

Feedback or Feed-forward? A Case Study in One Higher Education Classroom

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ABSTRACT Constructive feedback can allow students to recognise areas of deficiency and assist them in closing the gap between actual and desired achievement. However, not all lecturer feedback stimulates learning. Rather, it would seem that students often ignore feedback or do not know how to use the feedback constructively. Given the above background, an important question arises: How do students in a Life Skills classroom experience feedback? In attempting to answer this question, we explore how feedback, a key issue in assessment, can be used to inspire students to learn. A basic interpretative qualitative approach employing focus groups and semi-structured interviews created the opportunity to explore how final-year students in a Life Skills classroom experience four feedback issues. The findings suggest that students need to learn how to convert feedback into enhanced knowledge in order to understand precisely what aspects they need to improve.

1. INTRODUCTION

Examinations have a long history in education (Badger 2010: 77; Gipps 1999: 356). Earl (2003: 5) pointed out that written and oral assessment have existed for centuries – from the early Chinese examinations, through public presentations by students of Aristotle, to the universal examinations of the past century. Traditionally, the idea of assessment was synonymous with measuring learner success rather than promoting success. It would, however, seem that in the past few years, the perception of assessment has been subjected to a paradigm shift in terms of its nature and purpose. Scholars of this persuasion highlighted the necessity of moving away from a culture of testing to one in which greater emphasis is placed on the quality of student learning (Duhs 2009: 1; Marriot 2009: 252; Harris 2007: 252). Braskamp (2005: 75) holds that assessment today is more about meeting students' needs when he explains that the word *assessment* is derived from an idea important to educators: one of sitting down beside or together, these in turn derived from the Latin words *ad* and *sedere*, the latter resonating with verbs such as *to engage, to involve, to interact, to share or to trust*.

The above definition leads one to interpret the idea of *sitting beside* as being communication process between the student, the lecturer,

the curriculum designer and the administrator. This idea points to the fact that lecturers should move beyond assessment for the sole purpose of grading, to a role of trusted lecturers guiding students towards self-regulated learning. It seems fundamental that lecturers should “sit beside” the said students when creating opportunities to produce evidence of their competence, and provide them with feedback, thereby helping them to evaluate their progress and become better learners. Here, assessment is coupled with forward-looking feedback aimed at the intended outcome(s). McGonigal (2006: 1-4) explains that the said approach – forward looking feedback - replaces backward-looking feedback, which focuses mainly on what happened at the point of assessment.

Comparison of the following two questions will help us to understand the issue at stake: “Did the student learn the work?” and “How can I prepare students for practice where they can demonstrate their learning?” The first question can be interpreted as having a backward-looking focus, whereas the second question has a forward-looking focus. Fink (2003: 80-83) defines this approach as “forward-looking assessment”, one in which learning goals, teaching and learning activities, feedback and assessment are categorised to encourage meaningful learning. McGonigal (2006: 1) holds that, in this model,

the focus of feedback is on assisting students to use learning materials in meaningful ways. In this particular dialogue, the lecturer seeks to convert feedback into feed-forward by (inter)connecting assessment tasks to feedback comments in order to provide information to students that will hopefully help them to amend or enhance future learning (Irons 2004: 7).

The underlying premise in most of the research conducted in the area of formative feedback is that students should see the connection between the achieved and the desired performance. Scholars argue that feedback allows students to recognise areas of deficiency in their knowledge and helps them to plan for future learning (Perera et al. 2008: 395; Crisp 2007: 572; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 200; Rodgers 2006: 219). Feedback can be seen as an active force that may stimulate interaction by means of input from different sources with the intention of showing students how they are progressing or failing to do so, whether they are improving or not and what other people think of their efforts (Bloxham and Boyd 2008: 106; Garrison and Ehringhaus 2007: 1; Rodgers 2006: 221). No wonder that scholars often refer to feedback as the oil that makes the assessment engine run, or as Pickford and Brown (2006: 13) put it, feedback “lubricates the cogs of understanding”.

