An analysis of the social construction of feedback by staff and students in a post 1992 university

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis is a small scale qualitative study of the ways in which 1st and 3rd year undergraduates studying in a post 1992 British university and a group of academic staff from the same university construct the idea of good feedback on written work. The research was carried out using semi-structured interviews with individual participants which were audio recorded, transcribed and then analysed using NVivo 9. An extensive literature review was conducted which located the origins of feedback in behavioural psychology and systems engineering as well as in the field of cybernetics and second order cybernetics with its links to constructivist theories of learning. The work of Foucault is drawn on to provide an analytical framework which focuses on the themes of discourse, power, identity and emotion and these themes are tracked through the comments of the staff and student participants. What emerges from the data analysis is that whilst both staff and students have well established discourses relating to feedback there is significant divergence in relation to the themes of power and identity, which the staff attach considerable significance to and identity and emotions which the students see as important. The contrasting emphasis which the thematic analysis highlights are discussed in detail firstly in relation to the student perspectives and then that of the staff before a synthesis of both perspectives is provided. It is proposed that the solution to the problems inherent in such divergent views on feedback as those identified amongst the student and staff participants, lies in a greater use of dialogic forms of feedback in which knowledge and learning in relation to feedback is co-constructed by staff and students

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APPENDIX 1

Acknowledgements

Reflective commentary:

Although completing my thesis is the conclusion of six years work as an EdD student it also represents the culmination of a much longer learning process for me. In September 1980, having completed my apprenticeship as a bricklayer, I decided to return to full time education and take the 'O' levels I had not taken at school. I did not know then where this path would lead me, other than, I hoped, away from the construction industry, and I would never have guessed it would bring me to the threshold of becoming a Doctor in Education.

The first paper I submitted for the EdD was for the module Foundations of Professionalism in Education. Its title was "To what extent can the introduction of national teaching standards be seen as an attempt to impose professionalism from above on teaching staff in Further education colleges in England?" The background for this overlong title came from the sense of indignation I had felt having attended the launch of the Higher Education Academy's professional standards for teaching staff in higher education. The new HEA standards consisted of a few relatively open, relatively innocuous aspirational statements about what teachers working in higher education should try to do to improve their teaching skills. In comparison, the standards develop for FE teachers were highly prescriptive and amounted to something like 300 individual standards which all FE teachers were expected to meet. I was anxious to share my sense of injustice on behalf of my former FE colleagues and so I took the opportunity presented to denounce what I saw as a manifest injustice. I received a B for the paper, which I was pleased with, but I was disappointed in myself for not addressing a weakness which had been pointed out to me by a colleague and which was highlighted by one of the markers. I realised that in my eagerness to condemn what I saw as a blatant unfairness I had forgotten the need to tie up all the loose ends of the argument. The lesson I learnt was that a sense of outrage is no substitute for judicial and carefully balanced argument.

The second paper I submitted was for the module Methods of Enquiry 1 and it also addressed an issue related to FE, this time in the form of the development of professional identify amongst FE teachers. I decided that I would use this paper as an opportunity to follow up the whole question of the professional identity of FE staff which had been implicit in the first paper. The feedback was generally positive and I was pleased to get another B. However, I also realised that I had once again failed to develop the arguments as clearly as I could have done. I could see exactly how a research approach along the lines of those I discussed could be used in an FE context because I was, or at least thought I was, so aware of that context;

unfortunately I failed to make this knowledge explicit and, unusually for me, had allowed myself to get caught up in the product rather than the process of the proposed research. By the time I received the summative feedback I realised that the direction my career was taking me in was opening a gap between FE and myself. I had also found something else which had made me angry to write about which had nothing to do with FE.

The third module I studied was a specialist study on policy development in education, an area which I had always seen as remote and far removed from my area of influence. One year after joining the university where I currently teach I was given the role of learning and teaching adviser to the faculty, in effect I had been promoted from a senior lecturer to a principal lecturer with a corresponding expectation that I would be closely involved in developing the faculty's approach to teaching. From my point of view the outcome of my first attempt at policy development was, by and large, a disaster as I had naively assumed that good ideas mattered more than the politics of committees. During the module we had looked at models of how policies are developed and what can go wrong and this really helped me to get a clearer understanding of what had happened to the policy I had sought to develop. Once again the paper was graded at B and whilst I could, and did, draw comfort from the consistency of my grades I couldn't help noticing the consistency of the feedback which was that in seeking to make my central point, which I see now was largely a retrospective act of self justification, I had over-simplified that which was complex and failed to apply a rigorous clarity of thought and expression when trying to explain how a theoretical model could explain what had gone wrong in my attempt at policy development. In short I was making assumptions and tending to gloss over areas which either didn't seem to fit the argument or which, if I were truly honest, I may not have fully understood myself.

When I sat down to write the paper for Methods of Enquiry 2 I was, for the first time, not setting out to avenge some grievance, real or imagined. Instead I wanted to share something which I had conceived of, developed, put in to place and then successfully explored. It was, at that time, the thing which had given me the greatest sense of achievement in over 20 years of teaching. The work I was doing on the PGCert, my university's in-house training course for new academics, was, without a doubt the most fulfilling aspect of my work at that time. The fact that I was, to a very large extent, able to do pretty well what I liked gave me the opportunity and the confidence to move beyond the FE mindset of compliance and the need to meet externally set targets, which I had come to see had characterised my first

couple of years in higher education. The introduction of a choice in the form of assessment and what it meant for my students in terms of their learning was in many ways a metaphor for my own sense of release. I realised that I had a choice, I could do what I had done so often in the past and re-invent myself to suit the situation I was in or I could just rage against the manifest unfairness of everything every time things didn't go my way. I remember feeling intensely proud of the fact that my MOE2 paper was given an A grade although I could see the flaws in it even if they seem to have eluded the markers. The EdD handbook defines an A grade as publishable material and I took it at its word. I presented an edited version of my MOE2 paper firstly at our University learning and teaching conference and then at the HEA national conference.

