounter'** it allows. For instance, Sarah spoke of the motivation generated by regular face-to-face encounters, while Louise advocated the importance of a human **'connection'**:

> *'I meet my dissertation tutor like sort of every two weeks, I'm going to see her next week, and because I'm actually seeing her I feel sort of obliged to do the work, I mean I can't just not do the work because it's like another person. I can't, I don't know, if she's saying, "do this work" or "look at this", I'm going to do it aren't I?, 'cause I can't, I'd be embarrassed to go back next week and say, "oh I haven't done anything", 'cause like how lazy am I! I mean I've only got like eleven hours a week anyway ... I mean she's likely to help me as well, I mean she's making me work 'cause like you don't have to start your dissertation 'till like January but like I've almost done everything now that I need like whatever, which is good ... But that's the thing, I glad, I'm glad I can't [leave things to the last minute] because I'd probably be like everyone else if I didn't see my tutor, or I didn't have the sort of tutor who like cared, said come back next week or whatever, I probably would leave it'* (Sarah).

> *'I think there should be more, I know you can make appointments but I think there should be more of a thing where like say in the middle of the module everybody has to go and see their, like, tutor and you get to talk*

173

*with them, I find it more helpful if you've got more of a sort of connection
... to discuss your work and things like that'* (Louise).

- This seemed important for students who experienced the learning context as relatively isolating and impersonal:

'... it's like last year, I had to go to see my personal tutor but I didn't even know who they were, that's bad it is, it's like, who's that? Because like [name of tutor] said, go and see the personal tutor, but I don't know who it is, so she's like, OK go and see like head of second year or whatever, but it's like, I've never met them' (Sarah).

'I mean like in the second, last year, half the time I didn't even know who my tutor was, do you know what I mean? ... I didn't even know who my tutor was, I didn't have any sort of support' (Justin).

'I don't think they [tutors] know me ... I don't think it's on a personal level at all ... There's certain people like Robert and various other students who are either really studious or really loud that people know. I mean there's a certain guy who's in our Psychology lectures and everybody knows him and all the lecturers were like, before they even sort of meet him like, oh we've heard about you, but I don't think they know me ... I think there needs to be sort of a personal level, you feel a bit like a number sometimes ... 'cause they're not really connected are they? ... there's one subject, the one that I did badly in the essay ... I had nobody I could go and see, and so what did I do wrong? Well, I just avoided the subject and went, "oh anyway". But it's frustrating 'cause the whole point about being at university is learning and improving and if you're not getting adequate feedback, and even if you push for adequate feedback it tends not to be particularly helpful ... I had got an essay mark, it was a summer one and I did OK in it but I wanted to know what she meant by certain comments, but I don't know who the person is who marked it 'cause it says whatever the name is but I don't know her and I think I'm probably being lazy and just thought, "oh well", you know, "it doesn't really matter", but I suppose it does really at the end of the day' (Louise).

Personal and impersonal comments

It is interesting that in developing the repertory grids, the construct of 'comment is personal' / 'comment in impersonal' was elicited from six students. The majority of comments regarded as personal by Robert were those relating to conceptual aspects of his work, such as 'argument' and 'critique'. Of the other students (from whom this

construct was also elicited), two comments in particular were repeatedly rated as personal. These were the comments, "While you make some good points, your structure makes it difficult to see them - a more logical order would have made you assignment more coherent" and "Original argument, but should you have mentioned the literature on X without considering the literature on Y?" These comments appear to share two important characteristics. Firstly, they address the student or their work as 'you' or 'your', giving the impression that they are addressing the student personally. Secondly, they focus on, and appear to engage with, the student's specific assignment content and/or their argument/analysis, which is something personal and in some ways unique to the student.

In relation to this latter characteristic, analysis of both Justin and Claire's repertory grids yielded a significant positive correlation between the construct 'comment is personal' / 'comment is impersonal' and 'comment is about conceptual aspects of my work / comment is about technical aspects of my work'. That is, for Justin, comments rated as personal tended to be those perceived to be 'conceptual' in their focus ($r = 0.725$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.008$), and this was also the case for Claire ($r = 0.834$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.001$). Moreover, Claire's grid also revealed positive correlation between personal comments and those rated as helpful ($r = 0.757$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.004$). Meanwhile, of the comments rated as impersonal by three or more of the students (almost half of the grid elements), two are about 'technical' aspects of an assignment (spelling and grammar), and while the other three refer to 'concepts', 'argument', and 'criticism', they are merely descriptive and/or lacking specificity.

- Returning to the interview data, the predominant view among the students seemed to be that verbal guidance *prior* to assessment, or **verbal 'feed-forward'**, was important for explicating **assessment expectations**:

'... The improvement's not because of feedback ... I think it's just made me aware that I have to go and see teachers, which is probably helpful, 'cause I don't think I would have thought, I would have always thought to go to teachers but I think I was more lazy, you know, I thought, "oh well I haven't really got time, I've just got to write it", whereas now I think, well it's more important no matter how soon it's due in to go and see the tutor and just say, "look I really don't know where to start with this" ... [so] I think it's [expectations] been made more explicitly to me about how to do it by going to see my tutors' (Louise).

'[Name of tutor] said to me, what is your view on this [essay] question?, and I said, it's about [topic area], and she said, well how are you going to get to that point?, how are you going to, you know, you've got to get to what you think by arguing your way through it academically, and I think most of my tutors have said that but she's done it the most, the best way, you know, you've got to say <u>why</u> you've come to this final point and why you think that, and that's kind of what [name of another tutor] said as well' (Lisa).

'... are you aware what you're marked on?' (Researcher).
'Not always, no. Um, [name of tutor] who does the [name of unit], she's been through it quite thoroughly today, what we'll be marked on, and that's the first time that we've ever had such thorough grounding on, look at this, do that ... she went through each question on paper and said what she'd be looking for, how to approach it, what to bring in' (Angela).

- This verbal feed-forward does not, according to the students' responses, have to occur on a one-to-one basis. Three of the students gave examples of where they felt tutors had made assessment expectations clear, which involved verbal guidance to groups of students:

'What else was [name of tutor] saying? He was saying something else useful as well, I can't remember what it was now ... he's said so much more useful stuff than any of the lecturers put together I think, not like I'm having a go at the other lecturers, but what he's, what I remember from what he's told us, he told us, he told our group individually ... he got our group in the first year together in the lecture hall, I think it was after a lecture or something, and he actually went through the best ways to sort of go about it [assessment], you know, and all that sort of stuff. And, you know, that's been really useful' cause it's, you know, he didn't have to do that, I mean, I think it was in his own time possibly when he did that, and, you know, that's something that's really useful. I mean, you know, that's been like invaluable, the advice he gave me in the first year, it's been really useful. I mean, without that advice I probably would have done something different and not sort of, um, you know, learned as much maybe' (Robert).

'... the way [name of tutor] did it today was very good, you know, for the whole class, telling us what she would expect ... that seemed to work well ... But with some of them [tutors] it is like, you know, you just don't know what you're expected to do' (Angela).

This latter part of this comment from Angela, however, reflects the fact that five of the seven students had, certainly in their first two years at university, rarely approached tutors for advice, waiting instead for tutors to be proactive. As a result, occurrences of useful advice being sought by students prior to assessment were rare. Even by their third year, these student-tutor interactions remained relatively uncommon. There seemed to be a number of reasons why some of the students were still either reluctant or unable to approach tutors for verbal guidance, despite the importance they placed on it.

Barriers to seeking help

- One student pointed out that opportunities for discussing a tutor's feedback comments further with them once marked work was returned were problematised by the university timetable and timeliness of feedback.

    'I don't think I've ever gone back to a tutor after [receiving marked work] because it usually happens that we hand the work in, we have the exam and then the next semester starts and we don't usually see those tutors again, which is a shame because there's not that continuity, so I don't think I've ever gone back' (Lisa).

- While this applies to verbal feedback, it should not be a problem for obtaining guidance *prior* to assessment. Yet further barriers were apparent. As with written feedback comments, there were negative, discouraging experiences of verbal advice:

    'I think the only time I really have [seen a tutor to get further feedback] was in the first year and I got like a comment saying how I'd done, and I got like 48, and it told me what I needed to change and so I changed it, and the next time I got 49, so I did actually go like to the lecturer and said like, I did like what you said, how come I've only got one mark

177

better?, and it was like, "oh well you can't, every [piece of work is] different and you can't relate it to the next one" (Sarah).

While this lecturer may have been correct if the two pieces of work were qualitatively different, their comments were not helpful to the student:

> *'I went to see someone and said like, you know, "I've tried really hard at this ... and I've got a really poor mark", you know, "can you tell me where I went wrong?", and like the person read it through and he says, um, "oh well, if I'd have marked this I'd have given you a higher mark actually", you know, I were like, "oh great!" (sarcastic)'* (Justin).

And this tutor merely reinforced Justin's perception that marking is a fairly subjective exercise.

- Other barriers to the students seeking verbal advice on assessed work (either prospectively or retrospectively) related to the **perceived approachability** of different tutors. Examples were cited of accommodating tutors:

> *'I think [name of unit tutor] without a doubt, for [name of unit], has been the best teacher out of the whole three years, you know, she's like gone out of her way to look for material for me and she's brought stuff in and given it to me and she's always been available when I've needed to talk to her and stuff and her feedback's been really, really helpful, and if all the tutors could be like that, you know what I mean, it would be fantastic ... Generally, they've been a lot better and more approachable this year, yeah, and just the level of approachability is the kind of main thing and the sort of willingness to let the student know that they will go out of their way for them if they have to, do you know what I mean? Um, if you think your tutor's like really sort of working hard for you it just really encourages you to work hard for them, you know, um, and just attend all your lectures and all your seminars and you just give them your best, you know, 'cause you think their giving you their best'* (Justin).

> *'Actually today, 'cause like I went to see [name of dissertation supervisor] and I had to talk, she said, "go and see [name of another tutor] about this thing" or whatever, about, er, software, so I went to see him and he was like really helpful and like left his room and went looking for this thing and he couldn't find it so he asked the computer technicians, he like kind of went out of his way 'cause he doesn't know me, I'm not in any of his lectures, he's not my tutor, so that was quite helpful'* (Sarah).

- However, other tutors were described as less approachable:

178

'It depends, it's just whoever, different personalities ... [but] I had one lecturer, I won't mention his name, and like I went to see him this year ... and he was just like, it's like an appointment but he didn't like say, oh sit down, he just like stood there and I felt really awkward and the door was left open, it was just really like, oh, you know what I mean? I didn't feel sort of like I could talk about it, it's sort of like, yes tell me what your problem is and go away, sort of thing, so not a very good experience ... it's not as if I'd just knocked on, he knew that I was coming, 'cause like I'd emailed and it were just like, 'cause I was stood up I felt like kind of awkward and he was stood up too and I was like, I couldn't really describe what I wanted to talk about, I just felt all flustered and stuff, it wasn't very good' (Sarah).

'... you could put it like this, some tutors are far more enthusiastic and interested in actual teaching, and those that are you can feed off it, you know, it really builds you kind of thing, it's quite inspiring, there are others who're in there obviously just giving the patter and going away kind of thing, you know, they're not really interested in teaching ... but when you come into the place expecting, not to be spoon-fed, but to be taught and for them to be accessible, not just going to see them but to actually get some feedback from them and to be inspired in some way, some tutors just fall completely short on that and some are oozing with it (laughs) ... you get some tutors like [name of unit tutor] who you just think, yeah, this is great, why isn't everybody like this?, kind of thing, but I mean it's obvious that she enjoys teaching, she gets a lot from it kind of thing, whereas it's so obvious that other tutors are there just to throw out fodder and leave you to screw about with it, you know, they're not really interested in whether you've learnt anything, it doesn't seem, and you wonder if some of them are even bothered if anybody passes the damn course (laughs)! ... it got to a point where somebody went to ask him [name of tutor] something at one point on the corridor ... and he ran to the toilets, into the men's toilets, and if I'd have been there I'd have gone in after him (laughs), but I wasn't unfortunately ... ' (Lisa).

- Yet there seemed a more fundamental reason for Sarah, Lisa, Angela and Louise to be reluctant to approach tutors for face-to-face advice, and this seemed to have less to do with tutors' approachability than it did with a lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority:

'... and also sometimes when tutors have said something about critical analysis I've felt too stupid to say, "what do you mean?", "how can we?", "what are we looking at?", kind of thing, and I've just like left it and thought, it'll come to me (laughs), it'll hit me in the face when I'm reading something' (Lisa).

'I perhaps feel as though I'd be wasting their time, I'm sure I wouldn't be, or maybe they've said all they've got to say on paper, or what else can I ask them? You know, probably I feel a bit insecure about it, perhaps, you

know, they'll actually start criticising me face-to-face on what went wrong' (Angela).

'*I might feel sort of, I don't know, hassling them or something, you might think you're sort of needlessly worrying or something'* (Sarah).

'*I think I get intimidated by really, really, really intelligent tutors, you know, there's quite a lot of tutors and lecturers here that have a very, well, all lecturers are quite academic, but I mean sort of quite modern, do you know what I mean? ... [and] it's difficult and you feel like stupid 'cause they know everything about it [the subject] and they've got papers published and they can go on for hours sort of talking about it and you're just like, oh? ... and it's difficult to sort of say, I don't really understand the whole idea of it ... and you think they expect that you should just be able to click with it'* (Louise).

5. The student-tutor-subject relationship

The nature of guidance sought and the importance given to face-to-face communication (and the associated barriers to dialogue), seemed to relate to how the students conceptualised their own, and the tutor's roles within a teaching and learning relationship.

The issue of status

- Robert and Justin (as reported above) (and to some extent Claire also) perceived tutors as having particular points of view regarding the subject of Psychology. Moreover, they seemed to understand these different viewpoints as reflecting the subjective nature of the subject. Their responses during interviews tended to emphasise the contestable nature of knowledge and, while regarding their tutors as having a certain level of expertise and authority, they saw them more as 'subjective experts' to be engaged with at a dialogical and discursive level. For example, Justin made the following comment:

180

'I think that's a good thing that if you can sort of disagree with your tutor ... at least it shows you got your own individual perspective on something, which, 'cause there's no right or wrong answer, and I think that's good if you can demonstrate that, that you've got your own sort of individual outlook on something, it shows you're capable of independent thought ... when I'm doing it [the presentation assessment] she'll [unit tutor] probably like ask questions, you know, to do with her viewpoint and I'll sort of, try and sort of think of a counter argument. There's no right or wrong answer so, you know, it's not the rights or wrongs, but as I said before, it's just, you know, your argument really' (Justin).

So for Justin, his argument is more important than pleasing the tutor:

'I totally worry about it [who will be marking the assignment] but, I don't know if it's me being stubborn or whatever, but I'd rather put what I think and get a lower mark for it than kind of go along with it' (Justin).

Meanwhile, Robert stated that:

'[Name of tutor's] sort of whole sort of outlook on Foucault, she sort of like disagrees with it ... [and] I'm sort of thinking from what I've read that Foucault is right, we are quite constrained by kind of wider influence of sort of powers that be, you know, 'cause there are a lot of constraints. I mean, [name of tutor] is talking about "what about agency?" and, you know, free will, that sort of thing. I mean, I'm only a third year Psychology student so I try to read that kind of stuff and it like gets really complicated, sort of gets into whole different arguments' (Robert).

And for Robert, the emphasis of the degree is on conceptions and points of view rather than information and facts:

'It [Psychology] opens your eyes to things, and I suppose it's true, you do learn a lot of things and I suppose it gives you a different perspective on the way you look at things, you know, you think about things in slightly different ways ... I'd definitely say I've got a different perspective, a different way of thinking about things now. I don't know whether it's 'cause of the actual facts you learn or just, it pushes you to think in a different way, it's probably the latter, makes you sort of be more critical 'cause that's what you, you know, sort of doing this degree makes you do' (Robert).

- The other students, however, emphasised the objective nature of the subject:

'... Psychology's not subjective at all, it's just, you're looking at it 'cause there's all the research saying this, that and the other' (Louise).

181

'I think with a Psychology essay, with the essay you don't so much like learn do you, you sort of use the knowledge you've got from like your lecture notes and get books, internet or whatever, to like answer the question ... I suppose it's like going and getting lots of information and trying to find the bits which like matter, are important' (Sarah).

- As a result, there seemed less of an engagement with tutors at a discursive level, and more of a determination to find out what they want and what information or facts they would like the student to present:

'... like the one [essay] I gave in last week, I said to the, like the lecturer before I gave it in, a few days before like, have I mentioned the <u>right</u> stuff?, have I chosen the <u>right</u> areas?, 'cause I don't want to like give it in and then I might have answered it but like not really, I might have answered it how I wanted to but not, I wanted to make sure that I'd like put in all the sort of stuff that she was looking for' (Sarah).

'I've got to go and see [name on unit tutor] and stuff and so I really think it is important 'cause you get to know what <u>they</u> expect, you need to know what they want from you 'cause it may be different for one tutor, and with our [name of unit] essays only one person was marking them 'cause she was the only person who did the subject, so it's important to go and see her 'cause she has a certain way of thinking, you know, they all have different ways of thinking and they all want you to answer an essay in a certain way' (Louise).

'I suppose it's whether you make, um, whether you make the right notes [in lectures] as to whether you give them [tutors] what they want ... I mean I've not often gone to lecturers kind of saying, "I don't understand what you've told us today", that's not often happened, more often it's been a case of, "I don't understand what you expect of us" ... I went to [my tutor] and basically showed her what I'd printed-out kind of thing and, um, again she was very enthusiastic, which I appreciate, but then she kind of like looked through it ... and she just kind of like handed me the papers back and she said, well you know what you're doing, that's great!, and I could of went, oh do I? (laughs), she was confident in me but I wasn't. So, um, again, good for the confidence but then in a way I wish I'd kind of said, well, no I don't really know what I'm doing, can you be more specific, you know, can you spoon-feed it me (laughing) so that I do know exactly every area I'm covering?' (Lisa).

One of the students, however, seemed to indicate a shift from this latter approach to one more in line with that of Justin and Robert:

'I've learnt quite a bit now to feel more confident about doing it [being more analytical], I think before I was a bit worried about, thinking, oh god I shouldn't do that, I've got to try and do this, you know, whereas

now I feel a bit freer about knowing what I should be doing, what I can put down ... I think I was trying to abide by the rules too strictly and wasn't being creative enough in the writing ... not bringing my viewpoint in too much, you know, I was relying on this book says this, this book says that, and going along with what other people said instead of interpreting it myself and putting forward my viewpoint and what I felt about it' (Angela).

The first part of Angela's comment suggests that her earlier desire to abide by tutors' rules was linked to a certain level of anxiety toward meeting assessment expectations. The interviews with the other students reinforced the significance of the affective or emotional dimension of assessment.

6. The affective dimension of assessment

Assessment anxiety

- A theme running throughout all of the interviews related to stress and anxiety. To differing extents, assessment was linked to emotional responses. To illustrate this, Louise commented on assessment in general when describing why her enthusiasm for the course had waned. Meanwhile Lisa described an occasion where an exam question referred to a topic area she had not come across before:

> *'... I find it [studying] quite hard. I think that's partly why I don't like being at university, I don't like the kind of anxiety and stress you get put under ... I'm not like a very stressful person, but when it comes to work I get really sort of, it doesn't necessarily make me do anything (laughs) but the thought of it, that kind of feeling inside like," oh god, I've got this to do, that to do, this to do!" And I think it's sometimes difficult to deal with, I don't really enjoy that kind of pressure'* (Louise).

> *'Um, it was horrible ... it was so frightening because you were, I was like I daren't mention it because if anybody knows what they're reading or knows about it reading this they'll know that I haven't got a clue and I'm just making it up and I don't really want to do that! ... I sat there with my fingers crossed thinking, oh god (tape unclear), and just blurbed on, and I think I only referred to it the once because I was frightened of it, I didn't know what it was'* (Lisa).

Assessment related anxiety seemed to have three implications for written and verbal guidance and advice.

Reassurance and instruction

- Four of the students (Louise, Sarah, Lisa and Angela) were anxious to meet assessment expectations. In particular they were at pains to give their tutors what they wanted and present in their written work the 'right' information.

> *'I don't think it's particularly stressful writing it [an essay], it's just worrying whether I've got the right stuff in it ... it's like looking at certain books and like everything the book says is like what you want to put in your essay so it's hard to know'* (Sarah).

- As a result, feedback and guidance was sought by the students to reduce their anxiety and uncertainty regarding assessment expectations by reassuring them that they were on the 'right track', but also (where necessary) instructing them on exactly what they needed to do to meet these expectations:

> *'... [I want to know] if I've not got something spot on, if I'm aiming in the right direction, you know, if I'm bordering there, and they say, well this is good, if you do such and such you can bring it on and build it, and perhaps just the word "good" (laughs), it's positive, it's encouraging ... [but] if something's wrong I'd much rather them say, "this is rubbish, this is crap", you know, "don't waste your time doing this", and "that's fine", "that's fine", you know, I'm quite happy to have it thrown at me, just thrown in my face and then I really know where I'm going ... I just need it (laughs) painted in big letters, "do this", "this is what you need to know!" ... if you're not sure where you're going, you know, if you're not sure you're heading in the right direction it can be quite panic inducing sometimes, you kind of think, oh god what am I doing?, am I doing the right thing?'* (Lisa).