Feedback that helps students to tackle classroom activities may be regarded as constructive in that it may positively affect their motivation and self-esteem. Constructive feedback can help students to understand the learning goals they are pursuing, identify the criteria, understand how they are learning, reflect on their learning strengths and weaknesses and ultimately develop appropriate approaches to learning (Cauley and McMillan 2010: 3; Broadfoot 2007: 123; Heritage 2007: 142). In addition, constructive feedback has the potential to help students both to think about their learning and to progress in relation to their own prior performance rather than in comparison with others, and to develop the skills of peer and self-assessment as an important means of engaging in self-reflection (Black and Wiliam 2006: 12; James and Pedder 2006: 28).

If feedback is regarded as one of the major determinants of how students approach their learning, why is it not a given that students will make sense of feedback? Boud (2000: 154) emphasises that although feedback is often re-

garded as the ‘bread and butter’ of education, the possibility exists that it could become so commonplace as simply to be ignored. Students often ignore lecturer feedback, do not know how to use the feedback constructively, miss valuable cues or are simply only interested in the mark (Broadfoot 2007: 124; Crisp 2007: 573; Pickford and Brown 2006: 15; Freeman and Lewis 1998: 48). Meyer (2009: 215) adds that learners in South African schools often experience summative assessment as the dominant mode of assessment and therefore students at university are often unable to recognise the value of formative feedback and “may even be traumatized by the presence of so much ink on the page”.

Not surprisingly, the effect of feedback is often different from what the lecturer originally intended. This in turn begs the question: How do students experience feedback? It thus seems important to investigate students’ perspectives of feedback and to explore how assessment practices can use feedback to foster worthwhile learning. In this paper, perspectives and practices of feedback in a Life Skills classroom are explored in order to reframe the purpose of lecturer feedback in promoting the quality of students’ learning.

Conceptualisation

The above discussion makes it patently obvious that assessment should no longer be viewed as something separate from teaching where the focus is primarily on grades. It should rather be seen as an integral part of teaching and learning (Macmillan 2007: 7; Geyser 2004: 90; Black and Wiliam 1998: 1-54) where the focus should be on assessment to learn (Carless 2005: 42). This again poses the question whether lecturer feedback always actually fulfils this role. In their familiar work, Black and Wiliam (1998) reviewed this question in particular. They maintained that a valuable opportunity to enhance learning is lost when the focus is merely on a grade or numerical score, as this alone does not provide any constructive feedback to students on how to improve learning (Black et al. 2004: 13).

A practical issue facing teacher-education lecturers today is how to use feedback with a forward-looking purpose. Although there is a growing body of research on the advantages of

feedback, lecturers cannot assume that their feedback, irrespective of the format, will automatically motivate students to truly engage with learning. The challenge remains on how feedback should be implemented as an educational tool that is able to convert students from passive receivers of knowledge into active participants who take responsibility for their own learning.

Race's Spreading Ripples Model of Learning

A number of theories have been advanced to explain how feedback affects students' lives. Boud and Falchikov (2007: 3-12), in explaining the major role of feedback in students' learning, emphasise the risks and consequences involved in assessment. By exploring Race's spreading ripples model of learning, this paper wishes to investigate how assessment, learning and feedback may co-exist in one higher education classroom by specifically investigating the feedback ripple (Race 2001: 1-29).

Race (2001: 11) reasons that a human brain does not work in a linear or pre-programmed way all the time, but rather operates at various overlapping levels, when, for example, making sense of ideas. He offers a theory underpinned by the premise that the learning consists of the continuous effect of four elements acting like the ripples on a pond, namely wanting/needing, doing, feedback and digesting. Interrogating Race's learning theory may lead to suggestions on how possible interactions between learning, feedback, assessment and performance may be formed.