The next step on my personal journey was the Institutional Focused Study (IFS). Since joining the university I had, single-handedly, taught the PGCert. The course had proved surprisingly popular with the staff who completed it but I knew that this was not the case in a number of other universities where the value of such training courses was questioned. I was convinced that the work I was doing made a difference but I wanted to test the accuracy of this belief. I carried out semi-structured interviews with staff who had completed the PGCert a year before. The IFS represented a step change for me in terms of my learning because not only was I engaging in real research with live subjects, I had taught myself how to use NVivo a computer-based data handling program. The size of the IFS, 20000 words, also meant that I had to sharpen up my skills in identifying and handling literature. I was fortunate, as someone who is not based in London, in being able to make use of the IoE's excellent e-journal provision and lucky in that my own university had an excellent education library from which I could take books with ease. My findings were encouraging and I could see that the course I ran and taught had had a positive impact on the people who completed it. This time not only did I present my findings at an International conference in Hong Kong, I also produced my first peer reviewed journal article. The third and, in some ways most useful, element of my learning whilst completing the IFS was having the opportunity to work with Dr Eleanore Hargreaves who proved to be an excellent supervisor. Overall I think that completing the IFS not only represented a very clear break with my past and with the first assignments for the EdD, it was also an excellent preparation for the rigours of the thesis.

Finally, we come to the thesis itself. It would, I think, be fair to say that completing the thesis has had the most profound effect on me in that it has really opened my eyes, hopefully not too late in my career, to what can be

gained from the process of research. I had always seen myself first and foremost as a teacher, hardly surprising after near 25 years but what I have come to recognise is that whilst teaching itself holds few thrills and even fewer challenges for me now, research is a whole new universe which I am keen to explore. Throughout the EdD I have focused my attention inwards on my own professional development and there have been enormous pay offs for me and my students and colleagues as I have shared my learning and knowledge gained from the EdD. The work I have carried out as part of the EdD over the preceding years has had an enormous impact on me in terms of my confidence and self belief but also in terms of my role as an academic and researcher. Completing Foundations of Professionalism allowed me to develop my perspective and helped me realise that, despite some similarities, universities and further education colleges were different in ways I had not fully appreciated. More than anything I came to realise that whilst a certain amount of passion was potentially useful when writing about an issue one feels strongly about, a dispassionate and critical stance is always likely to be more productive and I have tried hard to apply that lesson to my thesis. From MoE 1 I drew the lesson that tacit knowledge and assumptions are no substitute for clear explanations and shared understandings. These two vital lessons were applied in my thesis firstly by the choice of subject, the feedback I had provided to my student was all too often based on tacit knowledge, and secondly in recognising the extent to which knowledge is constructed and the ways in which the variations in the constructions could impact on understanding. The key lesson for me which I drew from MoE 2 was the realisation that my work could be good enough to share with a wider audience in the form of an academic paper presented at a national conference. I always thought that one of the key objectives of gaining a doctorate was to demonstrate that one could be, in academic terms, a player. My sense of audience shifted and I became more aware of writing for a much wider audience. The lesson I drew from the IFS was not only confirmation that my work was good enough to be published in a peer reviewed journal but that I had learnt how to manage qualitative data in a way that allowed me to have complete confidence in my findings. The lessons learnt from my IFS have been directly applied to the thesis: I have used the latest version of NVivo to analyse the data and my preliminary results have already been peer reviewed and shared at an international conference.

Chapter 1

Introduction:

At the end of the academic year in June 2010 I found myself having a difficult conversation with a third year undergraduate student whose dissertation I had supervised. The dissertation had been blind double marked by myself and a colleague and a mark of 67% had been agreed which, in my university's assessment scheme, meant that the assignment had been given a mark in the 2:1 classification. The dissertation is a compulsory element for students undertaking the honours route and the mark attached to the dissertation is always fed into the algorithm used to calculate the overall degree classification and consequently students place an understandably high premium on the mark awarded. In the case of the student I had supervised, the issue was one of what she saw as a discrepancy between the formative feedback and the summative grade. My student made it clear that on the basis of the feedback I had provided on her dissertation that she had been expecting a mark above 70% which would equate with a first class classification. My university's regulations do not allow students to appeal against a mark on the grounds of academic judgement only on grounds of unfair practice or failure to follow the relevant procedure for marking. My student accepted that they had no grounds for an appeal, but they did want to register their disappointment and confusion.

I could see her point of view but I also thought that the feedback I had provided had been clear and reflected best practice and I was more than a

little put out to be told that, far from clarifying and guiding it had, apparently, confused and misled my student. In my formative feedback I had consistently used the term 'good' in relation to her written work. My university provides generic assessment criteria in which the term excellent is used in relation to work worth more than 70%, good indicates 60-69%, satisfactory is 50-59% and basic indicates 40-49% and in this generic assessment descriptor a mark of 40% equates to a pass grade. As far as I was concerned the student had passed well and the feedback indicated that fact but it was also clear to me that what I had intended was not what my student had understood. My student had no option but to accept the grade but it was not with a good grace. It was clear to me that the relationship which had developed between us as student and supervisor, a relationship built on trust and a mutual recognition of what each of us was trying to achieve, had been damaged and in fact the student made no further contact with me. It occurred to me at the time that what seemed to be the problem was that, despite developing a close working relationship, my student and I had never really discussed exactly what my feedback meant. Instead we had clearly allowed a form of implicit or tacit knowledge to take the place of the kind of dialogue which might have helped us both understand the feedback and the specific relationship between grades and comments on work. This failure to convey and communicate clear feedback to my student troubled me and led me to reflect on the ways in which lecturers and students construct their understanding of what good feedback is and what can be done to help make that understanding more explicit.