Reward & motivation

In light of students' anxieties over assessment and their struggle to meet assessment demands, it is of no surprise that they seek praise when they have performed well. This provided both a valued reward and a strong motivator:

> *'It's like today when I was saying to you earlier about showing [name of tutor] my work and she like, she was positive about it and I felt like, I sort of walked out on a high sort of thing ... it's nice to be rewarded if you've done all that work basically and sort of encourages you as well to carry on, like do more work towards it, and assuming like I said, oh that's good, so I'll try and do better to get another compliment'* (Sarah).

> *'... the whole point for me is like the feedback you get, that sort of reward thing, I suppose you could call it operant conditioning ... like you get rewarded once and you sort of, you know, you know the value of that reward so you want to achieve it again ... It's like I was saying, when I didn't get any feedback on that one essay, you know, I got like a fairly decent mark, I didn't even expect to get the mark I got, and I was like, oh right, great I've got a decent mark!, but where's my feedback?!, you know, I mean if I'd got one for like a really low mark, say I got like 49 on an essay or something, it might be feedback for that, it's like, oh right, cheers!, (sarcastic) but, you know, you get like a decent mark and there's no feedback for it!, so it's sort of kick you when you're down, but when you get a good mark there's no reward for what you've done right ... 'cause you want to know, you'd want a little pat on the back'* (Robert).

Dealing with the unexpected

- Conversely, the anxiety induced by assessment could leave students upset and demoralised when then they received an unexpectedly poor mark:

> *'... the lowest mark I'd ever got, it was 48, which to me is like is like saying, why are you here?, you know, I think it's really bad ... [and] obviously I was in quite a state with it'* (Angela).

- As a result, the need for further feedback is intensified:

> *'I mean, it was only really last semester where I got an unexpected mark, I got crap marks for everything, you know, including my essays that I'd worked really hard at. Um, and yeah, in that instance when I expected to*

185

do well and, you know, and I got poor marks, I did feel really demoralised, so much so that I wanted to go and talk to somebody about it and find out, you know, <u>why</u>?' (Justin).

Taking things personally

- The 'emotional' nature of feedback was also apparent in the extent to which the students took feedback comments to heart, particularly if they were confined to pointing out areas of poor performance.

- Four students seemed to detach their 'selves' form their assessed work. For example:

  'I mean if it [feedback] was saying something like, this is rubbish, obviously that's like, you know, having a go at you as a person but, you know, if it's actually saying something about the work it's like a task, the task that you as a person, you know, you and the work are like two separate things really 'cause it's criticising the work, it's not criticising you, it's criticising something you may have done wrong or done right in the work, you know, it's giving you sort of feedback from that really' (Robert).

  'I don't take it ['negative' feedback] as a personal insult if you like, I take it as a comment on that piece of work and I would much rather know and them be quite blunt' (Lisa).

- However, Louise, Sarah and Angela seemed to have a more 'emotional' reaction to such comments:

  '... when I got like a really quite negative thing I just thought like, oh [sounding despondent] all that work and like it's sort of like been looked at negatively ... I think I do [take comments personally], I don't see how you couldn't really when it's your piece of work, especially if it's [the feedback] like criticising it ... I suppose it's like your work isn't it, but you're the person who's done the work, so it's kind of against you' (Sarah).

  '... the thing was I was so confused with what I was doing anyway ... what my direction was. I think she put like, "more work needed Louise", like, I don't know, 'cause I said to her, "oh I don't really know like what I'm doing, what the direction is", she goes, "yeah I can tell by the

references". Now I don't think, she wasn't being horrible, she's just like, it's the truth, I sort of thought, "oh right" ... so I suppose it was helpful 'cause I would have carried on, if I'd not had that I probably would have just carried on ... so I suppose it was good, but I was quite, I was disheartened even though I knew it wasn't my best thing, I thought, oh, it was all in red as well, so it was like, it's something naughty, it's red (Louise).

'*... most of it [feedback] is very critical, you rarely get a comment that says, you know, you've done this bit really good, which, you know, when you get mid-60s, you'd think they'd say something's good ... [Feedback comments are] are discouraging I think. Yeah, it's, um, you do wonder what you have done right, you know, especially when it's a part you think you've done particularly [well], but that's the nature of it isn't it?*' (Angela).

Praise and punishment

The emotional dimension to feedback was also implied by the fact that the repertory grid construct, 'comment is praising me' / 'comment is punishing me' was elicited from six participants. Unsurprisingly, all comments rated by three or more of these students as 'praise' included some words of approval from the tutor, even if accompanied by a negative criticism (perhaps supporting the widely held view, often found in teaching guidebooks, that a 'positive' must precede a 'negative'). Conversely, the comment "You have a very poor grasp of some important concepts" is the clearest example of censure and was rated as such by five of the students. The comment "Be more critical!" was also regarded as 'punishment' by all six of the students, possibly because of its use of an exclamation mark, which may have seemed aggressive (and in my conversations with students during the repertory grid sessions, was regarded as unnecessarily punitive). Similarly, the comment "You have used a journalistic rather than academic style' was rated as 'punishment' because, while descriptive, it implies negative criticism.

Chapter 8 – Discussion (Part 2)

'The least interesting aspect of a good conversation is what is actually said. What is more interesting is all the deliberations and emotions that take place simultaneously during conversation in the heads and bodies of the conversers. The words are merely references to something not present. Not present in the words – but present in their heads ... The information content of a conversation is demonstrable, expressed, explicit. But the whole point of this explicitness is to refer to something else, something implicit, something unexpressed. Not just not present, but explicitly not present' (Norretranders, 1998 :95)

In discussing the findings reported in Chapter 7, I relate them to the literature explored in Chapter 2. However, I also introduce further supporting literature, which had not initially presented itself as relevant to the topic of assessment feedback when the literature review was conducted. For example, literature on 'tacit knowledge' and 'power' help shed light on my findings.

The intention of the second phase of data collection was to explore in greater depth some of the issues identified by the first phase by examining the views and experiences of a group of students within a particular learning context. Issues emerging from the first phase of the research guided both data collection and analysis in the second phase. However, I also remained open to new issues and themes emerging from the research.

This discussion is divided into two parts. In the first, I discuss how my findings suggest a number of 'barriers' to the efficacy of formative assessment feedback. Here, I discuss how these barriers reflect findings of other studies (while providing a more in-depth account of how they problematise the feedback process). In the second part (which constitutes the bulk of this chapter), I focus on a further 'barrier', which relates to more

fundamental issues that have attracted less attention in the HE literature. In doing so, I attempt to offer a *provisional* and developing explanatory framework for understanding formative feedback (which surprisingly remains elusive in HE today). Implications of my research are addressed. I argue that while policy decisions focus on, and to some extent address the barriers to feedback discussed in the first part of this chapter, greater attention needs to be paid to what constitutes a more fundamental problem. This must be dealt with first if we are to both understand the meaning of assessment feedback for students in HE and enhance its impact.

Part 1

The feedback 'problem'

I believe that the first phase of the research highlighted a number of problems for students' use of assessment feedback. Moreover, the second phase of the research reinforced these as salient factors mediating the process of tutors providing useful feedback comments to students in HE. In addition, research identified in Chapter 2 supports the contention that these are problems faced by students in a range of different learning contexts, reflecting the inherently problematic and 'messy' process of assessing students (including the development and application of assessment criteria) and providing feedback to improve learning.

Aside from issues relating to the ways in which students might make use of their tutors' written comments, findings from the first phase of research suggested that feedback is (as Ding's (1998) study suggested) 'under used'. Simply in terms of numbers, the proportion of questionnaire respondents who claimed to 'read' and 'pay attention' to feedback was far greater than the proportion of respondents who indicated that they

usually use comments to improve their future assessment performance. The findings reported in Chapter 7 suggest that the students would *attempt* to refer to written feedback in order to improve. Yet the participants identified a raft of barriers to the efficacy of assessment feedback, reflecting many of those identified in the first phase of research.

One 'barrier' that was not evident, however, and which I feel is important to comment on, relates to notions of today's student taking an increasingly instrumental and consumerist approach to HE, relying on feedback to 'give them the answers' and ignoring advice when it is not seen to be directly relevant to passing the next assessment task. Rather, data from the first phase suggested that students are motivated to engage in learning in a variety of ways (both intrinsically and extrinsically) and desire feedback for a range of reasons. The interviews in the second phase of the research demonstrated further that individual students are likely to enter university for a complexity of reasons, and while these will relate to career ambitions and the need to obtain a good degree, they may also relate to an intrinsic interest in, and enjoyment of their chosen subject. The majority of the students I spoke to were eager to receive feedback to learn and not just pass assessment tasks. I discuss further the reasons why the students wanted to receive formative feedback comments (and what kind of feedback they sought) below. The point is that, as other studies have shown (for example, see Hyland (2000a)), the students regarded feedback and guidance as an essential and integral part of their learning experience.

In light of this, it is important that the 'problem' of feedback is framed, not as a question of why students choose to act or not act on the written advice they receive, but as a question of why there is mismatch between students' desire for feedback and the extent to which it is useful to them. There may appear to be little difference between these two

190

questions, but the distinction is an important one. The former question focuses on the student and, like early theories of communication (see Chapter 2), diverts attention from the very nature of the communication process itself. The latter, on the other hand, opens up the possibility that giving and receiving assessment feedback, as a socially situated process of communication, may be inherently problematic and complex. The first phase of research suggested some reasons for this, including 'structural' problems and problems relating to the 'quality' of feedback provided. However, it also hinted at further difficulties around the meaning of feedback for students. I begin by looking at the first set of problems as they relate to the results presented in the preceding chapter.

Timeliness and modularisation

Interviews with the Psychology students suggested that they found making use if assessment feedback difficult for practical reasons. The timeliness of feedback and the modular degree structure posed problems. Often they did not receive their marked work until long after the assignment had been submitted. As a result, the feedback seemed distant and lacking relevance to their current work. This problem was compounded by the fact that they had often moved on to very different units by the time they were able to see their tutors' comments. When comments focus on unit specific content, the relevance to work on other units is likely to be diminished. Moreover, comments may also seem irrelevant because of the different staff involved in the teaching of different units. That is to say, where students hold a perception of tutors as each having their own assessment preferences (as I discuss below), the feedback from one tutor may not be seen to be offering useful insights into what another tutor is likely to expect.

191

The timeliness of feedback and the 'problem' of modularisation as barriers to the efficacy of formative feedback comments were identified in the first phase of the research. The fact that these are issues that have now been raised by looking at three different learning contexts, suggests that they may be generalisable to other contexts. Increasing student numbers are a reality and are bound to impact on tutor workloads and the speed at which students' work can be marked and returned to them. It is also a fact that modular degree structures pervade HE institutions. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that the patterns identified by this research may reflect a wider picture. The findings also add credence to concerns expressed in the HE literature (for example, Gibbs (1999)) about the impact of an expansion of the student population and of modularisation.

The second phase of the research revealed a further difficulty for the students I spoke to. The particular system employed by the department for returning marked work to them often prevented the students from viewing their tutors' feedback comments, which in turn discouraged them from seeking this feedback since the effort to do so did not seem worthwhile. That is, in having to collect marked work from outside their tutors' offices, which often went missing, the students sometimes failed to receive written feedback, with some deciding that there was little point searching for their work in future. The 'local' nature of this problem (added to the fact that poor tutor handwriting was an issue for some of the students in the first phase but not for those in the second), illustrates how these 'structural' problems can be either context specific or reflecting wider patterns in HE.

The first phase of research suggested, however, that there might be more fundamental issues to consider in looking at assessment feedback. I turn my attention to these in the following section of this chapter. I focus on, and discuss, three areas of concern

(language, power and emotion). I then draw together the main strands of my discussion at the end of this section to argue for an alternative approach to understanding assessment feedback.

Part 2

Understanding assessment expectations

Having discovered that only a small proportion of the students in the first phase of data collection claimed to understand the criteria on which they were assessed, I was keen to see if this pattern was repeated with a different, and more experienced group of students in a different learning context. On first analysis, there was little to suggest a widespread uncertainty regarding the meaning of assessment criteria, with only two of the students expressing doubts. More than this, and as has been found in other studies (Scott, 1996), the students were all aware of the importance of a key assessment criterion - 'critical analysis' - as central to their degree course (a characteristic of a deep approach to learning, which tutors hope to foster). This is significant since other important criteria relating to, for example, 'argument' and 'evaluation' are directly linked to this term (Scott, 2000). Closer analysis of the data, however, revealed that the students were less certain what assessment criteria meant in practice. Moreover, understandings of critical analysis, in particular, varied.

It is logical to assume that students *must* have completed assessment tasks to progress to the third year of their degree course. In order to do so they would have been compelled to arrive at *some* interpretation of what was expected of them as the very act of tackling an assignment requires decisions to be made about, for example, appropriate content and what the tutor will be looking for. However, this does not mean that these

interpretations are 'correct'. So, for example, while the students had developed an understanding of what 'critical analysis' required, not all had developed *appropriate* conceptions of this term. The two main conceptions apparent were i) an understanding of 'criticism' in an academic sense and ii) an understanding of term in an 'everyday' sense. The former conception relates to the notion of a 'critique' – making a judgement on something through an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. The latter conception is limited to notions of 'fault finding' and censure, with purely negative connotations. That is to say, some students' understandings of the term were centred on the notion of contestable knowledge and of evaluating others' ideas, while other understandings were based on an idea of simply 'discrediting' ideas and theories found in the literature. The former reflects an appropriate 'academic' understanding of critique, while the latter reflects a less appropriate 'everyday' understanding of criticism.

Divergent conceptions of this assessment criterion and other criteria synonymous with it hold important implications for student learning and performance in assessment. For example, students holding the former conception will already be doing what is valued by academe. Yet those holding the latter conception are likely to struggle; it is not easy as an undergraduate student to find only fault with the ideas and theories of 'expert' academics. Moreover, if understandings vary between students, then it is safe to assume that there will be differences in understanding between some students and their tutors. This raises the prospect of students failing to make (appropriate) sense of their tutors' feedback comments. As Hounsell (1987) argues (see also Ballard & Clanchy, 1988), divergent conceptions of assessment expectations will provide a 'formidable obstacle' for assessment feedback because student and tutor understandings might not be based on the same premises. Moreover, students' misconceptions will persist despite feedback because such premises will underpin tutors' messages to students (ibid.). The

important point then is not so much *what* the students understood by particular assessment criteria but, after three years at university, *why* such understandings persisted. As Strike and Posner (1992) argue, it is more important to understand what produces a conception than the character of the (mis)conception itself (cited in Breen, 1999). In doing so, the implications for assessment feedback in student learning can be traced.

Significantly, the students I interviewed seemed to have developed a perception of there being assessment 'rules', distinct from published assessment criteria and constituted by individual tutors' particular values and preferences. It seemed that the students were very aware of the importance of adhering to published assessment criteria to achieve academic success, yet were just as concerned (if not more so) with understanding these assessment 'rules'. However, the students' experiences were of both assessment criteria and assessment 'rules' remaining hidden and rarely explicated. As one of the students commented, it is *'like working in the dark sometimes'*. And there was a feeling among the students that their tutors often assumed that they understood what was expected of them. Certainly, the unit documentation listed the criteria as if they were self-explanatory. Consider, for example, the brevity of the advice on the 'dos and don'ts' of essay writing, which predominantly focused on instructions for referencing sources.

Formative assessment feedback, by definition, should not only indicate and explain students' strengths and weaknesses, but it should also provide students with advice and guidance on how to improve. And by doing so, students will gain a better understanding of what is expected of them. Clearly though such guidance had not been particularly effective in clarifying assessment expectations, with uncertainty and confusion for a number of students persisting despite over two years of participating in a process of (at least in theory) 'formative' assessment. The reasons for this may be

linked to nature of education as a social practice. As such, Pring (2000) argues that it is inherently characterised by implicit values and beliefs. Moreover, in terms of assessment expectations, Sadler (1989) suggests that criteria for judging the quality of students' work are inherently 'fuzzy' and implicit. As a result, he argues that 'novice' students will have difficulty grasping their meaning. This notion of inherently 'fuzzy' criteria recognises the tacit nature of academic knowledge and practices. In distinguishing between 'latent' and 'manifest' criteria, Sadler (1989) argues that the latter is the set of criteria that is explicitly and consciously attended to during the production and/or assessment of work. Meanwhile, the former is the set which is in the background and drawn into the set of manifest criteria (for varying lengths of time) as and when required in order to make evaluations (Sadler, 1989). The implication is that for students to make sense of assessment expectations and feedback, they need to develop a body of appropriate tacit knowledge (Sadler, 1989).

The problem for students though is that this may not be easy. As suggested in the literature review, other authors (such as Lillis, 1997 and Street & Lea, 1997) have highlighted the 'hidden' nature of assessment expectations. They suggest that the very language of assessment, as apparent in assessment criteria, is implicit and taken-for-granted and may be alien and difficult for many students to grasp. Likewise, tutor's individual values and beliefs may also remain tacit and hidden. As such, students face a two-fold problem; not only are published assessment criteria imbued with meaning that may not be readily apparent to those who try to make sense of them, but tutors' intuitive judgements of work and their subjective expectations are likely to be underpinned by tacit knowledge (see Eraut, 2000) and subjective values and beliefs.

HE literature has only recently begun to focus on the implicit nature of the language of assessment and the tacit knowledge involved in judgements of quality. This is

surprising since it is only by subscribing to outdated models of communication (such as those of Weiner; Skinner; & Shannon), where the transparency and objectivity of information is taken for granted, that such an important issue would remain under-researched. When the process of assessment feedback is understood in the light of more sophisticated models of communication, the significance of this issue becomes obvious. For example, Norretranders (1998) makes a clear distinction between information and meaning. He argues that in the process of formulating a message to be sent from one party to another, a whole array of mental processes take place. Yet these are not present in the actual words that are produced - 'the actual information in the correspondence at face value refers to a mass of information that is merely not present' (ibid.: 92). Similarly, when assessment expectations are communicated to students (by providing a list of published criteria) or assessment feedback returned on marked work, the actual words used, or information (for example, "you need to be more critical"), will refer to a whole host of thoughts, feelings, conventions, skills, knowledge, past experiences, and ways of doing things (the actual meaning), which are merely implied. It is only through shared experiences and understanding that a student will make appropriate inferences from a message and, therefore, meaning from information. And, as already discussed, this may not be easy in the context of HE.

The implications of this approach to understanding assessment and feedback as involving a complex process of communication are significant. We cannot assume that the messages conveyed to students by feedback and assessment criteria about assessment expectations are inherently meaningful, since communication relies on them being able to interpret messages appropriately, which are underpinned by a language that is inherently subjective and opaque. This implies limitations to some of the current thinking on assessment. For example, in Chapter 2, we see that Biggs (1999) advocates

197

that all aspects of learning, teaching and assessment be 'aligned'. This alignment involves curricula, assessment procedures and teaching methods being aligned in ways where curriculum objectives relate to higher order cognitive thinking (Biggs, 1999). This requires teaching methods which encourage deep approaches to learning, and assessment that measures teaching objectives which reflect an intention to motivate students to aim for the higher order thinking and, in doing so, to study in a deep way. Biggs (1999) suggests that formative assessment is an essential part of desirable alignment and presumably, like teaching, assessment practices and the curricula (although Biggs is not explicit about this), feedback comments must also be aligned to course objectives. The problem though is that for precise alignment, the language of assessment and feedback must too be couched in the language of the course objectives and assessment criteria, underpinned by the very discourse students may have difficulty accessing (Higgins et al., 2002b (see Appendix IV)).

Further limitations are also apparent in other areas of, what is an increasingly 'psychologised' HE literature, which focuses on transactions between learners and students at the expense of considering wider contextual factors (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001). For example, Johnson et al.'s (1993) study suggests that different students will be more or less receptive to feedback depending on their level of 'self-efficacy' (apparent through their confidence in their own ability to complete a task). This importantly implies that psychological factors will mediate the extent to which students respond to feedback. However, students' abilities to (re)construct meaning from the information they encounter are ignored. The language of assessment is seen as inherently meaningful, implying that students' use of feedback simply depends upon the extent to which they are predisposed to 'persist' with attempts to complete an assessment task. Meanwhile other studies focusing on student motivation (mediated by external

factors) as determining the extent to which students will want to read or pay attention to tutors' comments, draw attention away from an essential analysis of the interplay between external influences, internal factors, students motivations, *and* how feedback comments might be interpreted.

Issues around the language of assessment and feedback as a process of communication constitute the first of the three areas of concern I address in this chapter. I now move on the second of these areas relating issues of 'power' in order to shed further light on the feedback process.

Feedback and the student-tutor-subject relationship

Recently, debates about learning and teaching in HE have been heavily informed by a focus on students' approaches to learning, the need to encourage 'deep' learning, and the role of students as participants in the learning process (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). While these debates do take some account of the social context within which learning takes place, often the notion of power relationships between students and tutors is neglected. For example, Gosling (2000) criticises Prosser and Trigwell (1999) for restricting their analysis of student learning to the construction of knowledge, where students' approaches to learning are influenced by their conceptions of what constitutes knowledge within a particular discipline. Yet this fails to pay attention to how power relationships influence knowledge construction.

The tacit nature of the language of assessment and, in turn, the assessment criteria and feedback it underpins is fundamentally and inextricably linked to the social situatedness of teaching and learning. As a social practice, the process of giving and receiving feedback is founded on the social relations between those involved in this process. My

199

interviews with students shed light on how their interpretation of assessment expectations, attempts to meet these expectations, and subsequent responses to feedback were mediated in different ways by their perceptions of the student-tutor-subject relationship and how they saw their place within this relationship.