Wanting/needing to learn is placed in the centre of this model because it is a powerful source that, in the first place, makes a student want to learn something. The power of motivation becomes evident when it influences the self-esteem, stimulates the "doing" ripple and engages students in learning. Race's model is based on the premise that the most effective form of learning is experiential learning – or learning by "doing" as he describes it (Race 2005:26). He also advocates the importance of feedback in developing a sense of ownership – a process he describes as digesting or "getting your head around it" (Race 2005:26). Race proposes that learning can be initiated by the bounced-back ripples through wanting/needing, doing, feedback and digesting (Race 2005: 26). But what are

the students' perspectives regarding the feedback ripple in one particular Life Skills classroom?

Context of the Study

The research reported on in this article was limited to a specific group of students, namely fourth-year Foundation Phase students taking the Life Skills Module at the University of the Free State. The participants were female students, because Foundation Phase teachers are traditionally women and this fact is reflected by the students in this classroom. Lecturers were also invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews because they could add new perspectives to the role of feedback in Life Skills assessment.

The student participants, 78 registered students between 23 and 26 years of age, of whom 69 were Afrikaans-speaking and 9 English-speaking – were all registered for the DLS 112 (Life Skills) Module. Most of these students continued with the DLS 122 Module in the second semester. Life Skills is currently one of four subjects (the others being Numeracy, Home Language and First Additional Language) taught in the Foundation Phase in primary schools. The DLS modules are therefore compulsory in the Foundation Phase curriculum.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case-study design employing semi-structured interviews and focus groups created the opportunity to explore how final-year students in this particular higher education classroom dealt with feedback issues. The rationale for employing specifically the case-study research design was that the role of feedback in assessment could be investigated within its real-life context and that the "what" and the "how" questions regarding feedback in the Life Skills classroom could be answered. Kvale (1996: 95) considers the "what" and the "how" questions to be key aspects in an investigation. It is believed that the "what" question will provide knowledge of the subject matter whereas the "how" question will be answered by analysing and making sense of the data. The purpose of this study was not to generalise but rather to gain insight into and an understanding of how

feedback, a key aspect of assessment, is understood in the Life Skills Module.

The study comprised both non-empirical and empirical data with the aim of investigating the research questions. The non-empirical research consisted of an extensive literature review on how feedback can contribute to students' learning experience, while the empirical research followed a qualitative approach to investigate the role of feedback during assessment in one particular higher education classroom. Data were collected by means of a literature review, focus-group discussions, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Not only students but also lecturers were invited to the semi-structured interviews. Lecturers were invited because some had experience of Life Skills teaching while others added new perspectives to the role of feedback in the Life Skills classroom by reflecting on their specific field of expertise. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the interviews and these were chosen in accordance with the following guidelines laid down by Flick (2009: 123):

- ♦ Practical availability during the June/July holidays in 2010.
- ♦ Participants who had not participated in the focus-group discussions.
- ♦ Knowledge of and experience in assessment in general, but also specifically in Life Skills, for example lecturers interested in assessment issues and who were then involved in Life Skills (Orientation) education .

Validating the Research

Qualitative researchers are often criticised for their lack of rigour and are even regarded as unworthy of entering into "the magic circle of evidence" (Robson 1993: 402). Several researchers have nevertheless in some measure demonstrated how qualitative researchers can persuade the reader to accept the findings of a study. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 294-301), for example, propose a scientific construct parallel with trustworthiness by describing four criteria that lie at the heart of any qualitative research project. This model was applied in the following way:

- ♦ **Credibility** in this study was enhanced by means of triangulation and member checks. All the participants were briefed about the focus of the study and they expressed their willingness to participate in the research.

All the participants gave their consent to the recording of the interviews. Data were provided to participants both to check and verify interview data. As a verifying measure, all notes were fleshed out by the researcher immediately after each interview had been conducted.

- ♦ **Transferability** was enhanced by means of a dense description of the data and further by maximising the range of information that could be obtained from and about the assessment context by purposefully selecting participants.
- ♦ **Dependability** was promoted by means of an audit trail of processes, for example the data-gathering process, which was done by means of multiple sources of data methods and data collection.
- ♦ **Conformability** was similarly enhanced by means of a degree of neutrality in that the findings were shaped by the participants' perspectives, not through research bias. Objectivity was enhanced by recording interviews and transcribing them verbatim so as to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' views.