During the period 10 January – 8 March 2011 I was part of a cross university group which had been asked to review the quality of written summative feedback on undergraduate work which had been presented to the external examiners at the last assessment round. Working with a colleague, I noticed an inconsistency of approach in terms of what was included in the written feedback to students and the way it was presented. The working group had all been issued with a criteria checklist against which we were asked to evaluate the feedback we were looking at. From the start it was clear that there were going to be variations in the way in which the individual members of the working group interpreted the criteria on the checklist which produced further clarification of the criteria themselves. Unfortunately, this further clarification did not produce the desired outcomes in terms of everyone carrying out the evaluation process in the same way and with a common understanding. Whilst the working party did not quite achieve the level of Babel Toulmin (2001) refers to in *Return to Reason*[1], the potential for confusion over feedback was clear for all to see. Thus as a working group we were faced with applying criteria, the precise meaning of which was not always clear to us, to written feedback which varied from readable to unreadable and from a line and a half of text to a full page of detailed comments. What became very clear is that each of us in the working group brought our own personal views, assumptions and values to the task of evaluating. It is hardly surprising that the members of the working party, and those lecturers whose feedback we were reviewing, approached their respective tasks in different ways as is clear from Lau's (2008) work on what

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[1] I am grateful to Professor Dylan Wiliam for this reference

influences lecturer's' approach to the design of assessment. Whilst the influences which Lau identifies apply to the design of assessment tasks, it is, I would suggest, equally likely that the same influences will be at work in lecturers' approach to producing feedback (see also Higgins et al, 2001): in both the design of assessment and the production of written feedback what tends to be overlooked is the student.

Taken together the foregoing considerations have raised the following research questions:

What influences the way that the concept of good feedback is understood by academic staff and undergraduate students ?

What steps can be taken to close any gaps in contrasting constructions of what constitutes good feedback by academic staff and students?

Chapter 2

Literature Review:

This literature review is divided into two separate but inter-related sections. The first section will address literature related to the first of my two research question and will focus on the origins of feedback and the links to behavioural psychology. I will go on to outline the way in which behaviourism, and the model of feedback associated with it, came to dominate British higher education. As will be seen in the chapter discussing the views of the staff included in my research, behavioural models of feedback are still very influential. In the second section of this literature review I will discuss both the alternative model of feedback offered by cybernetics and second order cybernetics and I will review the literature which addresses current thinking about feedback practices and how they can be improved.

Much of the commentary on staff and student perspectives will be viewed through the work of Michel Foucault, in particular his views on discourse, power and identity, will be used to evaluate critically the literature. In drawing on Foucault's work I am mindful of his suggestion that his writing should be seen as a tool box and I have tried to extract the tools which are, or appear to be, most useful, I do not, however, claim to have developed let alone applied, a comprehensive Foucauldian analytical framework to my research. The final section of the literature review will consider ways in which current practices in feedback in higher education can be enhanced and developed in order to, in

Nicol's (2010: 513) phrase, make feedback '...a dialogical process in which active engagement is played out.'

In his article calling for the development of sustainable feedback practices Carless calls for a '...fundamental reconceptualization of the feedback process.' (Carless et al, 2011: 395). The idea that feedback is a problematic area in higher education can scarcely be open for debate given the volume of research which has been carried out in this area (Hattie and Timperley 2007, Hounsell 2008, Bailey and Garner 2010, Fielding et al 2010, Nicol 2010, Ferguson 2011) and consequently it is difficult to disagree with Carless' call for a reconceptualization of feedback practices. However, I would like to go further and suggest that before such a reconceptualization can happen it is necessary for academics to understand the roots of feedback as a concept and how the original development of the term feedback has shaped the way in which feedback is conceived of and delivered by staff in higher education.

The origins of feedback:

I was trained as an historian and I have always believed that to understand an issue it is essential to study its origins and consequently the first part of this literature review will discuss the idea of feedback and its origins and early application to education. Very few writers who address the issue of feedback give much space to the origins of the phrase and in the case of Falchikov (2004) her assertion that 'The term 'feedback' was originally coined by Norbert Weiner in 1948...' (Falchikov, 2004: 157) is simply wrong.

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Although other writers have accurately identified the origins of the term feedback, their consideration of the origins is brief. For example, Burke and Pieterick (2010) devote about a paragraph to pointing out that the term feedback originates in electrical engineering. Brookhart (2008) highlights the role of the early behavioural psychologists and their emphasis on the link between reinforcement or feedback and learning, whilst Askew (2000) provides an even briefer mention of the origins of feedback in the context of electrical engineering. In all these cases there is a lack of criticality in discussing the origins of feedback and the writers quickly move on to discussing feedback in its educational context. An exception to this general rule is the work of Wiliam (2012) which provides perhaps the most comprehensive review of the origins of feedback. Wiliam locates the early work on feedback in systems engineering and behavioural psychology but also points out the difficulty of transferring models developed in these fields directly into an educational context. In a detailed critique of the research which has been conducted into feedback Wiliam highlights the difficulties associated with developing a common understanding of the impact of feedback on student learning and concludes 'For now, perhaps the most that can be said is that good feedback causes thinking.' (Wiliam, 2012: 212)

The way in which the term feedback came into common usage has, I would argue, significant implications for the way in which the concept is understood and applied in education. Higher education does not exist in a social and cultural vacuum and those who teach and study in higher education are not immune from the wider socio-cultural context in which they live (Barnett,

1994; NCIHE, 1997; Daniels, 2004). Consequently it is highly likely that ideas which are developed outside of higher education will come to inform thoughts and ideas within higher education: it is my contention that the development of the term feedback in the wider socio cultural context has significant implications for how staff and students understand and apply that term.