As Layder (1997) argues, power is ubiquitous in social life and can be viewed as closely linked to discourses and associated practices. 'Access' to discourses (ideas, beliefs and ways of talking about a subject) and associated practices distinguish individuals in terms of levels of expertise and authority. Discourses therefore articulate and effect social positions and relations (and provide markers of normality), and confer power on individuals (Layder, 1997). Through their education, training and experiences (and 'official' recognition of this), 'expert' tutors have a level of access to appropriate discourses and associated practices that 'amateur' students on entering HE do not. This power differential is recognised by most in HE. For example, students readily perceive tutors to be 'experts' who posses a level of 'know what' and 'know how' over and above that of the undergraduate (Hinett & Weeden, 2000) and, as Hyland (2000b) discovered, they seem to read feedback with an implicit understanding of this power differential.

Layder (1997) argues, however, that power is not uni-directional. As well as being able to resist the exercise of power, individuals are able to deploy power through the personal resources they have at their disposal. Whether through prior learning experiences or motives for entering HE (for example), the interviews with the Psychology students suggest that they had come to understand their place within the student-tutor-subject relationship in subtly different ways. Competing understandings of assessment criteria and difficulties uncovering the 'rules' of assessment mediated what students wanted from their tutors and how they reacted to the feedback they were given. Yet their perceptions of their own, and their tutors' role in the teaching and

learning process, and their view of the nature of the subject they were studying, also played an influential role. That is, the students' abilities to develop appropriate conceptions of what was expected of them both mediated, and were mediated by the extent to which they were inclined to accept, reject and question knowledge, ideas, information and advice.

As discussed above, the students I spoke to experienced assessment expectations on two levels, making a separation between what the tutor expected from them and published assessment criteria. To elaborate, if completing an assessment task is equated to embarking on a journey, then there was a sense in which the students recognised assessment criteria as constituting 'signposts', with the tutor specifying the exact destination. Yet the ways students attempted to reach this destination varied. While all seemed to see the direction as unclear, some appeared to rely heavily on receiving precise instructions on how to get there, hoping to plot a direct course (the shortest point from A to B). Others, however, would set off in a general direction, navigating their own way, and ready to challenge notions of a 'correct' route.

The concepts of 'absolutism' and 'relativism' from Perry's nine-stage progression model of students' conceptions of learning are useful for exploring these differences among the students (Perry, 1970). The model suggests that conceptions of learning progress from 'absolutist' to 'relativist' conceptions. That is, students' conceptions of learning progress from a view of knowledge as right or wrong, or good or bad and handed-down by an authority figure, to a more sophisticated view, where knowledge is seen to be flexible and contestable via reasoning. The concepts of absolutism and relativism seem to reflect differences among the students I interviewed. Those students, who seemed to have held an absolutist conception of learning, appeared to regard the role of the tutor and of feedback in assessment as instructing them on what was 'right' or 'wrong' with

201

their work and what information and facts they had been expected to present and discuss. There seemed to be a reliance on tutors to tell them what they needed to do to meet assessment criteria and conform to specific assessment expectations. Meanwhile, those exhibiting a more 'relativistic' conception of learning recognised the contestable nature of subject knowledge. They seemed to regard the tutor as a subjective, critical expert who should provide guidance, not in terms of 'right' or 'wrong', but in relation to the 'appropriateness' of the student's own interpretation of knowledge.

Before I can develop these ideas further and offer a more 'holistic' consideration of the feedback process, it is important at this point to introduce and discuss my third area of concern – 'emotion'.

The affective dimension of assessment and feedback

Hinett (1998) warns that the potential of feedback to elicit powerful emotional responses must not be underestimated. Yet, issues of 'emotion' are lacking from much educational research in general, and research on assessment and feedback in particular. This may be because, as Layder (1997) notes, the emotional sphere of social life may be difficult to trace. A reluctance to look at emotion may also be due to it being so closely viewed as, or linked with irrationality (Ingleton, 1999). However, authors such as Barbalet (1998) and Scheff (1997) see emotion as constituted by dispositional *and* cognitive elements. As a result, it cannot be ignored as simply an irrational dimension since it is relates to both disposition to act *and* decision-making. In other words, it is about reason and action as well as feeling.

Boud & Walker (1998: 194) claim that 'emotions are central to all learning'. Moreover, in adopting the view of Bloom (1956) and Barnett (1997), Hinett & Weeden (2000)

202

argue that 'learning is a complex relationship between cognition, action, intuition *and emotion*' (italics added). Receiving feedback can therefore be an emotional business. According to Layder (1997), emotion is frequently allied to power. As discussed above, students may recognise themselves as 'novices' and their tutors as 'experts'. The result of this perceived power differential is that some students are likely to connect evaluations of their work to evaluations of themselves. For example, Taylor (1993) suggests that discouraging feedback affects students' self-esteem, confidence, and whole approach to a course. This reflects the concerns of other authors. For example, Hyland argues that 'writing is an intensely personal activity, and students' motivation and confidence in themselves as writers may be adversely affected by the feedback they receive' (1998: 279). Meanwhile McCune (1999) suggests that the effects of feedback - where they are a change in students' conceptions of learning - can be linked to notions of confusion, anxiety and crisis of confidence.

Also linked to the issue of student anxiety is the summative function of the assessments the participants in my study undertook. In chapter 1 of this thesis, I explain how the context of the research was one in which written assessments had both a formative and summative purpose. Moreover, I claim that this was not the result of a deliberate choice of research setting on my part. Rather, I was simply interested in written work that led to written feedback comments and whether or not the students' work was summatively assessed was not a primary concern. However, the emerging importance of issues of power, emotion, and student anxiety has highlighted the significance of the summative dimension of assessment. While, in the main, the students were not driven exclusively by grades in their approaches to assessment and responses to feedback, it is nevertheless clear that a desire to obtain a 'good degree' had an impact on their behaviour and experiences. It seems that the anxiety to meet assessment demands was compounded by

the need to receive grades they were happy with. Failure was represented no more clearly (as far as the students were concerned) than in a 'poor' mark or grade.

Although not part of the educational literature, the work of Strathern (2000), Layder (1997) and Scheff (1990) provide a basis for illuminating the linkages between emotion, power and assessment feedback. For Scheff (1990), 'pride' and 'shame' are the primary emotions. Inherent in social life is the 'emotion-deference system' which functions continuously, yet almost at an invisible level. It is a form of social control in which individuals seek the pleasure of the emotion of pride and avoid the displeasure of the emotion of shame. Scheff (1990) asserts that the emotion-deference system is a powerful one. Drawing on the work of Helen Lewis (1971), who suggests that anger can quickly and often follow shame, he argues that when an individual perceives a rejection, form of criticism or insult from another, the system might produce 'a chain reaction of shame and anger between and within the interactants' (Scheff, 1990: 76). So for Scheff (1991), shame generates alienation while pride - its opposite - partners solidarity and togetherness (Ingleton, 1999).

Meanwhile, Layder (1997) (drawing on the work of Turner (1988)) argues that individuals have the capacity to present themselves to different audiences in different ways. Furthermore, Strathern (2000) argues that what is presented to audiences is what is perceived (by those doing the presenting) to lead to successful judgements rather than the true state of the individual. Consequently, some students in HE may present themselves to their tutors (as the 'audience' of their work) in ways that are designed to yield favourable judgements (rather than revealing their true state), possibly not just in terms of gaining grades but also in relation to how they are perceived as a person. The emotional dimension of the learning context will compound the anxiety some students experience in attempting to grasp what is expected of them by their tutors. This is

reflected in the fears expressed by the students I interviewed of negative judgements of their work and of appearing 'stupid' in the presence of 'expert' tutors.

The links between emotion, power and understandings of assessment expectations, can be illuminated by the views of Hounsell (1987). He argues that if students fail to grasp the nature of the tacit discourse underpinning the language of feedback (as argued above), they are may become:

> 'locked into a cycle of deprivation as far as constructive feedback is concerned. Since feedback fails to connect, it comes to be viewed as insignificant or invalid, and so is not given considered attention. At the same time the activity within which it is offered is seen increasingly as unrewarding, and so it is approached perfunctorily, thus rather lessening the likelihood that a more appropriate conception might be apprehended' (Hounsell, 1987: 117):

Yet when we also consider the affective dimension of the feedback process (as socially situated), there is danger that students may also enter into a cycle of 'emotional' deprivation. Failure to understand assessment expectations, and experiences of negative emotions as a result of unfavourable judgements of their work, may result in increasing detachment from the assessment process and a greater propensity to become guarded about how they present themselves to their tutors in future (in order to avoid negative emotions). However, such detachment will only serve to keep students' weaknesses 'hidden', resulting in feedback, which seems even less relevant to their needs.

By exploring the implications of 'power', 'emotion' and 'discourse' as salient dynamics of the contexts within which assessment and feedback practices take place, we can begin to consider how an explanatory framework for understanding assessment

feedback as a process of communication might take shape. I present my attempt to do this in the section below. I also consider how this approach to understanding the feedback process holds important implications for practice, which do not seem to be reflected in current policy decisions and 'official' assessment discourse.

Towards an explanatory framework

The dual problem of assessment feedback

The findings from my research, reported in Chapters 4 and 7, suggest that there are various problems relative to assessment feedback. These reflect difficulties on two very different levels. On the one hand, I have identified problems of a practical nature, which have elaborated and amplified some concerns expressed elsewhere (for example, see Gibbs, 1999). These include issues about the timeliness of feedback, the relevance of feedback comments when students are moving between often very different units on a modular degree programme, the legibility of written comments (for some students), and systems for the return of marked work (for others). On the other hand, however, I have identified other problems more fundamental to teaching and learning in HE. They revolve around issues pertaining to the exigencies of communication, assessment expectations, and the feedback process as socially situated. In the past, the HE literature has paid relatively little attention to assessment feedback and, despite some notable exceptions (for example, see Hinett, 1997 and the work of Black & Wiliam, 2000), much less to the latter issues. While this situation is changing, with a growing interest in feedback and more recent work focusing on the social nature of formative assessment (for example, see Randall & Mirador, 2003; Yorke, 2003; Mutch, 2003; and Orsmond et al., 2002b (where early findings from my own research have been discussed)), policy

decisions, official guidelines, and various educational development initiatives have tended to remain focused on the more 'mechanical' aspects of the feedback process. For example, consider the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. The section covering the assessment of students states that 'Institutions should publish, and implement consistently, clear criteria for the marking and grading of assessments'. And in terms of assessment feedback, the advice is (QAA, 2000: 12):

'In meeting the needs of students for feedback on their progress and attainment, institutions will need to consider:

- the timeliness of feedback;

- specifying the nature and extent of feedback that students can expect in relation to particular types and units of assessment, and whether this is to be accompanied by the return of assessed work;

- the effective use of comments on returned work, including relating feedback to assessment criteria, in order to help students identify areas for improvement as well as commending them for evident achievement;

- the role of oral feedback, either on a group or individual basis as a means of supplementing written feedback'.

Such advice treats feedback issues at a superficial level. That is, it usefully addresses some of the practical problems by directing institutions to provide sufficient feedback that is timely and consistent (in relation to published assessment criteria). Yet the more fundamental difficulties apparent from my research, which pose greater challenges for educators, do not seem to be considered. For example, attempting to bring assessment

expectations into the open by publishing lists of 'clear' criteria is not the same as questioning the very nature of the discourse underpinning them. And I suspect that advocating the provision of oral feedback to groups or individuals as a supplement to written comments is borne more out of efficiency concerns than an understanding of the potential benefits of a dialogical relationship between student and tutor or the importance of the 'human' encounter. Moreover, the only reference to the language of assessment relates to how it should reflect that of teaching or, in other words, the need for a subject taught in English to be assessed in English. The result is that, at the level of practice, giving and receiving feedback continues to be predominantly underpinned by a decontextualised conception of communication as linear and transparent. In other words, this 'common-sense' understanding of the feedback process has led to a focus on the practicalities of delivering feedback to students and to efficient ways of offering performance information (for instance, I have encountered a number of initiatives hoping to increase the speed of the process via computer-generated comments). As such, the emphasis has been on combating 'outside' interferences, rather than those relating to the very nature of communication itself (for example, consider Shannon's concern with external 'noise' as hindering an otherwise effective communication process).

However, efforts to improve the efficacy of formative assessment feedback (as well as other aspects of teaching and learning) have also been strongly influenced by a dominant 'mode' of thinking, which has obscured the true nature of feedback as a problematic and socially situated process of communication. According to Ashworth (1998), innovation and change in HE has been dominated by 'technical rationality' (a term first used by Donald Schön to describe a dominant model of professional knowledge and practice founded on the application of scientific theory to 'to the

instrumental problems of practice' (Schön, 1983: 30)). Ashworth uses the term in the context of education to refer to the process whereby educational developers and policy makers identify concrete problems and engineer solutions to them. As a result, 'there is a tight relationship between means and ends - The solution relates logically to the problem' (1998: 5). To illustrate the problems of such an approach, Ashworth cites the example of learning outcomes. In this case, problems relating to course flexibility and the flexibility of the 'delivery' of education are identified. The logical solution has been seen as the development of clear statements of aims and learning outcomes, allowing credit transfer and increased course flexibility. However, the result has been to shift emphasis from the *process* of education to the *product* (the knowledge, understanding or skills that a student achieves). The social context is neglected as 'Knowledge becomes a commodity, a resource – rather than the stuff of human communication' (ibid.: 27).

Understanding the true nature of assessment feedback

If, based on my findings, the 'problem' of feedback is re-framed by understanding formative assessment as a socially situated process, underpinned by tacit discourse, power relations and an emotional dimension, how should feedback by conceptualised? What questions should we be asking about the process and where do they lead us in terms of identifying and addressing the needs of students, and improving the efficacy of assessment feedback?

The assessment process involves communication between tutor and student. However, it is a very different communication to that of everyday conversation or written exchange. It usually involves the asking of an academic question, inviting a response

209

from the student. This response is based on the student's *interpretation* of the question and understanding of what constitutes 'correct' or 'appropriate' ways of addressing it. When the student submits their completed assessment, the tutor *interprets* the student's response and judges the extent to which it fits with what they perceive the question to require. The tutor then decides how best to feed information back to the student on their performance. All of this can take place over a lengthy period of time and does not require the two parties (tutor and student) to be in the same place at the same time. Moreover, the process is socially situated, taking place within a context of an unequal power relationship, where communication is underpinned by tacit discourse, and where strong emotions may come to the fore. Assessment feedback therefore involves a complex, atypical and potentially problematic form of communication.

Black and Wiliam's (2000) 'notes' toward a theory of formative assessment seem to be pertinent in light of my findings. The model they offer is one of complex interactions between teachers, students and subject matter. This is reflected in my findings, which support the view that any understanding of assessment and feedback must recognise that 'all assessment processes are, at heart, social processes, taking place in social settings, conducted by, on and for social actors' (Black & Wiliam, 1998b: 56). Students are not simply receptacles for transmitted information, but active makers and mediators of meaning within particular learning contexts. That is, we must dispatch with any notion that feedback information is inherently meaningful and recognise that both the sender and recipient of a message have co-creative roles in constructing its meaning (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Figure 4, based loosely on the work of Norretranders (1998) (whom I refer to above), represents an attempt to illustrate an understanding of the feedback process as a form of communication. This diagram shows the 'flow' of information between tutor and

student. The narrowing of the bold lines towards the point of assessment and feedback reflects the decisions and choices made as thoughts, values, beliefs, expectations (and so on) are refined into the actual words intended to represent them (as either feedback comments to the student or completed pieces of written work to the tutor). The broken lines at the top of the diagram, converging toward an academic discourse and assessment rules, represent both parties attempting to draw on the tacit language, rules and practices required to both construct and reconstruct meaning from the actual words presented to them at this central point. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the diagram, the converging lines toward power relations and emotion reflect the simultaneous influence of power and feelings (such as anxiety) on this process of interpretation and meaning making as a socially situated activity.

FIGURE 4. Feedback as communication
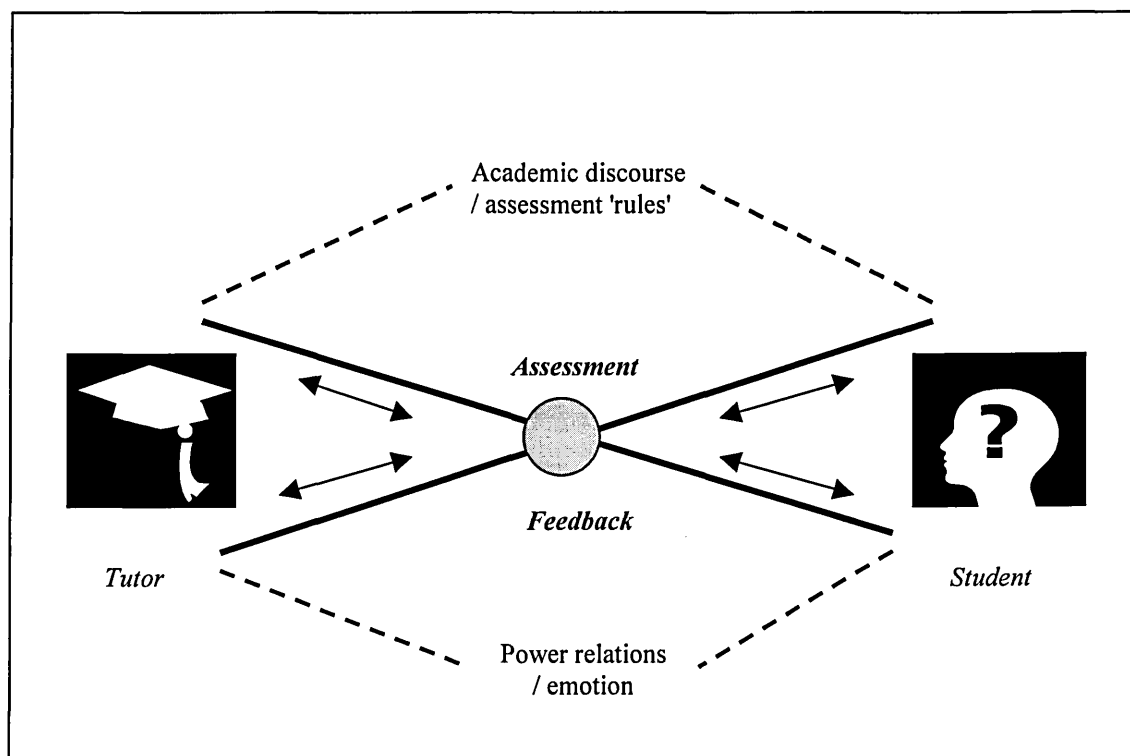
Understanding feedback in this way focuses attention on the fact the messages between tutor and student are not inherently meaningful. Moreover, it highlights the centrality of

subjective interpretation in the process. At the same time, it emphasises the socially situated nature of learning and assessment and points to power and emotion as inevitably implicated in any exchange of information. In doing so, it challenges the rationale of initiatives, which prioritise the publication of aims, objectives and assessment criteria based on a language constituted by terms such as 'critical analysis' and 'academic argument'. It also challenges a preoccupation toward aligning these 'explicitly' stated aims, objectives and criteria with feedback to students. Rather than assuring transparency, such moves will at best maintain the status quo (characterised by confusion and anxiety for many students) but more likely have the effect of closing off opportunities for debate and dialogue about the meaning and value of such terms. Merely listing detailed criteria, making them available to students, and referring to them in feedback comments is not the same as helping students to grasp what is expected of them at university.

In the following chapter, I identify specific implications for practice and discuss both the research process and its contribution to the topic of assessment feedback (including the extent to which my findings can be generalised to other contexts).

Chapter 9 – Conclusions & recommendations

This chapter is not offered as a summary of my findings. Rather it is reflects an attempt to distil the salient issues from chapters 1 to 8 and, indeed, from the research process as a whole. There are a number of issues to reflect on. They are to do with the significance of this research, its implications for practice, the relationship between theory and data, and the lessons I have learned as a researcher (and, indeed, a writer). I discuss the latter two issues first before considering the significance of my research and its implications for practice.

Writing this thesis

After two-years of full-time study, I suspended my PhD registration for one year to take-up employment elsewhere. After three years of full-time study, I commenced employment at the University of Leicester while remaining registered as a PhD student for a twelve-month 'writing-up' period. Therefore, in total, I was engaged with my PhD programme of research (to greater and lesser extents) for a period of five years. The task of writing this thesis has therefore been to distil a lengthy and relatively 'messy' programme of research into a coherent account. This has been a sizable challenge, since to some extent the directions I have taken, and approaches I have adopted during this time have changed repeatedly (albeit subtly) as the study has 'evolved'. Ultimately though, I have had to recognise that no single approach to writing this PhD thesis could have truly captured in its entirety the experience and evolution of conducting this research. What I do believe, however, is that this version of the thesis accurately presents an honest and truthful account of my research and its findings.

All of the issues I discuss in the proceeding sections of this chapter have inevitably impacted on the research process in terms of the data I was able to collect and how I have presented and made sense of my findings. In hindsight, and under other circumstances, this thesis may have looked a little different. However, I feel that the substance of my findings and the argument I have developed is valid and, I hope, contributes to both a better understanding of the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education and, perhaps more importantly, to the development of practice in this area. I discuss the research process, the significance of my research and implications for practice in the sections below.

Research as a learning experience

Not surprisingly, the production of this thesis has been a learning experience, not just in terms of gaining a greater understanding of issues and debates around teaching, learning and assessment, but more so in terms of being a researcher. My own expectations of undertaking a programme of doctoral research (as a form of learning and assessment) were unclear from the outset - I have only come to understand what I need to do now that I have done it. Of course, a programme of PhD research is, and indeed should be an ongoing process of learning. And so it has proved to be. As a 'novice' researcher, I have learned a number of valuable lessons. Three of these relate to the practicalities of conducting research and, in particular, to the mistakes and compromises inevitably made as a result. These issues, which I briefly discuss below, are not often written about in journals articles and books since authors (understandably) are required to 'sell' and promote their research findings and ideas rather than discuss what could otherwise be seen as weaknesses.