The researchers aimed to construct the study soundly, to use the correct measures to conduct the research, and to establish a chain of evidence forward and backward (Soy 2006: 4).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in the study were based on guidelines suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2008: 63-65) and Henning et al. (2004: 73). Care was taken to respect ethical issues like informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the right to privacy, and conducting interviews with the participants in a relationship of trust and transparency. Ethical approval was also officially obtained from the relevant department.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brown (2004: 84) describes feedback as the "heart" of assessment. In reality, however, lecturers and students often have different understandings of feedback. While the value of feedback is often overshadowed by marks, lecturers sometimes interpret feedback as wasted time

(Crisp 2007: 572). One student participant clearly explained that constructive feedback is often beside the point: “Definitely, definitely, I think it is the first thing, I think, that what every student does is to look at their file – they look for marks.”

Against the above backdrop, it thus seems necessary to explore the reasons behind students’ views. Whilst much has been written about student assessment, feedback and learning, much less attention has been focused on the perspectives of students – the people who are supposed to be assessed (Brown et al. 2009: 4). Solis (2003: 10, 11) agrees that student perspectives are often overlooked and that researchers lack students’ input when investigating aspects of assessment. This means that valuable opportunities to enhance student learning may be lost if lecturers ignore students’ views and perspectives. Bearing this idea in mind, we broke down the data originating from the qualitative research into segments so as both to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that informed the participants’ views of feedback and to make sense of the information. The data analysis yielded four themes with associated categories. The emerging themes focused on the feedback method, the feedback language, timely feedback and the feedback structure.

3.1 Feedback Method

This theme comprises three categories: written, oral and non-verbal feedback. Students, in order to progress and succeed, need constant and supportive feedback on their learning. When written, oral and non-verbal feedback is implemented, different learning styles are accommodated. The nature of the feedback is however not as important as the fact that the students understand and use the feedback and moreover believe that the feedback will tell them how to improve.

Non-verbal Feedback

Non-verbal feedback is important in establishing and maintaining a rapport with a student. Latham (2007: 1-3) points out that every remark, gesture, facial expression, every act and even every omission that occurs in and beyond the learning space is a form of feedback. A lecturer’s lack of awareness of non-verbal communication

can have a powerful effect on the way students interpret the feedback. Following from these arguments, it does seem that the non-verbal communication of a lecturer can be an important factor that may either inhibit or motivate students to pay attention to the feedback. Stiggins and Chappuis (2005: 13) claim that the most important task of a lecturer is to encourage growth and to take students to the edge of their capabilities. Student participants were likewise in agreement:

It would very much depend on the lecturer. ... The lecturers. That would depend on how enthusiastic they are ...

It is the lecturer who defines the tasks and provides the feedback. It seems that their non-verbal communication can lead to increased confidence, which can activate the belief that learning is possible.

Written Feedback

The findings suggested that written feedback enabled students to read both the diagnosis of their errors and the suggestions on how to improve. Students believed written feedback to be meaningful because they could always go back to reread the feedback and reflect on it again. Some of the participants also explained that they were keen to receive written feedback because it was personal:

For me, written is more personal. If it is going to be done orally, it will be sort of for the whole class ... So, I like to have it ... on my script ... for then I know it was [written] for me personally. So, I like the written [feedback].

Although written feedback is personal, some students may feel bombarded by too much written information and they will probably ignore the feedback. Some of the participants indicated that they did not have time to read feedback on Blackboard and thus preferred to listen to the oral feedback in the class.

Oral Feedback

When factors like time constraints and class numbers make it difficult for lecturers to provide comprehensive and useful written feedback all the time, then oral feedback given to a class will allow them to elaborate further in the form of detailed comments. Oral feedback given in the classroom also motivates students to engage in

the learning process when suggestions and explanations are discussed. One student participant explained why she preferred oral feedback:

Oral feedback. Because when you get oral feedback, then you can also still ask questions: "But mam, why do you think ... what was wrong with the paper or why do you think this and this?"