In their seminal work *Inside the Black Box* (2006) Black and Wiliam apply a metaphor derived from systems engineering of the classroom serving the purpose of a black box into which inputs are made and from which outputs are recorded. For Black and Wiliam the crucial point is to understand the transformations which occur within the Black box but for our purposes the metaphor of the Black Box, and the reference to systems engineering, serve a slightly different purpose.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED 1989) the earliest recorded use of the term feedback appeared in a journal called *Wireless Age* in 1920. The significance of the OED's definition of feedback, and the early appearance of the term in a journal produced by the Marconi Company and concerned with improving the transmission and reception of early radio, cannot be overlooked if we are to fully appreciate the value of Black and Wiliam's metaphor of the Black Box. If we also consider the early work of Harold Black, (Black, 1934) an early pioneer of telephone technology, whose development of the feedback amplifier helped to reduce distortion and increase the clarity of signals, we can start to appreciate the way in which

engineering provided the early framework for thinking about feedback as a process.

In engineering a distinction can be made between open and closed loop systems. In the former there is input, a process and an output but no feedback whilst in the latter there is input, a process and output but with feedback on the output which compares the difference between the input and the output. In the closed loop system the difference between input and output is used to manage the system by, for example, increasing or decreasing speed, volume or quality. Closed loop control systems played an important part in the development of early steam technology and inventions such as the steam governor made Watt's steam engine safer and more efficient. As the 19th century progressed so the use of closed loop control systems in engineering increased. The demands of two world wars in the 20th century provided a massive stimulus to the development of ever more efficient and complex control engineering. However, from Watt onwards, the basic principle of the closed loop control system was to use feedback to control a process regardless of what that process was or how complex it became. In effect in a closed loop control system feedback was the measure of difference between input and output and the difference could be either positive or negative (Åström and Murray, 2008). Whilst engineers have long recognised the utility of feedback as part of a control system, they also recognise that feedback has the potential to cause instability within a system which, as Åström and Murray, (2008) point out, can cause fluctuations in a system or even make the system run out of control.

The origins of the term feedback is not confined to the world of engineering and it appears frequently in the literature of behavioural psychology (Kulhavy, 1977; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Mausolff, 2004). As a school of psychology, Behaviourism was epistemologically descended from associationism, a view of learning which can be traced back to Aristotle. Associationism emphasised the way in which learning occurs as ideas are associated in the mind through experience: thus a child learns to avoid touching fire by associating the idea of fire with the experience of heat. It was the work of the Russian Physiologist Ivan Pavlov and the psychiatrist Vladimir Bekhterev, who both studied what is commonly referred to as classical conditioning, which provided the scientific basis of much of 20th Century behavioural psychology (Mills, 1998). The work of John Watson and Edward Thorndike, in the early part of the 20th Century, went far beyond the work of Pavlov and Bekhterev in that they not only developed increasingly sophisticated behavioural experiments, they also began to codify what behavioural psychology was.

In the second sentence of his classic 1913 paper *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views it*, Watson states that the theoretical goal of Behaviourism is "...the prediction and control of behavior" (Watson, 1913:158). The primacy of the central tenants of psychology, as defined by Watson, found eloquent expression in the so-called Little Albert experiments (Watson and Rayner, 1920) and the modern reader can hardly avoid being shocked by the apparent indifference shown to the child as Watson and his team exercised control over the inputs to generate specific responses – in this case fear.

The concept of feedback is closely linked to the idea of reinforcement (see e.g. Baron et al, 1969) and Thorndike's (1927) work shows that repetition of an action without feedback on the outcome of that action, in this case drawing lines of varying length, has little or no impact on learning (Bangert-Drowns et al, 1991). Just as Behaviourism draws on the concept of feedback and links it to the process of reinforcement, so it also uses the idea of the human mind as a Black Box which can-not be directly monitored and evaluated (Staddon, 2001; Dragoi, 2008). Although Watson and Thorndike can be credited with laying the foundations of early behavioural psychology, it was the work of Burrhus Frederic Skinner and Benjamin Bloom which was to have the more enduring impact on British higher education.

Skinner became interested in psychology in the late 1920s (Mills, 1998) and from 1945 onwards he became recognised as perhaps the pre-eminent writer in his field (Thyer, 1991). Skinner's work on operant conditioning built on the work of Thorndike but went beyond that of Pavlov and Watson. Skinner recognised that the participants in his experiments were not simply demonstrating involuntary physical responses such as salivating or emotional ones such as fear. Skinner believed that learning was not simply a response to a given stimulus but it represented the accumulation of past experiences and the environment in which the learner found themselves (Skinner, 1950; Kazepides, 1976). In common with other behavioural psychologists, Skinner saw feedback as a crucial element of the environment in which learning was to occur.

The impact of Behaviourism on British Higher Education:

Whilst neo-behaviourists such as Skinner were influential in disseminating the behavioural message across all levels of education, it was the publication, in 1956, of Bloom et al's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* which, in the form of learning outcomes would, eventually, have the most profound impact on British higher education. Bloom's work underpinned the link which was formed between behavioural objectives, learning outcomes and feedback on assessment. It may be argued that learning outcomes are qualitatively different from the learning objectives which emerged from Behavioural psychology. However Prideaux, (2001), Harden, (2002), Moon, (2002) and Adam, (2004) all suggest that to some extent the terms, learning outcomes and learning objectives, are interchangeable. Allan (1996) acknowledges that learning outcomes might contain learning objectives but she states they differ in three important ways:

- Unlike learning objectives, learning outcomes are not expressed in terms of one specific element and may combine several elements such as knowledge or skills which makes an outcome more complex than an objective

- The learning outcome does not define the context in which the learning is to occur

- A learning outcome does not necessarily define a pre-determined standard to be reached in order for the outcome to be met.