Despite initial enthusiasm expressed by students to take part in the research (when initially recruited), this seemed to have waned by the time I followed-up my initial contact with them with emails and telephone calls to arrange a convenient time and place to meet. Although a 'socially awkward' experience, I had to write to and/or telephone some of the students on several occasions when they either did not reply to my messages or failed to turn-up at agreed times (despite my irritation and frustration with them!). The time spent doing this was significant (sometimes with whole days spent waiting in vein for interviewees to make an appearance). I was prepared for this in view of my experiences on a previous research project where I faced difficulties recruiting and arranging to meet further education students (even when these students were financially compensated for their time, which was something I could not afford for my current research).

When interviews did take place, there were a few occasions where students would arrive and indicate that they only had 45 minutes to spare despite being made aware previously that the sessions were likely to last for 1 to 1 ½ hours. In these situations I was reluctant to attempt to arrange an alternative time and date fearing that they may not turn-up in future. These interviews proceeded, yet I was conscious of not dwelling on issues that I did not feel were relevant. However, the participants did agree to answer any questions I did not have time to ask by email after the session.

Finally, the accommodation I was able to book for interview sessions (at the times the students indicated they would be available) was not always ideal. I had wanted to standardise the interview settings to prevent the possibility of this being a factor impacting on the data I gathered (for example, I wanted all interviewees to be equally

comfortable in the rooms I booked). However, this was not always possible and some sessions took place in rooms not best suited for an interview. Moreover, some locations were not conducive to tape-recording due to noisy maintenance work taking place nearby (leading to poor quality sound recordings which were not easy to transcribe). Other rooms were prone to interruptions from students mistaking them for ones in which they were due to have seminars, and others still were difficult for the students to find, which occasionally delayed their arrival and reduced the time available for the interview sessions.

Handling the interview data

Transcribing tape-recorded interviews is an extremely time-consuming process, particularly for someone such as myself whose typing speed is somewhat sluggish. Ideally, I would have employed someone to undertake this task for me but lack of financial resources prevented this. As a result, the process of producing transcripts for analysis took a great deal of time and effort, which could perhaps have been better spent on other tasks. Although, on reflection, I feel that in some ways the transcription process did bring me 'closer' to the data.

Once transcribed, I was able to begin analysing the data. Often this process is reported in a 'matter-of-fact' way, where a clear, logical structure for moving from raw data to 'key findings' is described. Of course, this disguises the true nature of the process and in my own analysis I was conscious of the need to address one problematic issue in particular; While sensitive to salient issues from my review of the literature and my prior theoretical assumptions, I was keen to avoid imposing concepts on the data. While easy in principle, it is less so in practice. For example, when coding data from

216

the first few interviews, it was tempting to 'impose' this early coding framework on all subsequent transcripts regardless of how well the data seemed to 'fit' (particularly since it seemed to reflect my expectations and suspicions about what the data would ultimately reveal). I attempted to avoid this potential pitfall by setting the interview data aside for a time and, on returning to them, re-coding the transcripts without reference to my previous attempt and in a different sequence (for example, by beginning with my final interviews and working backwards to the first). This led to important revisions being made to my initial coding scheme, which ultimately determined the nature of my findings. To increase my confidence in these findings, I also shared my interpretations of the student interview responses with a number of colleagues (as reported in Chapter 3). While this gave me some new insights, which I had not previously considered, in general there was a high level of agreement. Below, I discuss further the research process in terms of the relationship throughout this thesis between theory and data.

The relationship between theory and data

After delineating the scope of my research (the parameters are described and explained in chapter 1), key issues were identified from a more extensive review of existing literature. A starting point for this process was to explore concepts of feedback beyond the scope of education literature and consider wider understandings of the term. In the early part of the literature review (see chapter 2), the concept of feedback was considered in relation to early models of communication. These models proposed a linear, transparent form of information exchange. Meaning within the feedback/information message was assumed and, with both sender and recipient of the information objectified, only external 'noise' was seen as hindering the process.

However, it soon became clear that thinking about communication had moved on from these early models. At the same time, more recent studies on assessment feedback in higher education suggested that assessment practices might be inherently problematic. For example (and as discussed in chapters 2 and 8), a number of authors highlight the 'fuzzy' nature of assessment criteria (for example, see Sadler, 1989) and the difficulties making sense of academic discourse(s) faced by 'novice' students (see Hounsell, 1987). Yet despite this implicit conception of assessment feedback as involving a far from straightforward exchange of information, an explicit model or theory of formative assessment remained elusive.

Data collection and analysis proceeded in the absence of such a theory. However, underpinning ontological and epistemological beliefs (as outlined in chapters 3 and 5) guided this in two important ways. First, rather than adopt a 'grounded' approach to the research process, existing ideas influenced the questions I pursued and, to some extent, how data were analysed. For example, in chapter 2, student motivation was presented as a mediating factor in students' responses to assessment feedback comments, which in turn was linked to their approaches to learning. Initial data analysis and coding of interview transcripts was sensitive to this. Examples of 'deep' and 'surface' behaviour were recorded as such and linked to students' views on feedback. However, my interview data suggested a deep and surface dichotomy was not wholly useful for making sense of my conversations with the students. Rather, emerging from the interviews was a sense in which a 'conscientious consumerism' (Higgins et al., 2002a (reproduced in Appendix III)) led to tensions and anxieties in students' desire for, and use of their tutors' comments. The second important implication of my approach to this research, was to focus attention on the socially situated nature of a complex phenomenon. This focus necessitated a sensitivity to all levels (or 'domains') of social

life (from the macro- to micro-level). Also, and while not presupposing the importance of any one set of explanatory factors, this focus made me aware that issues raised in existing literature and those emerging from my own data should be considered in the context of important social dynamics (for example 'power' and 'control').

So, from relatively simplistic questions (- what do students understand by feedback and how do they respond?) a more sophisticated inquiry developed into the true nature of assessment feedback. In other words, a re-framing of the 'problem' of feedback arose from a mutually influential dialogue between theory and data, which led to an understanding of formative assessment as a socially situated process, underpinned by tacit discourse(s), power relations and an emotional dimension. In the following two sections, I discuss the significance of my research findings and implications for practice.

Significance of this research

As work towards a PhD thesis, I did not set-out with lofty ambitions to revolutionise approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in HE! Nor was it ever likely that I could, given my relative inexperience as a researcher and the resource constraints (as sole investigator) within which I was working. Rather, I hoped to conduct a study that would yield useful insights on a topic, which for many years had remained relatively under-researched. As such, I feel that the work I have undertaken does offer a modest yet not unimportant contribution to current thinking on assessment feedback.

When I conducted my initial literature review, it was apparent that there was of lack of research exploring the meaning and impact of written comments from the perspective of the HE student. While there were some studies focusing on the types of comments

tutors should provide, others looking at the value students placed on formative feedback, and others still identifying the extent to which students read the written advice they receive, few, if any, could be said to explore all these issues together, and less appeared to do so while attending in detail to the social dynamics of the learning context. My research therefore constituted a novel approach in the breadth of its scope and, in particular, its recognition of assessment and feedback as a complex and socially situated process of communication.

I feel that my research contributes to an understanding of the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in HE in two ways. On the one hand, a number of findings from my work reflect (and develop further) those reported elsewhere (and therefore enhance the validity of findings from other studies). Yet, on the other hand, findings from my research pose a challenge to some aspects of current thinking and, perhaps more significantly, offer new insights. Examples of both types of contribution (which have already been detailed in the preceding chapters) are presented below.

Support for previous work on assessment feedback

1. A handful of studies (for example, see Hyland (2000a)) suggest that students value formative assessment feedback and both welcome and read their tutors written comments (despite some lecturers holding a contrary view based on anecdotal evidence of student apathy). My findings, based on qualitative and quantitative data, support the conclusions of these studies. Moreover, they offer insights into the reasons why students are keen to receive feedback comments. However, my research also suggests that feedback is often 'under-used' (reflecting Ding's (1998) findings).

2. Other authors have pointed to the timeliness of feedback and the modular nature of degree courses as presenting 'practical' barriers to students' use of feedback. And, while identifying additional 'local' problems (such as illegible handwritten comments and flawed systems for returning marked work), my data support these findings also.

3. Other studies have pointed to aspects of what I have found to be a more fundamental problem with the process of giving and receiving feedback. A number of authors have suggested that 'novice' students may have difficulty understanding the criteria upon which they are assessed. Others have linked such misunderstandings to difficulties in interpreting tutors' comments. My own findings have supported these claims. However, I feel my work has taken these issues further by focusing on why misconceptions may arise and what the implications are for the demands students place on feedback and how they respond to it. Moreover, my research has linked these difficulties to important social dynamics characterising the context within which feedback as a form of communication takes place.

New insights and challenges to current thinking

1. Despite concerns in the HE literature that students are increasingly instrumental in their approach to learning and assessment, limiting their efforts to what they need to do to get by, and accepting advice only when it is seen to provide specific instructions on how to obtain better marks, my research revealed a range of competing motives driving student behaviour. As 'conscientious consumers' of HE (see Higgins et al. 2001 (reproduced in Appendix III)), the students

221

participating in my research were keen to obtain a 'good' degree, yet also showed an enthusiasm for their subject and learning for its own sake. Feedback was therefore seen as a potential tool to help them both develop as learners and perform well at assessment.

2. Some students face difficulties interpreting assessment expectations. This drives their desire for feedback yet, at the same time, often renders the advice they receive problematic. There is a two-fold problem. The language of assessment underpinning published assessment criteria is not inherently meaningful or transparent. Students will not all necessarily be able to draw on appropriate academic discourse in order to respond successfully to assessment tasks and feedback since such discourse is characterised by tacit knowledge and implicit values and beliefs. At the same time, there is a perception that there are less formal rules of assessment, representing tutors' individual preferences and expectations, which remain hidden and are rarely explicated.

3. Difficulties around the language of assessment both stem from, and are compounded by the complexities and socially situated nature of feedback as a process of communication. For example, in focusing on the social context of assessment feedback, t he power relationships between students and tutors (and how they see the subject) can be seen as playing a crucial role. Students seem to perceive their role in certain ways within the relationship, placing different demands on assessment feedback. Where the subject is seen to represent objective knowledge and tutors are regarded as objective experts, there is reliance on guidance and instruction from tutors and less of an independent and critical engagement with the subject. If students believe they should be pursuing 'correct' answers and giving their tutors 'what they want' (particularly where

anxiety to meet assessment demands and fear of failure is rife), feedback is unlikely to be meaningful to them if the terms it uses refer to autonomous learning, independent though and critical analysis of contestable knowledge.

Towards an explanatory framework

In drawing together the main strands of my discussion in Chapter 8, I attempted to piece together a provisional, and in many ways tentative model, or framework, for understanding feedback as a process of communication. This framework sees feedback as occurring within a complex social context and as being inherently problematic, rather than as simply a transfer of objective information between two parties. This is significant because the implications for practice are far different when adopting the latter approach than they are when adopting the former. I address these implications by making recommendations for practice below. Before doing so, it is essential that I first assess the extent to which my findings are relevant outside of the particular learning contexts, which provided the focus of my research.

Relevance of these findings

Researchers are often careful not to over-claim that their results are generalisable to other contexts. In a similar vein, I would not suggest that my research findings reflect the reality of all teaching and learning situations in HE. I would argue, however, that my findings might have relevance for teaching and learning contexts in HE similar to the ones on which I have focused. That is, contexts where students complete written

assignments and where written assessment feedback has a role to play. My reasons for making this claim are outlined below.

Firstly, in terms of the questionnaire from the first research phase, ninety-four responses were gained (with a response rate of 77%). This is not an insignificant number of students and is a good response rate. Secondly, there were far more similarities between the responses of the two groups of students surveyed in this phase (who were from two very different learning contexts) than there were differences. Also, while it may be the case that the respondents to the questionnaire were not representative of the all the students enrolled on the two units - for example, they may have been more conscientious than, and have held different views to, the students who did not complete or return questionnaires - the responses of the students who took part in the interviews reflected the patterns that emerged from the questionnaire and, therefore, lend credence to the quantitative data. And finally, while the research raised a number of issues not explored by previous research, results from other studies (for example, that students read and value feedback) are consistent with my findings.

In terms of the interviews, there were again notable similarities between the two groups of students in the first research phase and also between the first and second phase participants (despite the interview schedule for the second phase differing from the first). It therefore seemed that the experiences of three groups of students, studying three different subjects and three different units (across two institutions and two different levels of study), were broadly similar. That is, despite some 'local' variations, the main issues around the students' abilities to make sense of assessment expectations and respond to feedback comments were comparable, suggesting that similarities might extend beyond the confines of the scope of this particular research project.

<u>Implications for practice</u>

Consistent with a number of other studies, my findings suggest that regardless of *how* students read, interpret and respond to feedback, the fact that the majority were keen to receive and read their tutors' feedback comments gives cause for optimism. They imply that, at the very least, attempts to improve practice and the quality of student learning through feedback will not fall at the first hurdle due to an inherent lack of student interest in assessment feedback. This is the good news. The bad news is that, as discussed in Chapter 8, my findings revealed a problem of significant 'under-use' of comments. While there appeared to be a number of 'practical' barriers to the feedback process, which need to be (and to some extent are being) addressed, more fundamental problems were revealed (in some ways reflecting more recent concerns of other authors). These problems became apparent from understanding the process of giving and receiving feedback as a problematic form of communication situated within a particular social context. By adopting this view of feedback and foregrounding the more fundamental problems, implications for practice become somewhat different than those reflected in policy decisions and official guidelines on formative assessment (at both local and national level). That is, current approaches to improving the efficacy of assessment feedback seem to be underpinned by a preoccupation with addressing 'practical' barriers to the feedback process at a superficial level. While a case can be made for addressing issues such as the timeliness of feedback, my research would suggest that there is greater merit in taking an approach which priorities more fundamental issues. Consequently, I believe that, at least as starting point, the following suggestions warrant serious consideration.

1. Avoiding assumptions of transparency

As a crucial first step, we should accept that the language of assessment and feedback is not inherently meaningful to students. Consequently, we must be prepared to recognise and openly question the knowledge, practices, values and beliefs underpinning it.

2. Dialogue and 'feed forward'

In doing so, those who teach and assess students must recognise that the assumptions underpinning assessment criteria and feedback comments need to be shared and discussed with students if they are to understand what is expected of them. How is this to be achieved? McCune (1999) advocates in-class discussion of the nature of academic discourse(s) with students. This is essential in order to avoid 'miscommunication' between student and tutor through the process of assessment and feedback (Hyland, 1998). More specifically, Hyland (2000a) argues that clear and comprehensive communication between students and tutors, not only on specific writing problems, but also on writing and feedback strategies, is essential for effective feedback since the stances that tutors and students adopt with relation to these issues are usually implicit rather than explicit and so not understood by either party.

Crucially, dialogue of this kind should not occur once assessment is over. If students are to understand what is expected of them, then they need to be helped to grasp these expectations prior to assessment and with sufficient time remaining for a difference to be made to their learning and approach to assessment tasks (Higgins et al., 2001 (see Appendix V)). As such, 'feed *forward*' to students is as important (if not more so) than feed*back*. Of course, this does not mean that feedback to students should be neglected.

By its very nature, formative assessment is a cyclical process with students needing information on their performance and guidance on improvement following previous work. Rather, the point is that without feed forward, feedback will diminish in its meaning and therefore its potential impact.

I presented a paper (unpublished) on the topic of assessment feedback at the Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education's third annual conference in Edinburgh in 2002. Toward the end of the session I suggested the use of class contact time to discuss assessment expectations with students. The responses to this suggestion from those attending my session were mixed, with many arguing that it is difficult enough to find time to cover key topic areas in the little contact time they already have with their students, without having to incorporate what they called a "study skills" session. However, my findings have convinced me that discussion of assessment criteria and assessment demands should be integral to any HE course. Consider for example the students in phase two of my research who recounted their experiences of a short talk given by one tutor at the end of a lecture, where effective approaches to assessment and assessment expectations were discussed. These students believed that this session had been one of the most useful they had participated in, and they held up this tutor as a shining example of somebody who had helped them make better sense of assessment. So, rather than impinging on, or even wasting valuable contact time, a session at the beginning of a unit to discuss (and feed forward) assessment expectations may well contribute to an improvement in learning and success at assessment (saving some students from the anxiety of struggling to make sense of what is expected if them, and saving the tutor from despairing of their students' mistakes).

3. Peer assessment

A complementary strategy to help students make sense of assessment expectations could be to consider the use of peer assessment. For example, Hinett (1998) argues that students rarely fully understand assessment criteria, yet when they are given the opportunity to openly discuss, challenge and debate criteria with peers who share their experiences of assessment and who can provide them with constructive feedback, they are better able to understand these criteria. In other words, when students have access to criteria and opportunities to practice evaluating work against them they become increasingly adept at making judgements (Hinett, 1998) and therefore of developing more appropriate understandings of the ways tutors will judge their work. Similarly, Sadler (1989) argues that exposure to others' work enables students to look at how their peers have responded to an assessment task (and the strategies they have adopted). Moreover, by reading the work of others, students will be confronted by, and learn to recognise, a wide range deficiencies and 'mistakes', which will help them to judge the quality of their own work in future (ibid.).

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APPENDIX I – The student questionnaire

ALL INFORMATION GIVEN WILL REMAIN STRICTLY ANONYMOUS.

SECTION A

1. Please give your age: _____ years.

2. Are you :   Male   ☐

               Female   ☐

3. Are you an overseas student?

   Yes   ☐

   No   ☐

4. How confident are you in achieving the degree classification you hope for? (*Please tick **one** box only*):

   Very   ☐

   fairly   ☐

   not very   ☐

   not at all ☐

5. What written feedback do you *expect* to receive? (*please tick **all boxes that apply***):

   At least a few comments in the margin   ☐

   Comments in the margin throughout the assignment   ☐

   At least one paragraph of comments at the end of the assignment   ☐

   At least one side of comments at the end of the assignment   ☐

   Less than one paragraph of comments at the end of the assignment   ☐

   Comments on each of the specific assessment criteria   ☐

   Comments on the tutors overall impression of the assignment   ☐

6. How long before an assignment deadline do you start ***preparing*** to write the assignment? (*please tick **one** box*):

2 weeks or more ☐

About 1 week ☐

A few days or less ☐

7. How long before an assignment deadline do you start ***writing*** the assignment? (*please tick **one** box*):

2 weeks or more ☐

About 1 week ☐

A few days or less ☐

8. Approximately how much time do you spend *reading* the feedback you receive? (*please tick **one** box*):

5 minutes or less ☐

10 to 15 minutes ☐

Between 15 and 30 minutes ☐

More than 30 minutes ☐

I do not read the feedback ☐

SECTION B - Please respond to the following statements by ticking a box beside each to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with it. (Please tick just *one* box for each statement. Statements continue on the next 3 pages):

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
9. I am at university because I enjoy learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. The main reason I came to university was to gain qualifications.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. One of the main reasons I came to university was just to do something different.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. I needed to come to university to enter the career that I want.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. I came to university to expand my knowledge of the subject.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. I often worry that I am not able to meet the standard required of me by the university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
15. I work very hard at university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. I am very self-motivated when studying.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17. I always try to find out what I am being marked on.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18. I usually try to write what I think the person marking the assignment will agree with.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
19. I try to produce an original argument when I write an assignment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. I usually pay close attention to the assessment criteria to help me when I am writing an assignment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. I mainly just use lecture and seminar or tutorial notes to help me write an assignment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. I often find it difficult to write enough words for the assignment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Statement	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
23. I often show my tutor or lecturer at least one draft of an assignment before I hand it in.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. I use a wide range of sources to help me write an assignment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
25. I usually use evidence to support the points I make in an assignment.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26. I know exactly what the criteria I am marked on are.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27. I understand the criteria I am marked on.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
28. Feedback comments are not that useful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29. I pay close attention to the comments I get.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30. I find the comments I receive impersonal.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
31. Positive comments make me feel good.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Statement	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
32. I find the comments that I usually receive motivate me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
33. I dislike getting comments that criticise my work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
34. I am *more* likely to read feedback comments if I get a *bad* grade	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
35. I am *less* likely to read feedback comments if I get a *good* grade	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
36. I usually use the feedback from previous assignments to help me write the next one.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
37. I find critical feedback helpful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
38. I can understand the tutors' comments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
39. Feedback comments are often difficult to read.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

SECTION C - What makes a good assignment? Using a scale of 1 -5 of importance (with 1 being very important and 5 being not at all important), please indicate how important you think each of these features are for an assignment by ticking **one** circle next to **each** feature:

<-Very important ----Not at all important->

	1	2	3	4	5
40. Demonstration of knowledge.	O	O	O	O	O
41. Well structured.	O	O	O	O	O
42. Good style of writing	O	O	O	O	O
43. Accurate referencing	O	O	O	O	O
44. Wide range of sources	O	O	O	O	O
45. Original argument.	O	O	O	O	O
46. Critical analysis.	O	O	O	O	O
47. Good grammar.	O	O	O	O	O
48. Proof of effort.	O	O	O	O	O

What type of feedback comments would you like to receive? Please use the scale of 1 -5 of importance to indicate how important you consider it to be in receiving each type of comment by ticking **one** circle for **each** type:

<-Very important ----Not at all important >

	1	2	3	4	5
49. Comments that tell you what you have done well.	O	O	O	O	O
50. Comments that tell you what you have done badly.	O	O	O	O	O
51. Comments that require you to think for yourself about what you could do to improve.	O	O	O	O	O
52 Comments that correct your mistakes.	O	O	O	O	O
53. Comments that tell what you could do to improve.	O	O	O	O	O
54. Feedback that tells you the grade.	O	O	O	O	O
55. Comments that explain your mistakes.	O	O	O	O	O

What aspects of your assignment would you like the feedback comments you receive to focus on?: Please use the scale of 1 -5 of importance to indicate how important you consider it to be in receiving each by ticking **one** circle for **each** aspect:

<-Very important ---Not at all important->

	1	2	3	4	5
56. The subject matter.	O	O	O	O	O
57. The structure.	O	O	O	O	O
58. Referencing.	O	O	O	O	O
59. Style of writing.	O	O	O	O	O
60. Your Argument.	O	O	O	O	O
61. Your use of supporting evidence.	O	O	O	O	O
62. The level of critical analysis.	O	O	O	O	O
63. The tutor's overall impressions.	O	O	O	O	O

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

APPENDIX II - WHAT DO STUDENTS REALLY LEARN FROM TUTORS' COMMENTS?