This comment particularly highlights the important value of oral feedback in the classroom as a communicative learning tool intended to communicate problems and suggest ways to correct mistakes. Few would argue about the importance of offering students opportunity for seeking clarification regarding comments and where they are repeatedly allowed to ask questions when something is not clear to them. With oral feedback, however, there is always the danger that students may not listen or be distracted or forget what was said. One lecturer participant argued that it may then be valuable for students to receive both written and oral feedback:

Uhm ... Ja ... a combination of both, but then time should also be provided for individual feedback because individual feedback – then you come [to know what's] behind the thoughts of a learner. The meta-cognitive skills of a learner ... and that to me is very important. Then you can determine where the learner went wrong, because often they ... you find they will say, "I've discussed, now I have studied." But how did they really study? How did they regulate their learning? In terms of what went wrong, you give the feedback, but can they really apply that feedback to their own situation?

The above lecturer participant touched on the importance of going beyond the thoughts of students in order to provide key points necessary for correction and improvement. The participant added that when the reason behind the mistakes was identified, meta-cognitive skills might be stimulated by enabling the student to learn about learning. The goal of feed-forward feedback is to provide opportunities for students to reflect:

And I would say, it must, if possible, it must be in writing so that the students can go back ... and read and reflect on the feedback and see how that can help them to improve their learning.

The above comment explains that through this act students can monitor their learning process and it will enable them to become reflec-

tive, self-directed and self-regulated learners. It may seem like a simple task to provide non-verbal, written or oral feedback on students' efforts. In reality, it is a much more challenging task to provide written or oral feedback in a forward-looking way that prompts thought and reasoning while also promoting student engagement.

If students do not implement the suggested improvements so as ultimately to promote learning, there will be little value in providing feedback. Here, the feedback language can give strong messages and can play a critical role in student learning.

3.2 Feedback Language

This theme relates to the tone in which feedback is given to students. It entails two aspects: encouragement and improvement. Harris (2007: 256) holds that because motivation and self-efficacy are closely integrated, insensitive judgemental feedback can negatively influence students' work attitude. Assessment is generally associated with ranking, and most students may experience receiving a grade to be either a reward or a punishment for their performance (McGonigal 2006: 1). Research has shown that feedback can have either positive or negative effects on students' motivation and self-esteem (Brookhart 2008: 21,24; Brown 2004: 84). If students construct their own motivation based on the feedback, the problem then is how to make assessment a positive learning experience that will also simultaneously promote student engagement.

3.2.1 Encouragement

In seeking to resolve this issue, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004: 13) remind us that motivational beliefs are not immutable. In part, they depend on how lecturers provide feedback, and here the feedback language can play an important role. Fink (2007: 15) describes effective feedback as FIDeLity feedback (frequent, immediate, discriminating and delivered lovingly). In other words, feedback should be user friendly, descriptive and non-judgemental in order to guide students in making sense of their learning and to provide them with an opportunity of expressing their thoughts about the learning process.

Wiggins (2004: 2) adds that the purpose of feedback should focus on learning and not on the person. In this respect, the data (as will be discussed hereafter) suggested that words should be carefully selected to avoid using language that could cause breakdowns in the communication process between the lecturer and the student. The idea is to get the students to revisit their work after receiving feedback. One can argue that using language in a feed-forward way can make a significant difference to students' ultimate achievement. There are two key aspects involved: first, a positive climate may encourage student engagement more than would a judgemental tone, and second, student engagement may generate opportunities for promoting student learning.

Some student participants emphasised that they valued feedback that gave them positive encouragement. This idea is reflected in the following remarks:

And this means even more to me ... And that meant a lot to me because I studied hard and even now that I did not get a distinction, I still tried and it was still appreciated.

Then I feel rather good. Then I at least think someone is noticing your hard work.