Allan's conception of a learning outcome can be directly contrasted with Mager's definition of an objective which suggests that objectives represent an: '...unambiguous statement, specifying precisely what the learner can do, the conditions under which the performance can be exhibited, and the criteria by which adequacy of the performance is evaluated.' (Mager, 1962: 56 cited in Ramsay 1993: 82). Notwithstanding the above, the significance of this debate over learning objectives and learning outcomes lies less in the definition of the terms because, as has been noted, for many academics the terms are simply interchangeable; the real significance is the extent to which learning objectives/outcomes have come to be seen as closely linked to the design of assessment tasks (Coats et al, 2005) and subsequently to feedback. What does seem clear is that, regardless of terminology, Bloom's taxonomy provided much of the conceptual model, especially with its emphasis on higher level cognition in learning, which came to underpin the learning outcomes based approach (Andrich, 2002).

Initially Bloom's taxonomy was more influential in the USA (Stobart, 2008) than in Britain and as late as the mid 1980s Bull (1985) was able to claim that whilst behavioural objectives, of the kind associated with Bloom's taxonomy, were widespread in the USA's education system they were still relatively rare in the UK's education system. However, following on from the work of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established and in turn the QAA developed what it called subject benchmarks which set out to:

> ...provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area.

They also represent general expectations about standards for the
award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and
capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have
demonstrated.

(QAA, 2007: 4)

As Moon (2002) points out the subject benchmarks developed by the QAA
can be easily linked to learning outcomes which define, in Hussey and
Smith's words: '...precisely what a student shall know or understand, and
what skill or capabilities they will have at the end of a specific period of
learning.' (Hussey and Smith, 2002: 223). The QAA also acknowledge the
explicit relationship between the subject benchmarks and learning outcomes,
for example in relation to the development of the Engineering subject
benchmark the QAA note:

By using the published learning outcomes from the Engineering Council
in the revised subject benchmark statement in 2006, programme
providers were now able to use a single set of learning outcomes.
(QAA, 2010: 2)

The QAA also make it very clear that there needs to be a direct and explicit
link between learning outcomes and assessment practices (QAA, 2006). As
a consequence of the relationship between learning outcomes and
assessment there is also a strong expectation that there will be a relationship
between feedback on assessed work and the learning outcomes. The
relationship between feedback and learning outcomes is frequently
expressed in guidance issued by universities to their academic staff thus:

- Feedback should - where possible - be directly related to learning outcomes and given assessment criteria, so that students are very clear on what was and will be expected of them
(University of Bath, undated).

- Feedback is evidence of the students' achievement of the learning outcomes and indicative of the quality of teaching
(Manchester Metropolitan University, undated)

- It is helpful to remember that feedback has four goals, to:
- justify how a mark or grade was determined;
- identify and reward specific areas of achievement;
- recommend where and how improvements can be made;
- indicate how well students are achieving learning outcomes
  (Queen Margaret's University College , undated)

- Feedback should be related to the learning outcomes and grading criteria
  (Goldsmiths,undated)

What seems to be inescapable in terms of the relationship between behavioural psychology in general, and Bloom's Taxonomy in particular, is that, alongside a drive for ever greater accountability and efficiency, behaviourism has had a significant impact on the organisation and delivery of higher education in the UK. The clear evolution of learning outcomes from behavioural objectives and the fact that these two concepts are frequently used interchangeably presents higher education with an interesting challenge if the development of more constructivist, student centred and dialogic approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are to take hold. In terms of feedback too much emphasis is still placed on behavioural models in which transmission of knowledge becomes a proxy for the co-construction of knowledge between the student and the lecturer. The risk posed by the

continued use of essentially behaviourist models of teaching and feedback is eloquently expressed by Maclellan who argues:

> ...not only is behaviourism ... an incomplete account of learning, society's obsessive concern with accountability may well mean that the ideology of behaviourism is accepted as dominant, with the language of learning outcomes, objectives and achievements increasingly distorting teaching towards assessment
> (Maclellan, 2005: 138).

It is my contention that, notwithstanding Maclellan's warning, the language of assessment and feedback in British higher education has become the language of learning outcomes, objectives and grades. In terms of the first of my two research questions the literature discussed above indicates that Behavioural models of feedback are common place across British higher education and these models have had a direct and sustained impact on what constitutes the idea of good feedback practice.

Cybernetics and the move towards a Constructivist approach to feedback:

In the next section of the literature review I will start to address the second of my research questions and seek to outline what can be done to move feedback practices away from the dominant Behavioural models towards a more socially constructionist approach. In this section I will set out the case for an alternative model of feedback based on a much more dialogic approach than is currently the case in the transmissive forms of feedback in common use. I will then go on to discuss how the issues of discourse,

power, identity and emotions may act as a barrier to change and how staff and students will need to confront these barriers if a more dialogic form of feedback is to emerge.

As Ramaprasad (1983) has noted although the term feedback was and is widely used in the field of management theory '...there is little consensus among management theorists on the definition of the concept.' (Ramaprasad, 1983:4). Ramaprasad's definition of feedback as being information which is used to close the gap between actual and desired performance is of tremendous significance because of the way it laid the foundations for aspects of Sadler's (1989) paper *Formative Assessment and the Design of Instructional Systems.* Ramaprasad argues that many writers looking at feedback focus on what he calls the 'output parameters' which are, in effect, simply a measure of productivity or quality with no regard to how the productivity or the quality can be improved. For Ramaprasad and Sadler effective formative feedback is a process of helping the learner to close the gap between actual and desired levels of performance. The emphasis on closing the gap between actual and desired levels of performance exhibits aspects of associationist models of learning. In associationism learning, or intelligent behaviour, is the outcome of pairing experiences or stimulations on one hand with ideas and thoughts on the other. Associationism pre-figured the work of early behavioural psychologists such as Pavlov and Thorndike whose use of immediate reinforcement/feedback was primarily concerned with motivating learners to try a task again and again. (Kulhavy, 1977, Sadler, 1998) Notwithstanding the behavioural overtones of Ramaprasad's

conception of feedback, its significance lies in its emphasis on the formative

nature of feedback which clearly distinguishes it from earlier conceptions

which were largely focused on defining feedback as 'knowledge of results'

(Sadler, 1989: 122).