Paper presented at the Writing Development in Higher Education Sixth Annual Conference, University of Leicester April 20-21 1999.

Richard Higgins, Peter Hartley and Alan Skelton

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on one aspect of a three year research project investigating the meaning and impact of assessment feedback on written course work assignments for students in Higher Education. In the first phase, we have focused on units within Business and Humanities in two HE institutions. However, this research raises fundamental issues for all disciplines which use written assessments.

This paper concentrates on three areas: the typology of tutor comments we have developed from an analysis of past student papers, initial findings from student interviews and a student questionnaire survey. Our initial findings suggest that there are considerable variations in the nature of written feedback comments provided by different tutors. They also seem to confirm that there are differences in students' approaches to learning and that these different approaches are linked to different responses to feedback and feedback preferences.

These findings raise important questions and issues which have implications for assessment practices and the development of student learning in general, and writing skills in particular.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on initial findings from ongoing research into the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in Higher Education. This research reflects important issues in Higher Education relating to concerns over 'graduate standards'. Assessment is an integral part of a student's experience of HE and, to a lesser or greater extent, assessment feedback can be a central component of the learning process (Brown & Knight, 1994). An understanding of the impact of assessment feedback is vital if the full potential of that feedback is to be realised.

A preliminary literature search suggests that this area is poorly researched. Currently there is plenty of useful *advice* available on good assessment practice (for example, consider the recommendations implicit in TQA judgements and the numerous 'guidebooks'). However, such advice is based upon teacher-centred research. There needs to be research into how students experience, understand, and respond to assessment feedback in order to understand its role in the student learning process, and suggest ways in which practices may be improved (Ecclestone, 1998).

Our research focuses on written feedback comments on written course work assignments. We investigate variations in the provision of feedback and differences in students' approaches to learning and assessment in order to raise important issues and suggest ways forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our initial review of the literature on assessment and feedback found little research on students' responses to feedback from their own perspective, particularly in terms of exploring these responses in different contexts within HE (such as different levels of study, modes of study, disciplines and institutions).

Nevertheless, important themes emerged- the context of assessment, tutors' approaches to assessment and feedback, students' approaches to learning, and students' responses to feedback.

1. Context of assessment:

Here the literature suggests that the increasing link between the economy and education is leading to a 'consumerisation' of HE. In addition to, and partly as a result of this, organisational and institutional changes such as increasing student numbers and increasing tutor workloads are promoting summative rather than formative assessment (Hyland, 1994).   There is also concern that this is resulting in increasingly brief feedback that measures competencies through reference to specific criteria (Layer & Wisher, 1986) which encourage the learning of facts and basic skills rather than critical thinking and critical autonomy. The suggested implications are that:

i) while tutors emphasise the importance of critical thinking, this is not always reflected in teaching and assessment methods (Entwistle, 1984);

ii) students are acting increasingly like 'consumers', driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark (Ecclestone, 1998; Brown and Knight, 1994; Winter, 1993) and, as such, are tending to adopt a 'surface' approach to learning (Hounsell, 1987).

2. Tutors' approaches to assessment and feedback:

Factors such as variations in teacher-training (in terms of assessment practices), in

3

tutors' perceptions of the purpose of assessment and feedback, and in their assessment and feedback preferences lead to extensive variations in the level and quality of feedback provided (Connors and Lunsford, 1993; Hounsell, 1987; Hextall, 1976; MacKenzie, 1974).

3. Students' approaches to learning:

An inevitable result of increasing student numbers is a more heterogeneous student population and this increases the likelihood that there will be ever greater variations in students' approaches to learning and assessment. Inevitably, there will also be greater potential for a mismatch between tutors' methods of teaching, assessing and giving feedback to their students, and students' approaches to, and understandings of assessment and feedback. For example, it is suggested that students increasingly fail to understand the taken-for-granted academic discourse which underpins assessment criteria and the language of feedback (Lillis, forthcoming 1999, Creme and Lea, 1997; Brown and Knight, 1994; Hounsell, 1987).

4. Students' responses to feedback:

The implications for student responses to feedback in light of these suggestions are that:

* students want the grade most of all but are also likely to want extensive, specific feedback that tells them exactly what to do to improve their mark, rather than feedback that encourages them to reflect on their learning (Swann and Arthurs, 1998);

* students are only likely to pay attention to feedback if their grade expectation has not been met, and finally;

* they may in any case fail to understand both feedback comments and the assessment criteria on which these comments are based (Hounsell, 1987).

4

The literature therefore suggests that different factors at different levels, which are both complex and inter-related, are likely to influence the ways that tutors provide feedback, the ways that students approach learning (Heywood, 1989), and, consequently, the ways students respond to assessment feedback.

METHOD

Our initial research focused on a level 1 Humanities module and a level 1 Business Studies module at two HE institutions (one a post-92 and the other a pre-92 university). This involved analysis of feedback comments, interviews with students and staff, and a student questionnaire survey.

1. Analysis of feedback comments:

A sample of assessed course work assignments with written feedback comments was obtained from three tutors. Each tutor contributed 25 assignments.

2. Student interviews:

10 students from each module were approached to take part in the interviews. All students except one from the Humanities module consented.

Students were asked questions on their:

* expectations of feedback;

* knowledge and understanding of assessment criteria;

* experiences of feedback;

* feedback preferences;

5

* approaches to learning;

* approaches to assessment.

3. Student questionnaire:

A questionnaire was administered to all students on both modules. We received responses from 45 students on the Humanities module and 49 students on the Business module.

EMERGING THEMES FROM THE RESEARCH

Our initial research involved a preliminary investigation of the nature of written feedback comments provided by tutors and explored how this feedback may vary. The research then identified the value students place on feedback comments and explored some implications for students' responses to feedback in the light of potential differences between students. This raised important questions and issues.

1. Developing a typology of tutor comments:

From an early review of the literature, we identified research involving the development of 'typologies' of feedback in both educational settings (see Ding and Ecclestone, 1997) and commercial settings (see London et al 1999). We decided to see if we we could develop our own typology of tutor comments.

The written feedback comments from a sample of course work assignments were analysed in terms of the type, focus, tone and quantity of the comments. From this analysis our typology was developed. It must be noted, however, that this typology is *provisional* - emerging from a relatively small sample of assignments for the wider

purpose of facilitating 'a process of mutual influence between theoretical ideas and concepts and the collection and analysis of data in an ongoing manner' (Layder 1998: 77). Fig. 1 presents the developing typology and illustrates the different types and foci of the comments we identified. To clarify what we mean by each 'type' of comment, Table I provides a brief definition and example of each.

This typology was used to compare the comments of the three tutors. This process revealed that the tutors tended to provide particular types of comments and focus on different aspect of their students' assignments, yet there were considerable variations between these tutors. These differences (between tutors A, B and C) are illustrated by 'mapping' them onto the typology of comments (see Fig. 2).

FIGURE 1. Developing typology of tutor feedback comments.

Type of comment

- Advisory suggestions
- Regulatory instructions
- Rhetorical questions
- Descriptive observations
- Praise
- Direct criticism

Whole assignment | Layout | Referencing & resources | Writing style | Specific subject | Use of evidence | Structure | Critical analysis
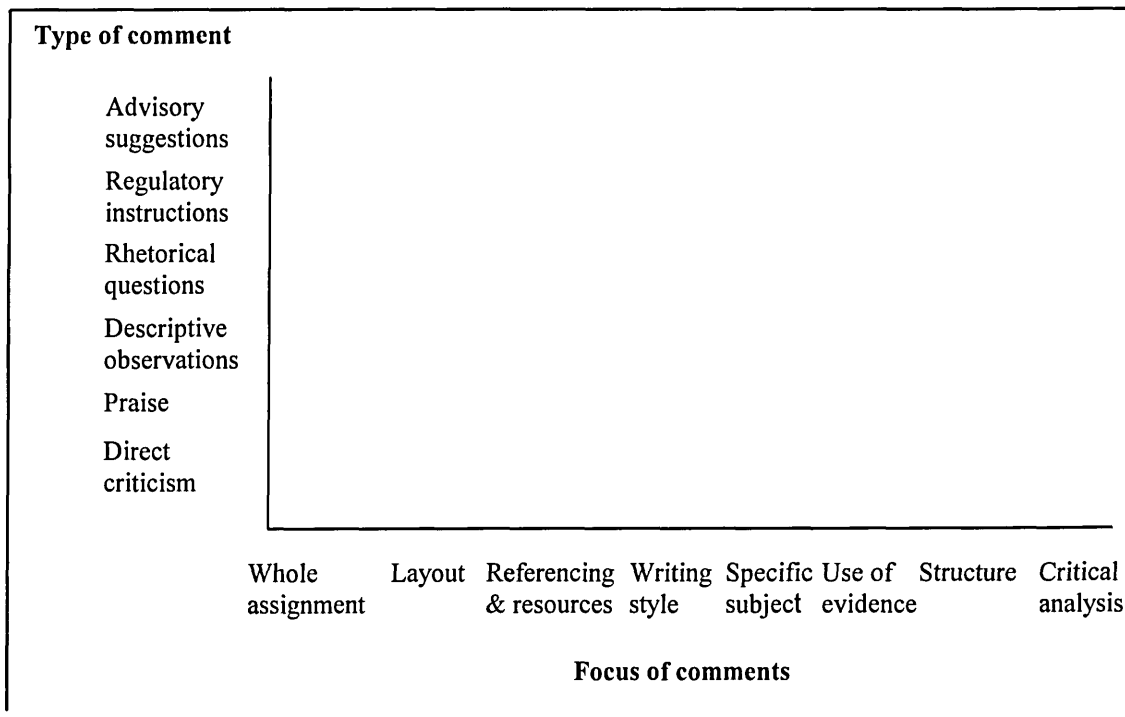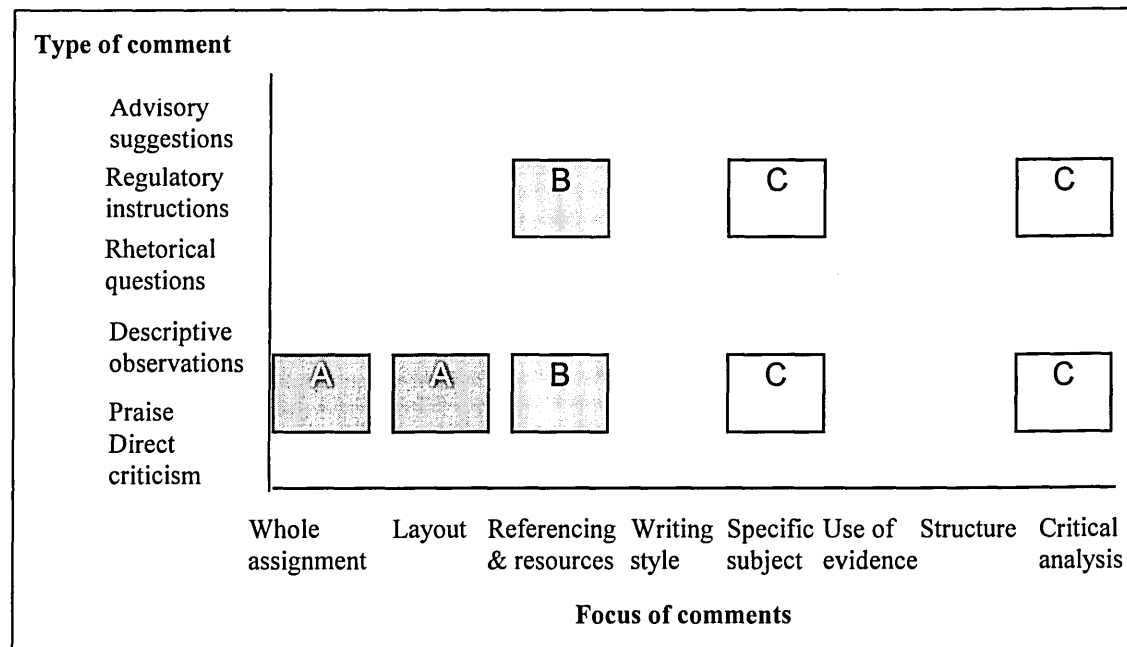
Focus of comments

7

TABLE I. 'Types' of written tutor feedback comments.

Type of comment	Definition
Regulatory instructions	Directive comments that instruct the student what to do (or not to do) in future.
Advisory suggestions	Suggestions as to what the student needs (or needed) to do, what they could or should have done, or what they could or should have avoided doing. The comments range in specificity.
Descriptive observations	Statements that describe or summarise an aspect of the student's work and in doing so, imply that this is an area that has been done well or poorly by calling attention to it.
Rhetorical Questions	Questions that invite consideration from the student and in doing so imply an aspect of the work that the student could or should have improved or could or should have avoided.
Direct criticism	Comment using words of disapproval to imply that a student has performed poorly in some (or all) aspect(s) of their work.
Praise	Comments using words of approval to imply that a student has performed well in some (or all) aspect(s) of their work.

8

FIGURE 2. Application of developing typology of tutor comments.

Type of comment								
Advisory suggestions								
Regulatory instructions		B		C				C
Rhetorical questions								
Descriptive observations	A	A	B		C			C
Praise Direct criticism								
	Whole assignment	Layout	Referencing & resources	Writing style	Specific subject	Use of evidence	Structure	Critical analysis

Focus of comments

The tone of the comments was also investigated. It was found that that for some comments the tone was clear - for example, "poor piece of work", while for others the tone was merely implied by suggesting that something had been done well or poorly. We have used a positive / negative dichotomy to distinguish these tones. However, there is a problem of language here as the word 'positive' may imply superiority over the word 'negative', when in reality a negative comment that tells a student where they have gone wrong might be welcomed by a student more than a positive comment and, moreover, may prove more helpful. This is something we need to resolve, but the point to highlight at this stage of the research is that the comments from the tutors also varied in tone.

Finally, the analysis of the comments also revealed that the amount of comments provided by each tutor varied; tutors A and B provided on average 2 to 3 comments per assignment, while tutor C provided approximately 5 to 6 comments per assignment.

9

2. Student approaches to learning and responses to feedback:

An initial analysis of the interview data suggested that most students 'read' feedback comments and while we have yet to complete a comprehensive analysis of the questionnaire data, initial indications are of a similar nature (see Table II). It seems that students value feedback comments, claim to pay attention to them, and a large proportion claim to make use of them for subsequent assignments.

TABLE II. Responses to assessment feedback.

Question:	% of students disagree:
Feedback comments are *not* that useful.	80
	% students agree:
I pay close attention to the comments I get.	82
I usually use the feedback from previous assignments to help me write the next one.	51

However, the interview data suggest that there are considerable variations between different students in how they respond to, and what they value in feedback. These variations seem, in turn, to be linked to particular strategies toward learning in general, and assessment in particular.

We have used a deep / surface / strategic model of students approaches to learning as outlined by Entwistle (1987) as a starting point for our analysis. Entwistle's defining features of the three student approaches are reproduced below.

Using these categories seemed appropriate in light of initial analysis of interview data which suggested that the characteristics of these approaches were closely related to students' responses to the interview questions.

10

Deep approach:

- intention to understand;

- vigorous interaction with the context;

- relate new ideas to previous knowledge;

- relate concepts to everyday experience;

- relate evidence to conclusions;

- examine the logic of the argument.

Surface approach:

- intention to complete task requirements;

- memorise information needed for assessments;

- failure to distinguish principles from examples;

- treat task as an external imposition;

- focus on discrete elements without integration;

- unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies.

Strategic approach:

- intention to obtain highest grades possible;

- organise time and distribute effort to greatest effect;

- use previous exam papers to predict questions;

- be alert to cues about marking schemes.

(Entwistle, 1987: 16)

The following extract from a student interview illustrates this:

Student A

> 'when you're learning, you're not learning for someone else, you're learning for yourself, so it just comes down to your personal enjoyment ... [I] to like to literally think of an argument - to definitely know what I'm going to argue and then make it, well you want it to read well - to be well structured ... You need to interpret the text well to show that I really know what's going on ... When I write an essay, I'm very certain what I'm going to write on ... and I want to literally argue it and make it coherent and use evidence and bring it in'.

This student emphasises characteristics relating to a deep approach. That is, personal enjoyment, argument, interpretation, and using evidence. The responses of the other interviewees also related closely to sets of characteristics associated with the three approaches to learning. This is not to say that all students can be categorised neatly as either 'deep', 'surface' or 'strategic', rather that these categories are *tendencies*. Student approaches may also change over time (although our research is yet to explore this issue).

TABLE III. Approaches to learning and responses to feedback.

Approach to learning	Response to feedback and feedback 'preferences'
Deep	Want feedback to engage with their argument; See comments as subjective and specific to each assignment and therefore not likely to refer to it for future assignments.
Surface	Want feedback to correct work and indicate what was right and wrong (particularly in terms of surface features); Are unlikely to pay too much attention to feedback unless their grade expectation has not been met;
Strategic	Selective in the feedback they pay attention to; Look for comments that are generic, critical and advisory; Are less likely to read comments if their grade expectation has not been met.

Further analysis of the interview data suggested that students adopting particular approaches to learning seemed to respond to feedback differently and value it in different ways. These particular responses were matched with deep, surface, and strategic approaches to learning. Table III presents our initial findings based on our qualitative research.

13

CONCLUSION

Our research is at a very early stage. However, our initial data suggest that:

1. There are considerable variations in the feedback comments provided by tutors, and that this is not simply due to differences between the organisation of modules, since two of the sets of tutors comments were from the same assignment task from the same module;

2. Approaches to learning among students differ, with students adopting deep, surface or strategic approaches. However, we need to explore this further;

3. Both variations in the feedback comments provided by tutors and variations in students' approaches to learning are likely to account for, at least in part, differences in students' responses to feedback and, therefore, the potential for feedback to improve student learning.

Our initial research raises a number of important questions:

i). How does the way that particular tutors provide feedback comments differ over time and across disciplines and institutions?

ii). How do student responses vary in different HE contexts (such as level of study, mode of study, discipline and institution)?

iii). How do these responses change over time?

iv). How do different styles of feedback affect different students adopting different approaches to learning?

We hope to address at least some of these questions through our ongoing research.

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17

APPENDIX III - The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning

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Abstract

This paper reports initial findings of a three year research project investigating the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. Adopting aspects of a constructivist theory of learning we see that formative assessment feedback is essential to encourage the kind of 'deep' learning desired by tutors. There are a number of barriers to the utility of feedback outside the sphere of control of individual students, including those relating to the quality, quantity and language of comments. But the students in our study seem to read and value their tutors' comments. Their perceptions of feedback do not indicate that they are simply instrumental 'consumers' of education, driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark and as such desire feedback to simply provide them with 'correct answers'. Rather, the situation is more complex. While recognising the importance of grades, many of the students in our study adopt a more 'conscientious' approach. They are motivated intrinsically and therefore seek feedback which will help them to engage with their subject in a 'deep' way. Implications of our findings for theory and practice are discussed.

1

Introduction

The importance of formative assessment

Black and Wiliam's (2000) developing theoretical framework of formative assessment emphasises the interactions between teachers, pupils and subjects within 'communities of practice' - in this case subject classrooms. They adopt aspects of a constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1986, 1990) by implying that students are not simply receptacles for transmitted information, but active makers and mediators of meaning within particular learning contexts.

This is a view reflected in the work of Biggs (1999). He argues that meaning is *constructed* through learning activities and therefore teaching and learning must be about conceptual change. Furthermore, he asserts that the ways students are assessed influences the quality of their learning (see also Hyland, 2000; Brown, 1999; Gibbs, 1999; Sadler, 1983). He therefore argues that curricula, assessment procedures and teaching methods should all be *'aligned'* so that curriculum objectives relate to higher order cognitive thinking. Formative assessment is an essential part of this alignment since it provides feedback to both tutor and student (Biggs, 1999). It provides tutors with a way of checking on students' constructions (ibid.) and students a means by which they can learn through information on their progress (Ding, 1998; Brown & Knight, 1994); Feedback from formative assessment 'has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument for the further development of each student's learning' (Hyland, 2000: 234). And, there is plenty of evidence of the benefits of formative assessment. For example, Black and Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis of 250 research studies relevant to the subject of classroom formative assessment concluded that formative assessment *does* make a positive difference to student learning. So, by

2

understanding teaching, assessment and learning as social practices which involve the active construction of meaning, we can see that formative assessment is vital for the kind of learning traditionally valued so highly in HE.