Based on the sentiments here expressed by the student, recognition of strengths may influence a student's motivational beliefs and self-confidence because "although I did not get a distinction, I still tried". Student participants emphasised their appreciation for the acknowledgement of areas of strengths by the assessor, for example:

... and what was nice there ... Dr actually said the names of a few of the kids who gave good answers and I felt that was ... that was cute, because that kid felt ... "Wow ... Wow. She actually looked at my answer and I gave a good answer there". So I think that gives ... that motivates a person even if you generally did not do all that well in that test. But in that specific question the lecturer liked my [answer]. I answered that one correctly and it was ... was good. Even if I do not generally score 80%, but [with] a 60% the kid still felt good about the answer that he gave specifically for that question.

The above participant seemed to agree that the tone of feedback needed to fit each student's achievement, individual nature and personality so as to strengthen learning. For feedback to be

effective in guiding learning, the language should be in a tone that students will read, understand and think about. Feedback that is either dismissed or rejected will clearly not engage students in their learning and, thus no feed-forward will result.

3.2.2 Improvement

The second category centres on improvement, growth, development and understanding. The data suggest that the way feedback is communicated can motivate students to connect with the feedback. The idea that understanding must be facilitated is reflected in the following comment of a student participant:

And it must be... uhm communicated in such a way that it gives meaning to the learners so that they know exactly how can I use this to my benefit to help me to improve and to improve my learning to put it that way.

The above comment suggests that feedback must "give meaning to the learners". The argument being that feedback should offer students the opportunity of understanding the difference between their intentions and what was expected of them. The intention is that students should be guided in a feed-forward manner in which they can use feedback to promote learning and assist improvement.

Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2004: 7) explain that external feedback is able to generate internal feedback. Students' re-interpretation of the knowledge "so that they know how ... [to] use this to [their] ... benefit" is a skill that can be developed by means of the way in which students receive their feedback. The challenge of providing feedback lies not only in the information; it also lies in motivating students to learn. It is the responsibility of the lecturer not to demoralise students with evaluative feedback, but to use feedback to form a link between assessment and the learning process.

3.3 Timely Feedback

This theme was about the timing of feedback to students subsequent to the assessment. Prompt feedback seems to be important in that feedback is supposed to guide students while they are still mindful of the topic. The longer the delay, the less likely it is that the student will find it either useful or be able to apply the sug-

gestions (Gibbs and Simpson 2005: 16; Freeman and Lewis 1998: 49).

3.3.1 Frequent Feedback

It thus stands to reason that frequent and timely feedback increases motivation and tends to motivate students to engage in learning. Student participants articulated this idea in the following ways:

Now you have to balance the time of feedback. Timing of feedback – which is so crucial.

So, I think the most important thing for me is that it must be [given] as quickly as possible because there is a process taking place now. So, as quickly as possible ...

My number one [requirement] would be that it must really be quick. It must really be efficient as in operational conditioning. Let's say within a week.

These comments express the expectation that feedback should be provided soon after the work has been submitted. In reality, however, this becomes difficult because of increasing student numbers and heavy workloads. It is therefore imperative that lecturers explore other options of immediate feedback.

3.3.2 Self-assessment

Black and Wiliam (2006: 15) highlight the potential value of self-assessment to promote student learning. They argue that self-assessment and peer assessment are able to provide immediate feedback, which, in turn, can impact on self-efficacy and increased motivation. The said forms of assessment can also be useful skills that will be required of students later in their professional lives. One could make a case for using self- and peer assessment in a feed-forward way when it forms part of the doing ripple, in the sense that the more students learn about how assessment really works, the better they will be able to demonstrate learning (back) to the lecturer. Race (2005: 89, 94) explains that students need to know “where the goal posts are”.

A significantly insightful finding in this study was that students were not prepared to implement self-assessment. The following comments explain why not:

No, the thing is that your friends do not have the knowledge to assess you.

It does not matter what your friend think[s] It is about what the lecturer thinks.