An alternative definition of feedback is offered by Wiener who describes it as:

> ...a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance. If these results are merely used as numerical data for the criticism of the system and its regulation, we have the simple feedback of the control engineers. If, however, the information which proceeds backward from the performance is able to change the general method and pattern of performance, we have a process which may well be called learning.
> (Wiener, 1954: 61)

Thus for Wiener feedback and learning is much more than a conditioned

response to a given stimulus. The development of cybernetics in the 1940s

represents a break with the mechanistic world of the 19th and early 20th

Centuries, a world which was closely associated with the focus on control

which Watson located at the heart of Behaviourism. Wiener's critique of

Behaviourism as a form of social organisation is telling :

> Those who would organize us according to permanent individual functions and permanent individual restrictions condemn the human race to move at much less than half-steam. They throw away nearly all our human possibilities and by limiting the modes in which we may adapt ourselves to future contingencies, they reduce our chances for a reasonably long existence on this earth.
> (Wiener, 1954:52)

Another important aspect of cybernetics, and the feedback systems

associated with it, is the recognition that a feedback message might be

transmitted with the maximum degree of clarity but it is inevitably distorted in

the reception to a greater of lesser extent (Zamel, 1981). This phenomenon is referred to as entropy. The phenomenon of entropy means that care needs to be taken in the construction and delivery of feedback if worthwhile progress is to be made. Wiener suggests that in order for communication to work it is essential that communication becomes a two way process if the sender (the teacher for example) is to be certain that the right message has been sent and received by the recipient (the student in this case). The problem with this model of communication is that communication, and therefore feedback, tends to be rather more complex than a simple circular process of transmit, receive, repeat. As Murray, (2006) has noted:

> When this notion of circular feedback and communication was applied to other areas of life, things became complicated. Messages were not unambiguous, meanings were constantly being negotiated and no-one could be the controller sitting outside the system knowing exactly what the message was supposed to be.
> (Murray, 2006: 215)

The realisation that the initial models of cybernetics developed by Wiener could not adequately resolve the problem identified by Murray led to the development of a more refined model of Cybernetics referred to a Second Order Cybernetics. Second Order Cybernetics recognises that in the communication and feedback process meaning is constantly in a state of flux and is negotiated and re-negotiated by the sender and the recipient. In reflecting on the origins of Second Order Cybernetics Glanville, (2004) notes the contribution of Pask to Cyberneticists' conception of communication and feedback:

> In Pask's version, understandings are not transmitted. Communication takes place between entities that build understandings (meanings) out of their interpretations of what they sense their conversational partner (or partners) offer them. This understanding is fed back to their partner(s) in new offerings that the partner(s) in turn interpret and compare to their original intention. This dual generation of what might have been called messages constitutes feedback and allows errors to be detected and new offerings/messages to be tendered that attempt to correct such errors.
> (Glanville, 2004: 1382)

In terms of the development of a theory of learning through feedback which can be applied to education, Cybernetics can be seen as providing a distinct alternative to the more traditional models of learning and feedback which were developed by behavioural psychologists. Moreover, von Glaserfeld (1989) suggests that by emphasising the ways in which systems, mechanical or human, construct and adapt to their environment based on the input they receive, cybernetics can be linked to Constructivist theories of learning. Constructivism shares with Second Order Cybernetics the principle that feedback and learning are not passive responses to specific stimuli they are, in fact, the result of engagement with and making sense of the learning environment by both the student and the teacher. The problem with the communicative principles which lie at the heart of Second Order Cybernetics is that they call for a level of resourcing which is not readily available in higher education (Bostock 1998). Furthermore, the core values of constructivism call for a far greater emphasis on the importance of the student as the agent for change in their own learning and emphasises the role of open and dialogic exchanges between staff and students. Such processes, whilst no doubt desirable, would not only be difficult to accommodate within the current levels of resourcing for mass higher

education but they would also require a fundamental re-alignment of the relationship between staff and students.

Re-engineering feedback as a communication problem:

In an opinion piece published in the journal *Teaching in Higher Education* in 2001 Richard Higgins, Peter Hartley and Alan Skelton make a strong case for recognising that feedback, as a communication process, is uniquely complex and that the first step towards progress in improving feedback to students requires lecturers to recognise the complexity involved. Nicol (2010) has also noted that too much of the communication inherent in the process of feedback on assessed work takes the form of a transmission, or monologue, in which the expert teacher transmits information about performance to a recipient often with little regard for how that information is received and understood. For Nicol, the problem with the prevailing model of feedback is that it does not improve student learning because it rarely requires students to respond, in a dialogic way, to the feedback. A further problem with lecturers' approach to providing feedback is the question of audience. Randall and Mirador (2003) have suggested that the target audiences for formative and summative feedback differ significantly, with much of the content of summative assessment being aimed at a wider institutional target rather than mainly at students. The need to meet the expectations of institutional audiences other than simply the students, has led Bailey and Garner (2010) to suggest that '...institutional practices designed to facilitate the efficient communication of written feedback to students are often seen by

academic teaching staff to create problems of their own.' (Bailey and Garner, 2010: 196). Taken in conjunction with the guidance from the QAA in relation to feedback, which tends to emphasise the structural aspects over the communicative ones, much of what is written on students' summative work is of limited relevance and use to them. Whilst formative feedback does tend to be aimed at students, Duncan, (2007) and Carless, (2006) have suggested that students are frequently reluctant to submit work for formative comments and so a valuable line of communication and feedback can be left under developed. Carless, (2006) suggests that the key to effective feedback, both formative and summative, is that lecturers recognise the socially constructed nature of feedback. Carless' argument suggests that that feedback, as a form of communication, is unlikely to be purely linear (transmitted and received) and is subject to a range of factors which are not part of the feedback process itself but which, nevertheless, have an impact on the process. A further compounding problem encountered when thinking about feedback as a communication process is highlighted by the work of Poulos and Mahony (2008). Poulos and Mahony point out that whilst considerable effort has gone into understanding the way in which feedback is structured and delivered, relatively little research has been carried out on how students in higher education perceive feedback. Furthermore, again according to Poulos and Mahony, the way in which a student receives feedback is a product of their psychological state and disposition and '...that credibility and hence impact of feedback is influenced by student perceptions of the provider' (Poulos and Mahony, 2008: 153). In emphasising the psychological and interpersonal aspects of giving and receiving feedback Poulos and