Feedback from formative assessment may take different forms (Hyland, 2000). However, this paper focuses on written tutor comments on written assignments. Kenneth MacKenzie (1974) commented on the process of tutoring by written correspondence at the Open University and suggested that in this context, written feedback comments were often the only source of feedback for students. This is becoming the case in all HE institutions as the landscape of HE continues to be transformed. The workload of tutors is growing alongside an expansion in the number of students. At the same time, the use of distance learning and new technologies is becoming more extensive. As a result, face-to-face student-tutor contact time is diminishing, leading to a greater reliance on written correspondence (whether paper-based or electronic). For example, in Paul Hyland's (2000) study of university history students, 40% of those questioned claimed to have never had a face-to-face tutorial on their assessment work.

There is a growing research interest in the use of formative assessment feedback (Ecclestone, 1998). Yet despite the significant position that written feedback comments occupy in students' experiences of HE, and that today an important purpose of assessment is considered to be the improvement of student learning (Gipps, 1994), this area surprisingly remains relatively under-researched - particularly from students' perspectives.

3

In theory, formative assessment can, by providing feedback, help develop 'deep learning' among students (Biggs, 1999). For formative assessment to work in practice, feedback must 'connect' with students. But at a time when student numbers are rising and competition for graduate jobs growing, are students increasingly becoming instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark? If so, will they heed written feedback which encourages them to reflect on their learning? Or will they simply pay attention to the grade and seek feedback only when it is perceived to provide 'correct answers' to commit to memory (and only then when their grade expectation has not been met)? This paper tackles these questions by building on existing thinking through our own research.

Outline of our research

Our research focuses on students' understandings of feedback. We conducted interviews with students and administered a questionnaire. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing for flexibility in the subjects' responses. They also enabled us to capture students' own accounts of their experiences and understandings of assessment feedback (Patton, 1990) while at the same time keeping respondents focused on the topic at hand (Kvale, 1996). We were therefore able to examine students' reactions to feedback in an exploratory manner. 19 students from two different subject units (level 1 Business and level 1 Humanities units) across two institutions (a pre- and post-92 university in the North of England respectively) took part in the interviews. The interviews were conducted toward the end of semester two when the students already had some initial (albeit limited) experience of feedback in HE. The students in our

study are diverse in terms of age, gender and background in addition to studying either one of the two very different units at two different institutions.

The questionnaire allowed us to generate quantifiable data (Bryman, 1988) and to identify general trends in light of the themes emerging from the interviews. The value of using both qualitative and quantitative methods has been outlined by many social researchers (for example, see Layder, 1998; Bryman, 1988). And, the particular advantages of methodological triangulation in educational research have also been recognised (for example, see Cohen et al., 2000; Hartley & Chesworth, 2000; Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). The questionnaires were handed-out to students during lectures (again toward the end of semester two). We collected completed questionnaires before the end of each lecture in order to maximise the response rate. We were able to gain 94 responses.

The context of assessment

Before addressing what is perhaps the most important question - how do students respond to their tutors' comments? - it is necessary to first 'set the scene'. Formative assessment feedback may be vital for learning, but in today's HE institutions, the conditions may not be in place for feedback to 'work' as we would want it to.

Firstly, students enrolled on modular degree programmes may experience heavy workloads affording them little time to reflect on feedback (Hounsell, 1984) (partly a result of the increased use of course-work assessment). They may find themselves studying a diverse range of short units. If the feedback they receive does not help them to improve generic skills, but is instead focused solely on subject-specific aspects of assignments, then feedback may be irrelevant for subsequent work on other units (Ding, 1998). Secondly, within modular degree programmes, it is not uncommon for units to

5

have come to an end long before assignments are marked and returned. If feedback is not timely students might not make the effort to go back to the assignment, which may seem distant and remote (especially if a pass mark has been gained) (MacKenzie, 1976).

There are also issues relating to the type of feedback students are given. A number of authors have noted the variability of tutors' comments in terms of both quantity and quality (Higgins et al., 2000; Ivanič et al., 2000; Creme & Lea, 1997; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; MacKenzie, 1974;). For example, while some comments can be very authoritarian, judgmental and detached, others may be very personal and empathetic. The students interviewed in our research seemed all too aware how feedback comments can vary, depending on the marker. But more often than not our student interviews revealed negative experiences of assessment feedback:

> *... but some of it was like "this line is immature" which wasn't particularly useful in any way ... and the worst of it, the problem was that she didn't specify what was wrong with it, she just said "this line isn't right", "this is wrong", "this is very good", "this introduction is unstructured", but she didn't say how it had become unstructured.*

> *I've got things like "your essay is as good as far as it goes" and things like that and it's not particularly helpful because you don't, it doesn't tell you how far you could have gone if you know what I mean. It just says "your essay is good as far as it goes, well done", and it's, like, a comment that's not particularly useful.*

As well as lacking specificity, comments can also be impersonal:

> *I think they should be more personal really 'cause quite a lot of the comments are similar to what other people got, you know, just reproduce*

6

them. So in a way, if they were more personal and direct then it would

be more helpful.

These comments suggest that students in our study perceive feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful, if it is too impersonal, and if it is too general and vague to be of any formative use. Handwriting also seems to be a common problem. For example, 40% of our questionnaire respondents often find feedback comments difficult to read.

There may be numerous reasons for inconsistency and 'poor quality'. The ways tutors perceive both the role of feedback and their students are likely to influence what they provide. For example (and while recognising that this somewhat an over-simplification of the situation), some tutors may wish to supply advice, while others will simply provide evaluative information as a way of justifying the grade. Furthermore, some tutors may not see the point in attending to the quality of their feedback comments if they are sceptical and cynical as to whether feedback is read at all (Ding, 1997). This latter perception may be compounded by tutors on short units lacking the opportunity to see students' future work and to ascertain whether the feedback they provided had any impact. But it may also stem from a belief that when, for example, students do not take the opportunity given to them (by way of tutors' office hours) to seek further feedback, help and support, it is due to a lack of motivation or commitment. In addition, tutors may not feel a need to produce detailed formative feedback for students whose grades are satisfactory or of a high standard.

A further barrier to the use of formative feedback may be that some students increasingly fail to understand the taken-for-granted academic discourses which underpin assessment criteria and the language of feedback (Hounsell, 1987). According

to Entwistle (1984:1), 'effective communication depends on shared assumptions, definitions, and understanding', but a study at Lancaster University found that 50% of the third year students in one academic department were unclear what the assessment criteria were (Baldwin, 1993 cited in Brown & Knight, 1994).

As one of our students noted:

'I haven't got a clue what I'm assessed on'.

This is perhaps not surprising if tutors' assessments of work require qualitative judgements in a learning environment where there are rarely either correct or incorrect answers (Sadler, 1989). For Sadler (1989), qualitative judgements usually involve multiple criteria, and at least some of these criteria will be 'fuzzy'. In other words, they will be abstract constructs which have no absolute meaning independent of particular contexts. Consequently, teachers may recognise a good performance, yet struggle to articulate exactly what they are looking for because conceptions of quality usually take the form of tacit knowledge (ibid.). So, the very language of assessment criteria itself, and consequently feedback comments, can be difficult for students to grasp (Creme & Lea, 1997). And the results of studies by Chanock, (2000); Hartley and Chesworth (2000); Orsmond et al. (1996, 1997, 2000); Ivanič (1998); Lillis (1997); Street and Lea, (1997); and Hounsell (1987) echo the view that students often experience problems interpreting the academic language underpinning assessment.

Our own research supports this suggestion. A concern for many of the students interviewed was that comments are frequently vague or too general. Often feedback comments employ the academic language used to express assessment criteria. But only 33% of our respondents claimed to understand these criteria. An inability to fully comprehend the meaning of assessment feedback may not necessarily prevent students

8

from paying attention to tutors' comments, since they may unknowingly interpret them incorrectly yet still attempt to utilise them. Nevertheless, this will almost certainly present an obstacle for many.

In light of the potential barriers to the efficacy of formative feedback - including the impact of modularisation, the inconsistency and sometimes poor quality of feedback, and the often tacit nature of the language underpinning comments - we might expect students to disregard tutors' comments. But is this the case?

Do students take notice of feedback?

Formative feedback comments can only be effective if students read and make use of them. Most of the students involved in studies by Paul Hyland (2000) and Ding Lan (1998) seemed to read tutors' comments. Our questionnaire data reflect this (see Table I). The time spent reading comments varies, with the majority of students claiming to spend less than 15 minutes doing so (although of course, our data does not tell us *when* this takes place or whether students return to look at their feedback on more than one occasion). But overall, 97% of students indicated that they usually 'read' the written feedback they receive. Furthermore, we can see from Table II that 82% of the students claimed to 'pay close attention' to feedback.

The interview data also support this:

> *I always look forward to seeing what they had to say.*

> *Normally I get the grade and then look through the self-assessment and the tutor's assessment, read the comments and ... see what comments he's made on the essay.*

This finding is reinforced by Hyland's (2000) study who noted that the majority of the students involved (from a range of institutions) seemed to try (even if only occasionally) to use comments for future assignments.

TABLE I Reading assessment feedback.

% of students indicating time spent reading comments					
5 minutes or less	10-15 minutes	15-30 minutes	More than 30 minutes	I do not read the feedback	No response
39	42	13	3	0	3

TABLE II Responding to assessment feedback.

Response:	% students agree	% students neither agree nor disagree	% students disagree
I pay close attention to the comments I get.	82	14	4

How do students use feedback?

But how might students 'use' assessment feedback? Ding Lan (1998) claims that in her study, a number of the students did not seem to have made 'good use' of tutors' comments. The responses of many of the students in our study indicate a tendency to 'bear comments in mind' for future work:

Well, I just try to take in what they've said as best you can, like, um, that's obviously a pointer for doing things in the future properly.

I probably would have read it [the feedback] so it would be in the back of my mind, but I wouldn't refer to it really closely or exactly or

10

anything. I would probably be aware of what I had to do, but not really,

it wouldn't be, like, in the forefront of my mind or anything.

However, the situation may be complex. Although the two students above do not seem to use feedback in the sense that they have it in front of them from a previous assignment when constructing a new piece of work, reading it closely and attending to every comment, their statements may imply a less 'rigorous' and 'intuitive' use of feedback. A more reflective approach may have considerable benefits if desirable learning involves the development of reflective skills. Clearly though, this area requires further research.

Why do students use feedback?

Putting to one side problems of defining and measuring the 'use' of feedback, our students appear to want feedback because they feel they deserve it and because they recognise its potential to be formative. Many of the students we questioned agreed that receiving feedback is a matter of 'fairness'. That is, if they make an effort to complete an assessment task, it is only fair that the tutor makes an effort to provide feedback:

> *... I mean it seems only fair really when you've spent the time writing the*
>
> *essay they should give you some feedback back really.*

A large number of the students in our study recognise that feedback comments are useful for formative purposes: 80% *disagreed* with the statement 'Feedback comments are *not* that useful'. Many of those interviewed wanted tutors to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and also placed importance on comments that provide guidance for improvement:

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... the minimum I think you should get is a grade and at least three or four comments on why you got that grade, how you can improve ... you get little comments in the margin but I expect to get them more fully explained at the bottom so you can look down and see that you've done something that they don't agree with or they think isn't very good, then you can look at the back and see that they've explained it a bit more, and, like, the overall idea of where you're at really and how you can get better.

I think it's good to get the pluses – the good points, but to me to just get a mark is not enough. I think one wants to know the weaknesses as well as the strengths and where they can mend the weaknesses.

This finding is reflected elsewhere. Most of the students in Ding Lan's (1998) study, while attributing much importance to grades, desired formative comments to supplement grades. 90% of students in Hyland's (2000) study believed that feedback could help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, engender a sense of achievement, and raise their marks on future work. Hyland goes on to comment that the students 'never seem to lose faith in its [feedback's] potential value' (2000: 243) (despite the problems they may encounter when attempting to use it).

But what is it that is motivating them to seek improvement? Moreover, does the type of motivation matter? We argue that it does. As already stated, there may be different ways of reading and using feedback and we anticipate that students' motives for paying attention to tutors' comments will mediate the kinds of feedback comments they desire and how, and under what circumstances they are likely to make use of them.

/2

The student as consumer

In a study by Swann and Arthurs (1998), a large number of their students seemed to take an instrumental view of learning, conceiving assessment tasks as obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of grades. Formative feedback was viewed as a means to negotiate these obstacles. In an earlier study by Howard Becker et al. (1968) of US college life, assessment demands dominated and were ubiquitous, and the students' behaviour reflected the instrumental and pragmatic strategies they adopted to cope with the particular teaching and assessment practices imposed on them to progress through the education system. But is this true for today's student in the context of UK HE?

A majority of the students in our study perceive HE as a 'service' and that feedback constitutes part of that service. As one student noted:

> *They way I see it is we're paying £1,000 pounds. It's more of a service*
> *now.*

If HE is viewed as a service, then students are arguably the consumers of that service. But what do they expect the service to provide? Most students in our study link feedback to attaining better grades. These students perceive feedback comments as identifying what they are doing right and wrong and therefore helping them to improve their performance in subsequent assessed assignments and exams in order to raise their marks:

> *... part of writing the essay question in the exam is having the right*
> *technique and whilst it would be useful to say that "yeah, you're*
> *bringing in good parts outside the subject and it's good that you've*

13

brought in this", it would also be good to know "well, don't ever use this

language in the exam 'cause it's going to count against you".

The student as a 'conscientious consumer'

But if students are preoccupied with the grade, then the kind of feedback they would most likely want (when their grade expectation has not been met) would surely be feedback telling them specifically what to do to improve their mark, rather then feedback which encourages them to reflect on their learning. However, our data suggests that students are not as instrumental and mechanistic as this (Higgins et al., 1999). Table III (based on our questionnaire data) indicates that although most of the students claim to be at university to gain qualifications, a large majority also claim to be at university because they enjoy learning.

TABLE III. Why study in HE?

Reasons for studying in HE:	% students agreeing
The main reason I came to university was to gain qualifications.	92
I am at university because I enjoy learning.	71

This is reflected in many interview responses:

There is an enjoyment part of it - to get into it [the subject]'

... when you're learning you're not learning for someone else, you're

learning for yourself. So it just comes down to your personal enjoyment.

Well, that's what the point of it is for me.

114

The questionnaire also asked students to identify features of a 'good assignment' (see Table IV). One of the most important features was considered to be 'critical analysis'. In addition, students were asked to rate different types of feedback comment (see Table V). Comments rated as important by over 75% of respondents include those that indicate the grade, comments that correct mistakes, and comments that advise how the student can improve. However, also rated as important were comments that *explain* mistakes, comments focusing on the level of *argument*, and comments focusing on the level of *critical analysis*.

TABLE IV. What makes a good assignment?

Features of assignments rated as important by over 75% of students:	% of students rating each feature as important:
Demonstration of knowledge.	97
Well structured.	89
Critical analysis.	89
Good style of writing.	79

Note to Table IV: As in Table V below, figures are based on responses to a five-point Likert scale (1-5, with 1 representing 'very important' and 5 representing 'not at all important'). Responses of 1 and 2 were judged to represent 'important'.

/5

TABLE V. What feedback is important?

Types of feedback comment rated as important by over 75% of students:	% of students rating each type as <u>important</u>:
Comments that tell you what you could do to improve.	92
Comments that explain your mistakes.	91
Comments that focus on the level of critical analysis.	90
Comments that focus on your argument.	89
Comments that focus on the tutor's overall impressions.	87
Comments that tell you what you have done badly.	86
Comments that focus on the subject matter.	82
Comments that correct your mistakes.	80
Feedback that tells you the grade.	79
Comments that focus on your use of supporting evidence.	79

The importance of feedback focusing on argument is reflected in many of our interview responses:

I would like them [feedback comments] to be more general about the entirety of the essay - how it's laid out and how the argument has been formed and how to make it more clear, things like that.

... the argument you're making - they should make a comment on it.

16

So it seems that while the students in our study want feedback to provide them with a grade, they also desire feedback which focuses on generic, 'deep' skills. It is possible that this is because they perceive skills such as 'critical analysis' and 'argument' to be valued by their tutors and rewarded with high marks. But here, we offer an alternative explanation in view of our findings. If students are concerned simply with obtaining the grades they desire with minimum effort, then we would expect them to adopt a 'surface' approach to learning (as outlined by Entwistle, 1987). This is because a surface approach is most strongly correlated with 'extrinsic motivation and narrowly vocational concerns' (ibid.: 19), while intrinsic motivation (such as interest in a subject area) is most strongly (and positively) correlated with a deep approach (ibid.). Our data suggest that the majority of students in our study are, at least to some extent, intrinsically motivated, and as such value feedback comments which focus on skills relating to a deep approach to learning.

Discussion and suggestions for practice

At the beginning of this paper, we outlined an argument for the importance of formative assessment for supporting learning. We also argued that in the context of HE today, perhaps the most common opportunity for providing such feedback comes in the form of written tutor comments at the end of students' course work assignments. But this raises a fundamental question - even if formative assessment takes place and students receive feedback, does it make a difference? In theory it should (and Black and Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis suggests that generally in practice it does), but to what extent is this really the case in HE today?

There are clearly a number of potential barriers to the effective provision and utility of feedback comments which are, to some extent, outside of the student's sphere of

17

influence. These may be 'structural' in nature - for example, a result of the impact of modular degree programmes. Or they may relate to the nature of feedback that students are provided in terms of the quality, quantity and language used. But these factors become irrelevant if students' interests are confined solely to the grade and feedback is either disregarded or sought only to provide a list of 'correct answers' for future assessment.

Our research suggests that while the grade may be of paramount importance to students, many of those we questioned are eager to read feedback comments. They expect feedback because they believe they deserve it - if they have made an effort to produce the assignment, it is only fair that the tutor makes an effort to provide feedback. Furthermore, there is a perception that HE provides a service and, as such, it is also the tutor's 'duty' to offer feedback. This latter point links to the notion of the student as a 'consumer', but this does not necessarily square with a notion of the student as consumer, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark.

It may be difficult in the light of relatively high graduate unemployment (or under-employment) and increasing competitiveness for graduate jobs, for students not to have 'one eye on the grade'. But while there may well be an increasing level of consumerism within HE, the argument that feedback will be ignored or only used if it provides 'correct answers' cannot be sustained. Rather, it is more likely that many of today's students have a 'consumerist awareness' reflected in a focus on achieving a grade *alongside* intrinsic motivations. As a result, they may recognise the central importance of formative feedback for their educational development.

How students use feedback is, however, another matter. Clearly the notion of 'use' in this context is complex and needs to be understood as occurring in different ways with

some students perhaps adhering closely to every comment while others reflect in a less conscious manner on a small selection of points which they have stored 'at the back of their mind'. At present, this issue requires further investigation.

Nevertheless, the good news may be that despite potential barriers to its use, the potential for formative feedback to improve student learning may still exist. But to make the most of students' enthusiasm for feedback and allow formative assessment to work, tutors need to take account of the following. Firstly, while recognising institutional constraints and difficult workloads, timely feedback is vital; comments should be returned to students as soon as possible after the assignment is submitted. Interim feedback on a first draft or an essay plan might also be productive. Secondly, it is not usually sufficient to simply tell a student where they have gone wrong - misconceptions need to be *explained* and improvements for future work suggested. Nor should comments focus solely on spelling and grammar. Fostering 'higher order' critical skills may have more long-term educational value. Moreover, students may not view comments on surface aspects of their work as particularly relevant or useful. In addition, providers of feedback cannot assume that the language they use is inherently meaningful to students. As one of us has suggested elsewhere, often "'... tutors base their feedback on implicit values and vocabulary that often mean nothing to the student'" (Higgins cited in Utley, 2000). Perhaps the introduction of some element of peer assessment may help students to become more familiar with the meanings of criteria upon which their work is evaluated (although much care must be taken when designing peer assessment strategies if their potential is to be realised (see Reynolds & Trehan, 2000)). Discussion between tutor and students about tutors' expectations may also help. As might more open dialogue between tutors themselves to prevent students receiving conflicting advice based on different meanings across disciplines (Higgins et al., 2001).

/9

Our findings should be treated tentatively and as provisional. While this paper provides a useful starting point for identifying and analysing the issues involved in the provision and utility of tutors' feedback comments, the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students is an area that still remains relatively under-researched, particularly from the students' perspective. As MacKenzie (1976: 58) stated twenty-six years ago, 'much remains to be known, in any detail, about the average student's use of his [sic] tutor's comments'. This apparently remains the case today, yet, as we have demonstrated, there is clearly room for improvement.

We need to develop a clearer picture of *how* exactly students use feedback. We must also investigate further students' abilities to understand the academic discourses upon which the language of feedback is often based. We need to develop a better understanding of the student-feedback and student-tutor relationships whilst recognising that there are complex tensions between students' motivations, their approaches to assessment, the variable feedback they are presented with, and their attempts to utilise comments. Furthermore, we need to understand how tensions between being grade-sensitive and being motivated by a desire to engage with HE at a 'deep' level are played-out in students' lives - or in other words, to understand what it means to be a conscientious consumer.

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26

APPENDIX IV - "What do you expect?" Students' responses to assessment feedback

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SUMMARY

This paper reports ongoing research into the use of assessment feedback to improve learning in higher education (HE). Increasingly, the language of assessment criteria and feedback reflects attempts to explicate academic terminology. But is this language, often underpinned by a discourse of quality standards, accessible to students? Or can it pose fundamental problems learners?