These comments highlighted that students' need to master certain skills to fully understand the value of self- and peer assessment. Cauley and McMillan (2010: 4-5) warn that self-assessment implies not only checking answers, but that is a process in which students develop a sense of autonomy to improve understanding. Students must therefore be trained to do self-evaluation as part of the process of formative assessment (Rushton 2005: 511). Although assessment can be considered to be the lecturer's responsibility, students can nevertheless learn how to monitor their own learning through self- and peer assessment, provided that is, they are given proper instruction. Successful students thus again need to understand the appropriate criteria and standards for evaluating and assessing their own work.

3.3.3 Technology

Feedback utilising technology was integrated through Blackboard¹ participation and mobile learning². If technology aims to enable students to reflect on their work, allow them to share thinking and provide meaningful feedback, then this is an avenue that is surely worth considering (McGuire 2005: 265). This idea was supported by the students when one noted: “...because we like to do that then we will go on MXit and do a group discussion ... and it's everyone's viewpoint and so ... you also give different answers and different viewpoints.”

Assessment in the first semester of the module programme was integrated by means of online quizzes on blackboard, while in the second semester this was done by means of mobile learning. Literature suggests that multiple-choice questions are probably the best form of question to use in online testing in that these provide immediate feedback to students (Bloxham and Boyd 2008: 211; Frey and Schmidt 2007: 417). Some students complained about the cost, the small screen and about the technological problems related to incompatible phones. Others pointed out some advantages, for example having the flexibility to have access at any time and anywhere, and being able to both work independently and receive immediate feedback.

It can be argued that multiple-choice questions do not always enhance conceptual under-

standing, but the advantage of the mobile-learning activities was that it forced students to engage in the learning process, before, during or sometimes at the end of a lecture, as this student indicated: "This forced me to spend time going through my work before class." The aim was to involve students deeply in the evaluation of their work in order to incorporate immediate feedback with mastery of knowledge and understanding. The students had multiple opportunities to complete the tests and, surprisingly, they were motivated to repeat their efforts until they obtained 100%, even if the activity was not part of the continuous assessment mark. The aim was first to provide prompt feedback by integrating technology into the module, then to assist students to track their own progress towards attainment of standards, and finally, to motivate them by building confidence in themselves as learners.

3.4 Feedback Structure

This theme encompassed rubrics, alignment and self-regulation. Harris (2007: 257) holds that students need to know precisely what and how they will be assessed in order to be successful. Biggs (1999) – the originator of constructive alignment – echoes this sentiment in maintaining that assessment procedures and teaching methods should be aligned with a view to relating the curriculum objectives to higher-order thinking (Harris 2007: 257).

3.4.1 Analytical Rubric

Student participants in our study agreed that feedback had to be given in accordance with the stipulated assessment criteria:

... if they give feedback it must be according to the rubric.

An analytical rubric is able to assist students into identifying achievement expectations. This tool will ensure that they understand the specific requirements of a certain task. One can contend that a rubric can be used in a feed-forward way by highlighting to students what is important when they approach assignments. Participants had the following to say in this regard:

Firstly, what I consider to be important is ... uhm ... sort of like a memorandum. One must basically go through the question with the exact answer ... and also a reason.

Because one often writes an answer and then it is incorrect, but one does not know why it's wrong. Or one gives the right answer, but he [lecturer] continues with the following correct question. One doesn't know why they say the answer is incorrect. So, I would say, a person should basically provide the memorandum, but then that person should basically provide the reason why this is the case.

The above comments of student participants indicate that students want an outline of how questions should be answered. For the purposes of this study, memoranda were made available to students via Blackboard. Students here emphasised the importance of verbal feedback where the reasons behind answers could be thoroughly discussed. This process involved students in the learning process and it would seem that students considered it important to know exactly where they were heading.

3.4.2 Clear and Specific

It thus stands to reason that students need to understand the link between the different elements of the assessment design, for example the task, the learning outcomes, the assessment criteria and the lecturer's feedback. This means that feedback needs to be clear, specific and attainable. The following comments of student participants reinforce the idea that general feedback will not be useful and that feedback should specifically suggest ways to improve and develop:

If you don't know what you did wrong, what you can work at and where can you improve, and so on?