Mahony have opened a rich seam, but, rather disappointingly, they don't really provide the tools required to exploit the insight. The work of Higgins (2000) and Carless (2006) has proved to be very helpful in identifying the range of tools required to interrogate the student perspective on feedback. In analysing the ways in which students make sense of feedback Carless (2006) uses a tripartite framework, derived from Higgins (2000), of discourse, power and emotion for the analysis of feedback but for my analysis I would like to re-introduce Higgins' 4th component; 'identity'. The four elements of analysis will be discussed one at a time in the following paragraphs, starting with the term discourse.

Locating assessment and feedback within the dominant discourses of higher education

Any consideration of the term discourse is likely to require a focus on the work of Michel Foucault and in particular his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* Foucault emphasises the ways in which discourse and knowledge are constructed in historical contexts which are not fixed and immutable but which are transient and change over time. Foucault argues that discourse is much more than what he calls 'a slender surface of contact ... between a reality and a language...' (Foucault, 1974: 48) by which he means that discourse certainly includes language but it is so much more than a language and 'It is this *more* that renders them irreductable to the language ...' (Foucault, 1974: 49 emphasis in the original) In critiquing the traditional economic determinism and ideologies of classic Marxist theory as offering an inadequate explanation for the historical development of post industrial

society, Foucault argued instead for an historical approach which "...seeks to discover that whole domain of institutions, economic processes, and social relations on which a discursive formation can be articulated...' (Foucault, 1974: 164). As with any historical theory there are inevitably points at which one discourse gives way to another but the process of change is not easy or smooth and Foucault points out the risks involved for those who set out to study the transitions 'Is there not a danger that everything...may disappear, leaving for analysis a blank indifferent space...' (Foucault, 1974: 39). The risk Foucault alludes to arises from his argument that discourse which emerge in separate historical periods are not necessarily thematically linked but are likely to represent completely different ways of thinking about the given subject. As has been noted above, the discourse of feedback on assessment represents two contrasting conceptions, derived from behavioural psychology and cybernetics respectively, with both providing alternative paradigms within which lecturers and students operate.

In his essay *Reframing assessment as if learning were important* Boud outlines what he sees as the traditional dominant discourse of assessment in higher education which consists of an over exaggerated focus on "'outcomes', 'measurement', and 'integrity'" (Boud, 2007: 17) whilst the concepts of feedback, improvement and learning are only second order considerations. Boud suggests that a review of policy documents at both an institutional and a national level suggests that there is a far greater emphasis on the first three elements of assessment than on the second three noted above and he argues:

> Notwithstanding the limitations of focusing on publicly available documents, this suggests that the dominant discourse of assessment within institutions remains related to measurement and certification despite a perceived need to acknowledge other purposes. Learning takes the subordinate position in official writings about assessment. (Boud, 2007: 17)

In establishing this approach to assessment the policy makers at Institutional and national level are establishing the truth of the discourse and truth, for Foucault, is linked to power which in turn defines reality. This focus on the measurement of learning as if it were some sort of quantifiable, objective artefact can come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the work of Broadfoot. Broadfoot (1998) argues that 19th century conceptions of meritocracy have had a profound impact on British educational discourses and that consequently 'the language of assessment is characterised by terms and concepts which reflect this aspiration.'(Broadfoot, 1998: 453). Stobart (2008) also points to the importance of the Victorian legacy, particularly in the attempts by universities in the 19th century to drive up standards, when it comes to the discourse around assessment and he points out that 'Contemporary debates about the impact of using assessments for accountability purposes echo those of the nineteenth century' (Stobart, 2008: 16). Thus the practice of assessment in British higher education can be seen as being less concerned with processes designed to stimulate and support learning and rather more concerned with crude measurements of attainment. As Bryan and Clegg have put it the introduction to their book: 'Measuring achievement has become the obsession of higher education' (Bryan and Clegg, 2006: 1).

In the field of higher education there are a number of dominant discourses with assessment being one of the more significant ones. The question of how far the dominant discourse surrounding assessment in higher education can be accommodated within a massified higher education sector at a time of diminishing resources is addressed by Gibbs. Gibbs argues that institutional approaches to assessment tend to be informed by a culture which is '...conservative and defensive rather than bold.' (Gibbs, 2006: 20) and that consequently changes in assessment practices, including feedback, are slow to develop. Thus the reality for many students in higher education is that their role in the assessment process is to act as passive recipients of wisdom transmitted via lecture, tutorial and feedback. Whilst it could be argued that Universities are well within their rights to adopt the kind of defensive and conservative approaches noted by Gibbs when dealing with assessment and feedback, research derived from schools (Broadfoot 2002, Black and Wiliam 2006, Stobart 2008), suggests that approaches which actively engage the students in the assessment process are likely to be more successful than ones where students are passive recipients of assessment.

In his 2007 essay Boud calls for a restructuring of the discourse around assessment which replaces the language of marks and grades with one based on the language of 'informed judgement' which he describes as '...an idea that focuses on learning centrally – learning to form judgements – as well as on the act of forming judgements about learning, which may be used for validating purposes.' (Boud, 2007: 19). What Boud is calling for, if

implemented across higher education, would represent a paradigmatic shift of the first order of magnitude.