Research suggests that students usually read feedback comments (see Higgins et al. forthcoming; Ding, 1998). But there is growing evidence that students may have difficulty interpreting them (see Chanock, 2000; Hartley & Chesworth 2000; Lillis, 1997; Street and Lea, 1997; Hounsell, 1987). For example, will a student, advised to demonstrate a greater level of 'critical analysis', intuitively know what to do?

Our initial data suggest that students perceive their position within the subject-tutor-student relationship in particular ways. This 'positioning' mediates how they understand the language of assessment and respond to feedback. Implications for practice are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Written feedback on students' written course work constitutes a complex form of communication and it is naïve to assume that tutors' comments are inherently meaningful to students (Baynham, 2000). Nor can we assume that students will want, or be able to respond 'appropriately' to the information they receive (for example, see Ding, 1998). There are two interrelated reasons for this. Firstly, messages are not always meaningful to their recipients, especially in the context of HE with its particular inter- and intra-disciplinary academic terminology. Secondly, communication takes place in a complex social context where power relations, individual dispositions, motivations, past experiences, emotions (and so on) mediate how actors make sense of their circumstances and impact on their behaviour (Layder, 1997).

By drawing on the work of John Biggs and two recent research interviews (as case studies) we attempt to illustrate how both 'meaning' and 'power' may mediate the process of feeding-back to students and impact on attempts to improve learning.
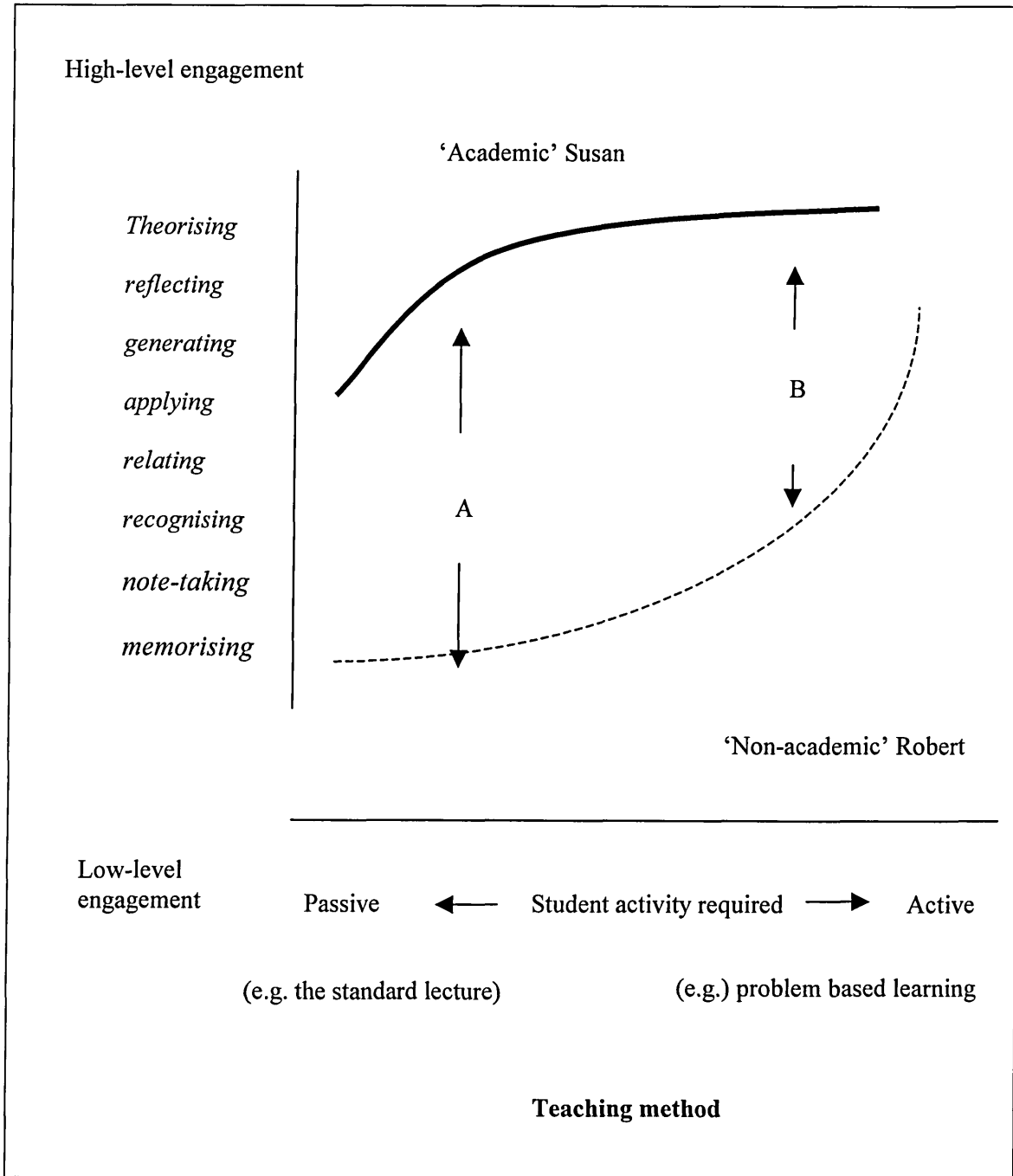
'CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT'

The potential benefits of what Biggs (1999a) refers to as 'constructive alignment' are illustrated in Figure 1. Biggs adopts a constructivist approach to teaching and learning and emphasises the 'centrality of student activity' (Biggs, 1999b: 63). He argues that the aim of learning should be to effect conceptual change. This requires teaching oriented to encouraging students to engage in higher-level cognitive activities such as 'theorising' and 'reflecting'. And, for this to occur, teaching, curriculum and assessment methods must be 'aligned' to clear, specific objectives, which define what should be taught, how it should be taught and how learning should be assessed (Biggs, 1999b). Objectives should be expressed as 'appropriate verbs' (such as 'analyse' and 'hypothesise'), which are consistently used to indicate what understanding is required of

2

students through learning activities and to evaluate how well objectives have been met (ibid.). This is, therefore, a criterion-referenced system.

Where objectives relate to high levels of student engagement as expressed in verbs such as 'theorising', aligned teaching/learning activities require an active rather than passive approach. We can see from the two students in Biggs' model that when teaching is passive (for example, students simply experience standard lectures), 'academic' Susan is already engaging with relatively high levels of cognitive activity, but 'non-academic' Robert is at a much lower level of engagement. The gap between the two students' levels of thinking is wide. But through active teaching/learning activities, Robert is encouraged to engage in higher-level thinking and Susan does more of the things she was already doing. As a result, the gap between the two students is closed, with both engaging with learning at higher levels of cognitive activity (Biggs, 1999a).

Consider two new students in relation to this model (based on two recent student interviews). For the purposes of this paper, we shall refer to them as 'academic' Richard and 'non-academic' Peter. Both are level 3 undergraduates completing full-time degrees in Psychology at Sheffield Hallam University.

3

Figure 1. Student orientation, teaching method and level of engagement

High-level engagement

'Academic' Susan

Theorising

reflecting

generating

applying   B

relating

recognising   A

note-taking

memorising

'Non-academic' Robert

Low-level
engagement   Passive ◄—— Student activity required ——► Active

(e.g. the standard lecture)   (e.g.) problem based learning

Teaching method

THE STUDENTS

Richard has always enjoyed a relatively high level of academic achievement. He is at university because he wants to work as a counsellor. He likes the subject he is studying:

4

I enjoy it, yeah. I mean not everything. I enjoy more of what I'm doing than what I don't enjoy I think. You know, you get people saying "I'm bored of degrees", but I still think it's enjoyable.

And he is on-track for at least an upper second-class degree with grades ranging from 60-70%.

Peter, however, is unsure what he wants to do when he leaves university. He performed less well at school than Richard, re-taking a number of GCSEs alongside his A levels. He does not seem to enjoy his studies:

I don't want to do it anymore. I just, I don't really like academic life. I'm not really suited to it ...I can't wait to leave.

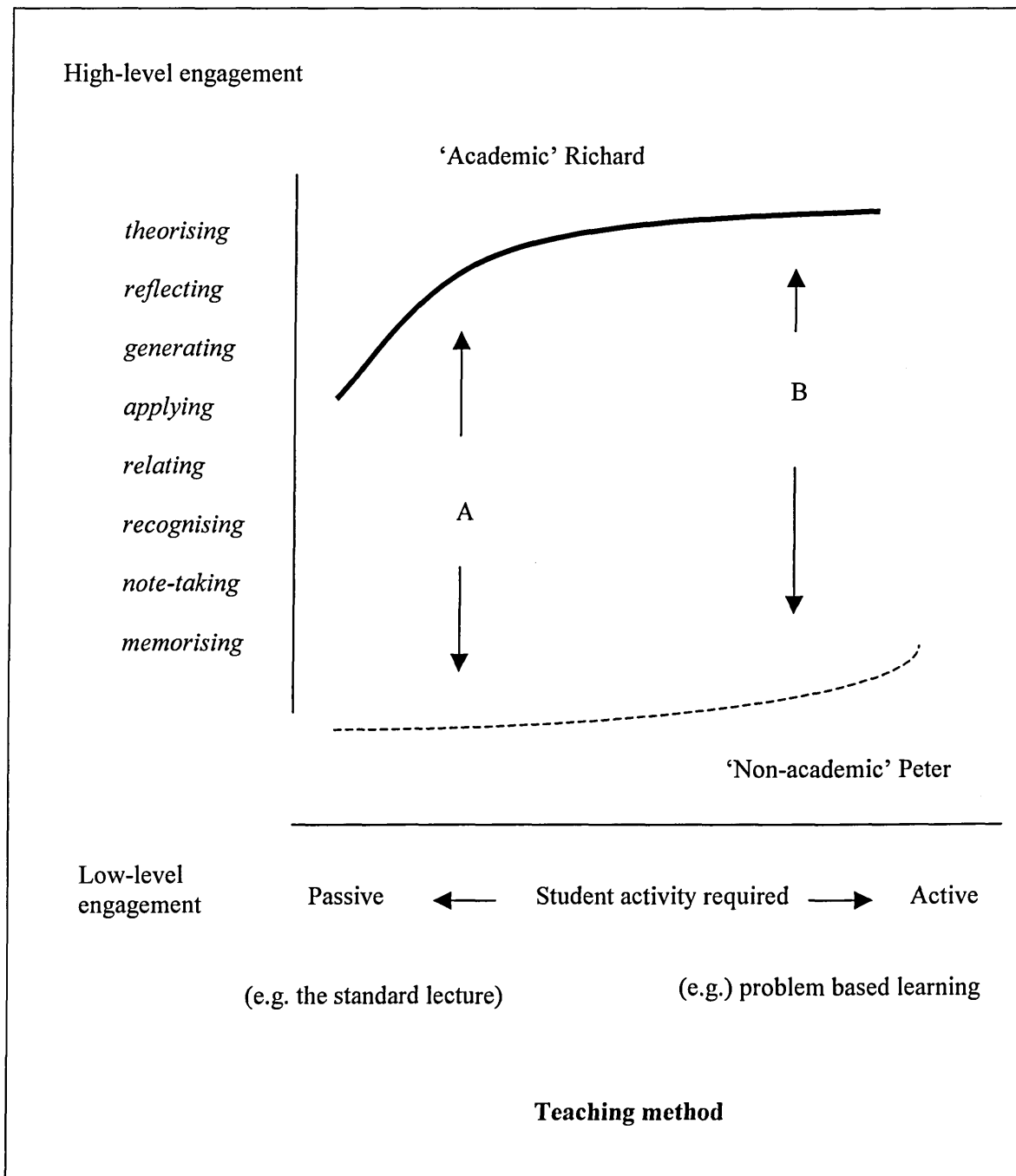Peter is hoping for a lower-second class degree, with grades currently in the region of 50-60%

THE COURSE

The programme of study both students are enrolled on is, by Biggs' (1999a) definition of the term, relatively well 'aligned'. The course objectives reflect the aim of encouraging higher-level cognitive activity. Teaching is 'active' and encourages a high level of student engagement with an emphasis on the development of skills of critical thought and reflection. The assessment activities focus on developing and assessing these abilities, and feedback practices are similarly 'aligned' so that the written advice students receive tends to incorporate verbs such as 'analyse', 'hypothesise', 'criticise' and 'evaluate'.

Should we expect this 'alignment' and, more specifically, the type of feedback it involves, to facilitate higher levels of cognitive activity? Teaching activities to

encourage 'deep' learning will certainly help, but so far it seems that the gap between 'academic' Richard and 'non-academic' Peter is still wide after two and a half years of study at degree level (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Unsuccessful alignment

High-level engagement

'Academic' Richard

theorising

reflecting

generating

applying   B

relating

recognising   A

note-taking

memorising

'Non-academic' Peter

Low-level
engagement   Passive ⟵ Student activity required ⟶ Active

(e.g. the standard lecture)   (e.g.) problem based learning

Teaching method

(Adapted from Biggs, 1999a: 4)

6

There may be a plethora of reasons for this (for example, Peter is in part-time employment, which affords him less time to study than Richard). But in this paper we focus on the language of assessment feedback and the student-tutor power relationship as important factors.

UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

The current trend towards increasingly transparent and specific assessment criteria is reflected in the QAA's code of practice for assessment and feedback (QAA, 2000). It is also reflected in the implications constructive alignment holds for written feedback. Tutors are encouraged to provide feedback comments relating closely to pre-defined assessment criteria. For Biggs (1999a), verbs such as 'theorise', 'reflect' and 'analyse' should underpin these criteria. The problem is that this language, no matter how specific, may not be inherently meaningful to students. For example, if a student is told that she or he has not been sufficiently critical by the feedback they receive, will they comprehend what is required of them in future?

Dai Hounsell (1987) has suggested that academic language constitutes a tacit, taken-for-granted discourse, which students often have difficulty accessing. And Lea and Street (2000) emphasise the contextual nature of academic language by seeing disciplines as sites of, and constituted in, discourse and power, with an emphasis on how disciplinary knowledge is constituted, reproduced, manipulated, resisted, transformed, and learned.

If alignment is to prove successful, then students must be able to grasp the language of assessment on which feedback comments are based. Terms like 'critical analysis' need to be understood. It is true that by engaging with active teaching and learning activities, students may internalise an understanding of what it is to 'hypothesise', 'theorise' or be 'critical', and some will, by definition, by adopting a deeper approach to learning (Biggs, 1999b). But is this sufficient to help the majority of students to become critical,

7

independent thinkers? What of 'academic' Richard and 'non-academic' Peter? Perhaps we need to look more closely at the meaning and impact of assessment feedback and how the student communicates with their tutor and relates to their subject.

Richard seems to recognise the implicit nature of the language expressing assessment criteria:

> *It's kind of assumed that you know what an essay is and how to write it and, you know, use the basic beginning, middle and ending structure. I think it's just assumed that anybody who can get into a position where they're on a degree course can competently write an essay. It's just time and practice I think ... I feel I finally know what it's about, but it's taken me a couple of years to get my head 'round it though. It comes across form the teaching although you don't explicitly get taught to do it, it's just kind of inferred all the way along. You just kind of pick up that that's the way to do it, you know?*

But he is confident he has (albeit slowly) gained a grasp of the language of assessment criteria. About terms such as 'argument' and 'critical analysis', Richard comments:

> *I feel pretty comfortable with the terms, yeah and that's what I try and do. I don't know if I'm doing it right but the way I try and do it is, um, to, well the way I always seem to do it is to present this sort of empirical argument and stuff and then spend the rest of it criticising it [laughs]. Um, so I don't know if I doing it right, I mean, that's what I think of, you know, the critique.*

Peter too experiences academic language as 'assumed' and implied, but he has much less confidence about its meaning:

I don't know. Academic argument? I suppose it's still a little bit, I do know

what it means but you don't really get things like that explained to you, you

just assume that it means one thing. I don't know what I assume it means. I

suppose you've got to use references.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that Richard is better able than Peter to access the academic discourse underpinning assessment criteria (and more analysis of our data is required), but the relative confidence in understanding the two students exhibit is certainly *suggestive* of different levels of comprehension. Furthermore, this comprehension seems to relate to how each student positions themselves with relation to their tutors and the subject.

RICHARD'S POSITION WITHIN THE SUBJECT-TUTOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Richard does no seem to conceive of the tutor as an objective expert. Rather, he acknowledges a level of subjectivity, which does not just reflect whether a tutor is 'harsh' or 'lenient' in their marking, but, more significantly, reflects the tutor's *subjective* viewpoint re the topic area:

That bugs sometimes, the kind of, the sort of subjectivity of the person who's

marking it, do you know what I mean? You're like, when you get your

feedback sheet, that's one of the things you check straight away, who

marked it, do you know what I mean? ... and it's really annoying when you

get somebody who, um, doesn't agree with your point of view and you get

marked down for it.

Richard demonstrates an awareness that there are different points of view within psychology. This is reflected in his autonomous engagement with the subject area and his adoption of a particular standpoint:

> *I'm probably a pain in everyone's neck anyway 'cause like I'm right into, I've got right into social constructionism and stuff, you know, the more qualitative side of it and that, and a lot of the lecturers here and the tutors and that, they're not right into that at all, it's very sort of quantitative, and I always try to bring a social constructionist argument into everything [laughs].*

The point here is not whether Richard's viewpoint is 'appropriate', but that he sees the subject (or at least areas within the subject) as something to engage with:

> *[It was when] we started doing about critical social psychology that I really found something I could get my teeth into.*

The subject is also something to be used to support or reject particular arguments and points of view, which may or may not be in line with the tutor's perspective. In either case, he is happy to disagree with the tutor:

> *I remember like one report we did and it was based on ... Eysenck's personality thing, and I basically think that the whole thing's a load of rubbish, do you know what I mean? So I went through it and did the report and, you know, there were no significant results and I sort of said what we could have done differently to maybe, you know, to maybe, why the experiment failed, and then at the end [laughs] I just had a, I just went on a massive rant about, er, "this could be the reason why it failed" and basically sort of tried to put my point that I thought it was, that the, er, [laughs]*

10

personality scale is a load of rubbish!, you know, and, um, what I got in the

feedback was that I wasted time and space putting, writing about that when

it was already an established and validated method of measurement and I

just totally disagreed with that completely, do you know what I mean?

Richard does not court conflict for its own sake. Rather, he has developed his own opinions from engaging with the subject; opinions he attempts to defend through reasoned argument. And for Richard, this is the point of HE:

I'd rather put what I think and get a lower mark for it than kind of go along

with it. I don't know, I mean I think that you shouldn't be sort of marked on

what your opinion is, it should be the way you construct your argument.

And (rightly or wrongly) he believes his arguments are not always engaged with by tutors, who have their own contrasting beliefs:

I do get the impression that there aren't sort of, as soon as they see, I don't

know, Foucault mentioned or something like that, they think "oh, bollocks",

you know, especially I mean, I can see their point of view like when you've

got a lot of stuff to mark, you know, and I don't think it probably gets read,

you know, really properly, it just kind of, and they see some social

constructionist and they think, you know, "oh, forget this", you know, "he's

wandering off the point here", you know, but, I don't know, I just keep

writing them and hoping that the person reads it really properly and sees

what I'm trying to say, you know.

This has implications for how he sees the role of the tutor. Rather than seeing them as an expert, on hand to transmit objective knowledge, he is much more interested in support for his engagement with the subject and development of ideas:

I'd expect, um, just full support basically. If you need to, um, if you're unsure about something and you need to talk to them about it, then there to be plenty of opportunity for you to get in contact with them and ask them about it.

And, for Richard, some of his experiences reflect this desire:

But, yeah, just the more support the better. I mean, you know, I won't start mentioning any names of the bad ones but, um, as an example of someone who really, really does it well, I think G without a doubt ... has been the best teacher out of the whole three years, you know, she's like gone out of her way to look for material for me and she's brought stuff in and given it to me and she's always been available when I've needed to talk to her and stuff and her feedback's been really, really helpful, and if all the tutors could be like that, you know what I mean, it would be fantastic. Generally, they've been a lot better and more approachable this year, yeah, and just the level of approachability is the kind of main thing and the sort of willingness to let the student know that they will go out of their way for them if they have to, do you know what I mean? Um, if you think your tutor's like really sort of working hard for you it just really encourages you to work hard for them, you know, um, and just attend all your lectures and all your seminars and you just give them your best, you know, 'cause you think their giving you their best.

It seems that Richard positions himself in a particular way in relation to the subject matter he is studying and to his tutors. Black and Wiliam's (2000) model of formative assessment can be used to illustrate this (although it must be stressed that the work we

12

are drawing on is very much work in progress and simply a 'sketch, or, at most, notes towards a theory of formative assessment' (Black & Wiliam, 2000: 5) (See Figure 3).