Because if you have made a mistake you can of course correct it.

So, that motivates one to perform better.

Yes, one learns from one's mistakes.

You learn and see, I did it in this way, but I should have done it in that way.

These comments emphasise that the focus of feedback should not fall on being right or being wrong, but rather on how the effort can be improved. Feedback that focuses on what needs to be done can encourage students to believe that they can indeed improve. General feedback given in the form of rewards or grades enhances ego involvement rather than task involvement. As explained earlier it is important to focus students' attention on ability rather than on the

importance of effort so as to avoid damaging self-esteem, which, in turn, results in learned helplessness. One lecturer participant argues that the goal of feedback is thus to enable students to regulate their own learning.

Again, if you look at the whole idea of ... uhm ... feedback and also self-regulation [or] self-regulated learning there is a very big correlation between the two, because self-regulation is seen as the pivot and all these other things revolve around that. So, if they have a skill of monitoring things themselves, for instance, then it should definitely work.

Alignment between assessment and learning outcomes is important for self-regulated learning. Race and Brown (2005: 89) emphasise that knowledge of assessment criteria would enable students to perform according to the said criteria. This means that assessment procedures should be designed intelligently and with a specific purpose in mind so as to allow the lecturer to give feedback that will empower students both to manage and improve their learning. It is therefore no wonder that Race (2001: 8) regards feedback as an important element in the learning model in that the effects of the *feedback* ripple can influence the *wanting/needing* which in turn can stimulate the *doing* ripple.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings in this study suggest that it is not feedback in itself that will improve learning, but rather the way students understand what to do with such feedback. It might motivate them to be more actively engaged in their own learning processes. It is thus not a given that students will make sense of feedback. Lecturers should not assume that their feedback will automatically motivate students to be engaged in their own learning. It is important constantly to ask oneself: How is one to use feedback in the Life Skills classroom so as to stimulate the learning ripple and inspire students to learn?

First, a case could be made for rather focusing on feeding *forward* than only feeding *backward*. Feed-forward can be explained as providing the student with the ability to close the gap between the areas of deficiency and how to remedy these. By doing this, students monitor their learning processes, which will enable them to become reflective, self-directed and self-regulated students. In other words, it is important

that students distinguish between feedback and feed-forward. They should not merely focus on what has already been done. This action can consciously focus them to build upon their strengths as the work progresses.

Second, it may be useful for lecturers to know how students feel about and experience feedback because lecturers and students can indeed have distinctly different understandings of the role of feedback in learning. If lecturers perhaps know how students experience feedback, they may potentially be in a better position to apply feedback in a forward-looking way.

Third, using both oral and written feedback can accommodate learners' different learning styles. The nature of the feedback is however not as important as the fact that the students understand and use the feedback and that they moreover believe that the feedback will tell them how to improve.

Fourth, it is evident that students will tend to be more inspired to learn if they believe that the feedback will help to improve their performance. It is thus important to use prompt feedback in a non-judgemental way. In the final analysis, feedback will only be effective if students pay attention to it, believe it and use it.

Fifth, it is vitally important to consider the different elements during the assessment process so as to promote student motivation, engagement and self-regulation. Central to this idea is Race's spreading ripples model of learning, which suggests that learning can be initiated by the bounced-back ripples through wanting/needing, doing, feedback and digesting. Feed-forward assessment implies that students recognise the goal of the feedback and interpret and apply the suggestions in order to close the gap between the current level of performance and the expected learning objective.

These five ideas frame the conclusion that feedback forms a vital part of the learning experience and they imply that the way students use the feedback in the Life Skills classroom is bound to potentially make a difference to how they learn.

NOTES

1. Blackboard refers to the learning management system of the University of the Free State, which supports learning by extending the face-to-face learning environment to online learning spaces.
2. Mobile learning refers to any kind of learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the

learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies, for example, cell phones.

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