For Black and Wiliam (2000), the key elements of the subject classroom are the teacher(s) or tutor(s), subject and student(s). In this model, the tutor may influence the development of their discipline, but their subject will inevitably feed more strongly into their knowledge and practice. More importantly though, we have the student-tutor relationship. Typically, students understand and identify the subject through their tutors. At the same time, the role of the tutor is central in facilitating or directing the learning of students. The two-way interaction is often stronger than that between the student and the subject.
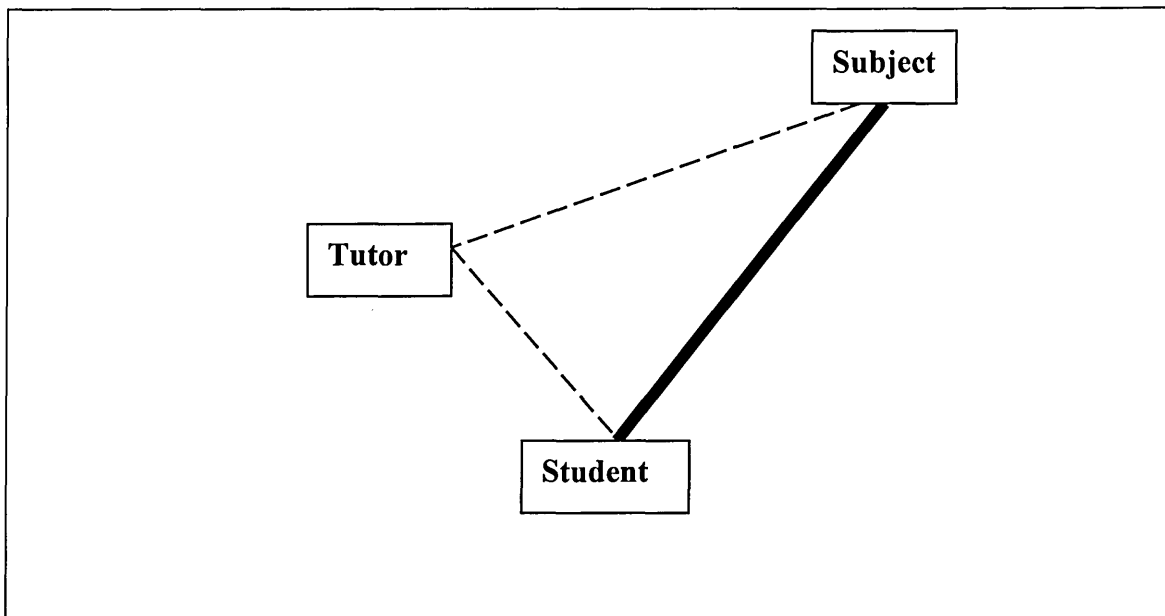
Figure 3. The learning and teaching context: the subject-tutor(s)-student(s) relationship
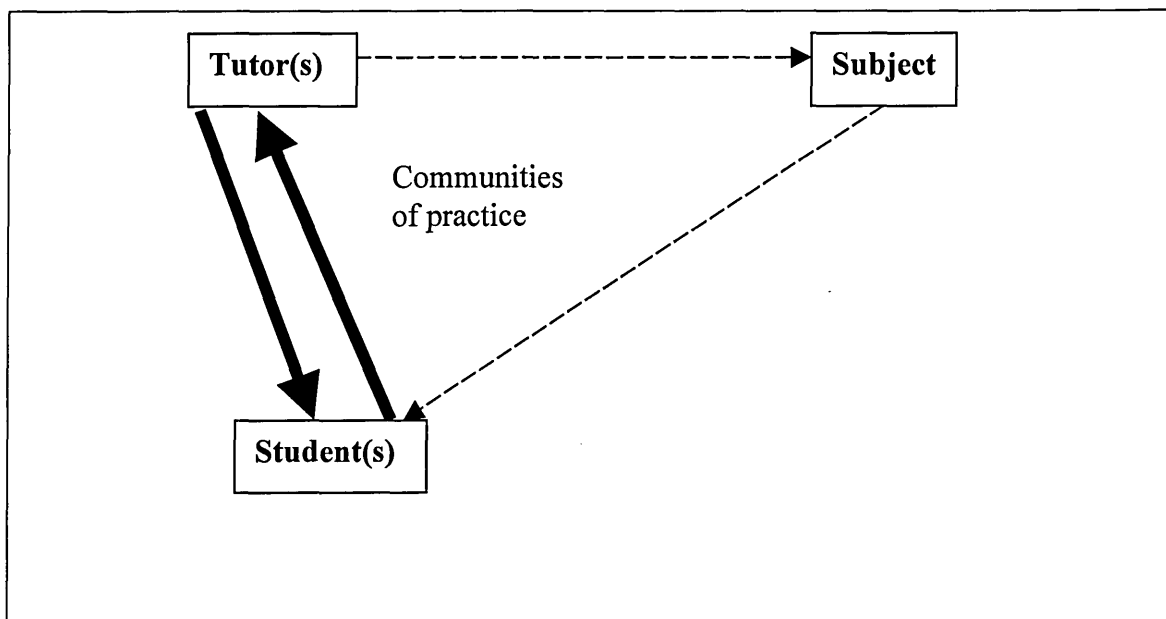
(Adapted from Black and Wiliam, 2000:2)

Richard, however, can be seem as positioning himself within this relationship as indicated in Figure 4.

13

Figure 4. 'Academic' Richard's position within the subject-tutor-student relationship

Richard engages more directly with the subject. He sees the tutor, not as objective expert, but as a *supporter* of his learning and academic development. The link between the subject and the tutor is depicted as relatively weak only in the sense that Richard does not seem to regard the tutor's opinions as the *same as* the subject itself, but rather as informed interpretation. This is not intended to represent some inflexible arrangement that Richard has found himself in, but the way in which he has positioned himself or perceives his position within the learning context.

PETER'S POSITION WITHIN THE SUBJECT-TUTOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Peter positions himself within the subject-tutor-student relationship differently. The purpose of this paper is not to explain why this is. Rather, we simply wish to describe Peter's 'positioning' and its implications for teaching and learning.

In contrast to Richard, he sees tutors simply as experts (often reflected in feelings of anxiety):

I think I get intimidated by really, really, really intelligent tutors ... it's difficult and you feel like stupid 'cause they know everything about it and they've got papers published and they can go on for hours sort of talking about it and your just like "oh?" ... And it's difficult to sort of say "I don't really understand the whole idea of it".

And rather than see the tutor as simply holding different opinions, which may be as valid as his own, Peter, while recognising that different tutors might want different things, is anxious to find out what each expects:

You need to know what they want from you 'cause it may be different for one tutor and with 'abnormal psychology' ... it's important to go and see her [the tutor] 'cause she has a certain way of thinking, you know, they all have different ways of thinking and they all want you to answer an essay in a certain way.

A further difference between Richard and Peter is that while Richard sees tutors as having opinions, which are valid but may differ from his own, Peter believes that different subject areas have different 'rules' and it is therefore a case of finding out from the tutor how to write the assignment correctly within each subject or topic context. When talking about the role of 'interpretation' at university, Peter comments:

I think things like that apply more to more general subjects ... like sociology or English but I think psychology has more of an obvious structure ... strict psychology's not subjective at all, it's just, you're looking at it 'cause there's all the research saying this, that and the other. I don't know ... there definitely are rules ... but I don't think necessarily that rules apply in the same way to every subject, do you see what I mean? There are certain rules for certain things.

/5

Contact time with, and support from tutors is, therefore, as important for Peter as it is for Richard, but for different reasons. Both want support, but while Richard sees the tutor as a subjective facilitator who may engage with his arguments and opinions and help develop his understanding of, and interaction with the subject, Peter recognises that tutors from different specialist areas expect different things and as such is anxious to find out what each 'expert' requires in order to reproduce this in his assessed work.

We can see Peter's 'positioning' as indicated in Figure 5. Here, there is greater reliance on the tutor (finding out what they want) and less independent engagement with the subject. The tutor-subject link is emphasised to indicate Peter's perception that the subject is something to be accessed through the tutor, rather than through independent engagement with it.

Figure 5 Peter's position within the subject-tutor-student relationship
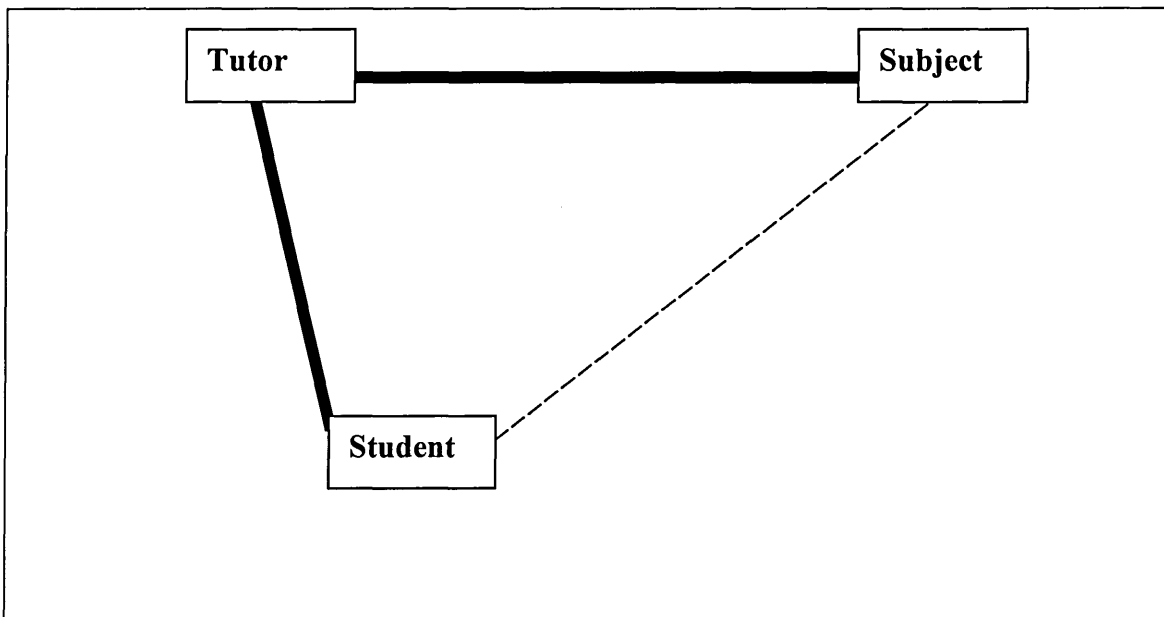
THE TUTOR-STUDENT POWER RELATIONSHIP

There seems to be a link between how students position themselves, their ability to understand the language of assessment and feedback, and their consequent ability to learn in a deep way. Richard's perception of the role of the tutor and his level of

16

engagement with the subject are linked to his ability to understand what is required of him at higher levels of cognitive activity. Peter on the other hand, is reliant on the views of the tutor and this stifles both his ability to be autonomous and critical and his understandings of these terms.

For Richard successful understanding of the language of assessment and the criteria underpinning feedback comments is likely to encourage him to continue what he is doing. But failure to do so for Peter is likely to cause him to rely on the tutor further in an attempt to make sense of his tutors' expectations. Of course, in doing so, the point of autonomous, critical thought will be increasingly lost on Peter; critical analysis and autonomy cannot be grasped through instruction, but through being able to access the particular, tacit discourses necessary for success.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Constructive alignment is important because it encourages the kinds of activities and 'teaching' practices necessary to achieve desirable objectives. But perhaps closer attention needs to be paid to the feedback provided and the relationship between the student and the tutor. Constructive alignment will contribute to achieving understanding, but not without particular attention being paid to the student-tutor relationship and the nature of support essential for students. Students will, of course come to university and position themselves in different ways in relation to their tutors and the subject. But what the tutor does can make a difference. They need to not only be facilitators of learning and available for consultation as mediators of the subject, but must do all they can to ensure that this is how students perceive them in relation to themselves and the subject. The consistent use of appropriate verbs within a constructively aligned system will go some way to helping some students understand what is expected of them, but for many, whose perception of their role within the

17

learning context is akin to Peter's, and who, as a result, may find the language underpinning assessment criteria and feedback difficult to grasp, attention needs to be paid to what the tutor does in distancing themselves from the role of objective expert. What is paramount then is changing (for the better) students' *perceptions* of the relationship between themselves, their tutors and the subject, *and their <u>confidence</u> in their relative equality within this relationship.* We hope to explore and develop these ideas further in our ongoing research.

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18

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APPENDIX V – Getting the Message Across: the problem of communicating assessment feedback

POINTS FOR DEBATE

The editors would particularly welcome, in the Points for Debate Section, readers' comments on or responses to articles which have appeared in earlier issues of the Journal. These may be in the form of a short paper or letter and should be sent to Professor Stephen Rowland, Director of the Higher Education Research and Development Unit, University College London, 1–19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 6BT. Selected contributions will be published at the earliest opportunity.

Getting the Message Across: the problem of communicating assessment feedback

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ABSTRACT *Current literature provides useful insights into the role of assessment feedback in student learning, yet fails to recognise its complexity as a unique form of communication. This article outlines ideas emerging from ongoing research into the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students in higher education. We argue that new models of communication are required to understand students' responses to the language of tutors' comments, and that issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships should be central to any understanding of assessment feedback as a communication process. Implications of adopting an alternative perspective for research and practice are identified and discussed.*

What do students 'do' with feedback they receive from tutors? Should we accept the Times Higher Education Supplement's summary of students' motivations and aspirations (based on Kathryn Ecclestone's research on assessment feedback at Sunderland University)?

'Students are clearly more cynical about "getting through" with a minimum of effort, rather than aiming to become critically informed, indepen-

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dent learners'. Ecclestone also noted that 'some students threw away the feedback if they disliked the grade, while others seemed concerned only with the final result and did not collect their marked work.' (Wojtas, 1998)

We have heard this argument from many academic staff over the last few years: students are indifferent to tutors' feedback comments and care only about the grade. At best, they will read a response to their work only when it provides 'correct answers' for the exam.

However, is this really the case? How far can we generalise Ecclestone's study? Have students become intrinsically more cynical or is this a response to their changing environment? In a different article, Ecclestone has warned that the trend towards more prescriptive formats of outcome-based assessment could endanger more open-ended student learning if taken too far (Ecclestone, 1999). We know that assessment is an important student 'driver'—so have we created the situation that we now complain about?

Returning to the particular issue of assessment feedback, there is certainly research to suggest that even if students do read comments they do little with them (Ding, 1998). Our own investigations suggest that, at the very least, feedback does not realise its full potential to become an integral part of the learning process. Why is this?

Our argument is that we cannot answer this question until we pay more attention to feedback as a *process of communication*. Research and theory in communication suggests a number of important principles which affect the way feedback is received and interpreted. Unfortunately, these variables have not received much attention in the literature on assessment practices. For example, when we communicate with other people we base our behaviour on implicit models of the communication process and on our preconceptions of the other people involved (Hartley, 1999). How do these variables affect tutors in their actions and students in their reactions? Consider the following scenario.

Professor Snape's Perspective: students are 'strategic consumers'

Professor Snape is convinced that, in today's competitive job market, the pressure is on students to obtain a 'good degree'. Meeting assessment demands has become students' *raison d'être*. They act like 'consumers', driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark (Winter, 1993; Ecclestone, 1998) and adopt a 'surface' approach to learning.

As a result, Professor Snape produces feedback that simply outlines his judgements on the piece of work and also tends to highlight what 'went wrong' with it—why it did not achieve a higher grade. The Professor is aware that the comments are fairly short and succinct, but they do echo the sort of comments he remembers on his undergraduate essays.

A Student Reaction: a learner's tale

We find one of the Professor's students, just after receiving one of the essays and record the reaction:

I was pinning my hopes on a 2:1 grade for this one but I've only got a 2:2. I'm really disappointed, but I'm determined to use the feedback to improve my next essay. I'm anticipating more emotional turmoil—to either be hurt by stinging criticism, or encouraged by praise, reassurance and constructive guidance. But, not for the first time during my course, I'm simply left frustrated. 'A satisfactory effort. More critical analysis of key issues would have helped.' This is the sum of the feedback. The Professor obviously thinks that, for me, a 2:2 is satisfactory, but I don't. I'm dismayed that this was no more than he expected from me. More critical analysis? I thought I had analysed the main issues thoroughly and been critical—maybe not. I thought I knew what critical analysis involved—maybe I do not know after all. I wanted the tutor to engage with what I had written, to provide a personal critique of my work, but his comments do not live up to the level of critical analysis that I expect him to employ.

The Need for 'Better' Feedback?

Our Professor has delivered 'accurate' and 'appropriate' feedback as he sees it, but has left the student feeling demoralised and angry. Should we be asking the Professor to provide more extensive comments? Would the process of communication be improved or are there more fundamental problems to address?

We are concerned that much current educational thinking characterises the process of assessment feedback (albeit implicitly) in terms of an over-simplified model of communication. Communication is seen as the linear transfer of information from the sender of a message (the tutor) to a recipient (the student) via a medium (usually written comments). This conception of the communication process reflects early models and theories of information originating in the 1940s (for example, see Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Although versions of this model are still widely propagated in 'how to do it' books on communication (such as Osborn & Motley, 1999), they are heavily criticised in the current academic literature on human communication (for example, see Craig, 1999). These models suggest that there is nothing 'wrong' with the communication process itself—what hinders the transfer of information are external interferences.

In the educational literature, this view is often reflected through an 'outside-in' focus on factors that hinder the assessment feedback process, as in the view which suggests that consumerism mediates students' receptiveness to feedback. Other examples concentrate on the structure of the university or assessment system. Issues such as the timeliness of feedback, heavy tutor and student workloads and modularisation are implicated in disrupting the flow of information between tutor and student (Ding, 1998; Miller *et al.*, 1998).

Another 'outside-in' example would be the advice which tutors might use to evaluate their feedback (especially if Subject Review looms). Consider the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) guidelines on assessment and feedback, as outlined in their code of practice for assessing students (QAA, 2000). This advises HE institutions to consider:

- the timeliness of feedback;
- specifying the nature and extent of feedback;
- relating feedback to published assessment criteria;
- how the language of assessment and study should normally be the same.

These concerns, while obviously important and sensible, do reflect a preoccupation with structural problems, and also suggest that the feedback process is relatively straightforward once the procedural issues are sorted out. We do not want to argue that these guidelines are 'wrong', but that we also need to understand assessment feedback and its effectiveness from a different perspective.

The student's view we offered earlier—which reflects both informal conversations with students and our current research—suggests the salient factors in the feedback process are related to issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse. The student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some 'return' on that investment. Tutors assume a perceived position of authority within a power relationship based on their experience and the institutional context. 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. This suggests that the actors in our educational drama are likely to conceptualise feedback in qualitatively different ways—simply tidying up the language will have little impact.

So we suggest that the process of feedback as communication is inherently problematic. The 'internal' dynamics of feedback as communication must be foregrounded in any attempt to further our understanding of assessment feedback. Internal features of feedback should be considered prior to those identified as external and these external factors cannot be considered prior to internal features. For example, it is impossible to fully understand how consumerism (and students' motivations) or modularisation mediate the utility of assessment feedback without first understanding how particular social relationships shape the feedback process. In other words, it is impossible to investigate how an outside influence impacts upon a process if the internal dynamics of that process are not understood—that is, if the true nature of the process remains hidden (or simply assumed).

Uncovering the True Nature of the Process

There are other recent examples of educational researchers investigating fundamental processes which may have been taken for granted for too long. One example is the 'academic literacies' or 'academic practices' approach to writing and learning (as in Baynham, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000). Here, we see writing and learning explored at the level of epistemology and identities. Institutions and disciplines are analysed as sites of and constituted in, discourse and power, with an emphasis on how disciplinary knowledge is constituted, reproduced, manipulated, resisted, transformed and learned. Learning contexts are seen as complex—particularly against a background of new and emerging discipline areas and student switching between subjects (Lea & Street, 2000).

The focus of this approach also helps to suggest why assessment feedback as communication is particularly complex. Giving and receiving feedback occurs within these complex contexts, and so is mediated by power relationships and the nature of the predominant discourse within each setting.

While feedback shares a number of common features with other forms of communication, and while all conversation is linked to issues of power and discourse, the feedback process is particularly problematic because of the particular nature of the power relationship. The tutor occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student. This is therefore bound up with issues of power and, as Layder (1997) would suggest, inextricably with emotion. For example, the tutor's expert position confers their 'judgements' with an elevated status, which enhances the power of these judgements to invoke feelings such as pride and shame within students.

Our everyday communication usually 'works' because it is based on shared understandings. Both parties have access to appropriate discourses which enable them to construct and reconstruct meaning from implicit messages. However, as Hounsell (1997) and McCune (1999) have suggested, HE students may struggle to access the particular discourses underpinning tutors' comments. Moreover, if competing discourses are associated with different disciplines and tutors, then students face increasing problems as they move between these disciplines (especially in the light of modularisation and new, emerging discipline areas).

Implications for Research and Practice?

We do not want researchers to ignore factors such as consumerism or structural problems re the feedback process. However, we do suggest a different starting point, from issues of power, identity, emotion, discourse and subjectivity. By looking at feedback as an essentially *problematic* form of communication involving particular social relationships, we may begin to understand how external conditions interplay, mediate (and are mediated by) patterns of power, authority, emotion and identity, and how students' abilities to access appropriate discourses are shaped.

The importance of using an 'inside-out', rather than 'outside-in' approach assumes greater importance when we consider the implications for practice. Instead of asking if the student will take notice of feedback or whether it relates explicitly enough to assessment criteria, or whether the quantity is sufficient, we should be asking how the tutor comes to construct the feedback, how the student understands the feedback (how they make sense of it), and how they make sense of assessment and the learning context in general.

This suggests that tutors must question their own assumptions about knowledge, concepts, rules and conventions. As Ronald Barnett (1990) suggests, there are clearly differences in tacit understandings between and also within particular disciplines. This suggests the need for more open discussion, collaboration, and negotiation between tutors (and between disciplines), to reflect on, question, make explicit and share competing understandings.

Nor can tutors assume that students will understand a list of assessment criteria. Feedback may need to be more dialogical and ongoing. Discussion, clarification and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them, and develop their understandings of academic terms and appropriate practices before or as they *begin* to write. Perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to 'feeding forward' into a piece of work, rather than simply 'feeding back'.

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