Foucault, feedback and power relations in higher education:

Just as Foucault's work provides us with a way of thinking about discourse which goes beyond language to encompass all aspects of the social and interpersonal processes in involved in knowledge creation, so we can also draw on it for ways of thinking about the nature and meaning of power. For Foucault power cannot exist without discourse and furthermore power cannot exist without truth. However, Foucault does not think of power as the crude exercise of control by one person or one group over another, he does not see power as coming from above, indeed quite the opposite. Instead Foucault argues that:

> Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere. Power comes from below; that is there is no binary and all encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relations
> (Foucault, 1979: 93-94)

Furthermore Foucault states that:

> It's clear that power should not be defined as a constraining force of violence that represses individuals, forcing them to do something or preventing them from doing some other thing. But it takes place when there is a relation between two free subjects, and this relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon. Therefore, power is not always repressive. It can take a certain number of forms. And it is possible to have relations of power that are open.
> (Bess, 1988: 1)

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The ubiquitous nature of power underlines Foucault's argument that power cannot be owned by a person or a group, it can simply be exercised although it would, of course, be absurd to suggest that Foucault is claiming that there are no differences in power in the relationship between individuals and institutions or one individual and another. By arguing that power is diffused across and through society and institutions Foucault allows for the possibility of power struggles to occur at every and any level of society or an institution: Foucault's interest is in the ways in which power is used to instantiate discourse. Foucault illustrates the existence of inequalities of power in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* when he notes that

> Medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic powers ... cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them, and to claim for them the power to overcome suffering and death.
> (Foucault, 1974: 51).

In this example the discourse of the doctor is a manifestation of both power and truth in that only the doctor is sanctioned to define the causes of sickness and the actions to restore health. Furthermore, by linking power with truth it becomes clear that certain discourses are able to establish their version of knowledge as the truth regardless of whether or not there is any objective basis to the truth statement. Foucault goes on to discuss the importance of the institutions as sites in which dominant discourses are located and reified. It requires no effort at all to see how the discourse of higher education in relation to assessment, which has already been noted,

can be seen as representing a truth which is in turn based on the right of the academic to exercise their power of judgement over a student's work. If we accept Foucault's argument that discourse shapes knowledge and is shaped by knowledge then it can come as no surprise to learn, as Lea and Street (2000) tell us, that when academics encounter writing which does not reflect their world view, they tend to privilege their discourse and their truth over that of others, which finds expression in terms like, critical, analyse and evaluate whose meaning is often unclear to students.

The challenge posed by the need to shift the focus of the discourse away from that determined by the lecturer towards one which is able to incorporate the needs of the student is neatly outlined, albeit unintentionally, in Rae and Cochrane's (2008) article on how to make feedback meaningful to students. One of the three themes identified by Rae and Cochrane which they define as 'making sense of feedback' suggests that '...lecturers should use clear, accessible language that the students can interpret and understand...' (Rae and Cochrane, 2008: 228) The point is, as Chanock's (2000) work suggests, most lecturers think that they are already making their meaning clear. Chanock's paper highlights another key point which is that language is not consistent across disciplines and what lecturers giving feedback in one discipline mean by the word 'analysis', for example, may differ considerably from what a lecturer in another discipline might mean when using the same word. Beyond the precise meaning of a specific word Glover and Brown's (2006) work suggests lecturers also vary in the emphasis they place on grammar and the extent to which accurate use of grammar becomes a proxy

for evidence of subject knowledge. For writers like Hyland (2009) the socially constructed nature of academic discourse, which feedback forms only a small part of, makes it inevitable that concepts such as knowledge and truth will always be subject to interpretations and re-interpretation. At face value this process of construction should be unproblematic for students receiving feedback on their work but, as Hyland notes:

> A major problem is that the rules of the game are often implicit and are treated as just 'common sense' by their subject tutors who misrepresent academic literacy as a naturalized, self-evident and non-contestable way of participating in academic communities. Simply, if literacy practices are not made explicit, then students failed attempts to produce them can be seen as examples of muddled thinking or illiteracy.
> (Hyland, 2009: 128)

Hounsell et al (2008) make a similar point to that of Hyland when they suggest that some of the lecturers in their study: '...appeared to take it for granted that their expectations of academic work were relatively self-evident, that their feedback comments were transparent in their meaning and import, or that students would know how to remedy any shortcomings identified" (Hounsell et al, 2008: 56). Even if students are able to interpret and decode the cultural and linguistic assumptions which often underpin feedback, it does little to alter the power relationship because the language and cultural values are firmly those of the Academy and the dominant discursive practices it embodies.

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Developing a dialogic form of feedback in higher education: problems of power and identity:

As Hounsell et al (2008) and Hyland (2009) make clear, not only is the concept of academic discourse socially constructed within the Academy, it also varies across the disciplines and is based on a set of values, norms, rules and assumptions which are not always clearly articulated and yet which have profound consequences for students. Ivanič et al (2000) write about the relative power relationship between staff and students in higher education in terms of ideology rather than discourse but the point they make is essentially the same as that made by Hyland. In terms of providing feedback the power differential between students and lecturers will tend to cause students to read comments in particular ways, leading Ivanič et al (2000) to suggest that comments on written work which are perceived as negative are internalised by students so they come to believe the comments are about them and their personal qualities. What is clear from Ivanič et al's (2000) work is that students would like lecturers to take steps towards changing the way in which feedback is provided. Instead of feedback simply being a transmissive process, replete with the connotations of inequalities of power, Ivanič et al (2000) argue that it should become a more discursive process in which staff and students engage as something approaching equals. The recognition of the normative power inequalities which are represented in the feedback process is commented on by several writers although few are as explicitly critical as Hyatt (2007) who, when commenting on the status of lecturer's comments on students' work, argues that the implicit norms and values thus

expressed '...maintain a hidden ideological power, within contexts premised on post-Enlightenment values implicitly privileged within university cultures.' (Hyatt, 2007: 341). Whilst one might question the extent to which the basis of power in a university is hidden, after all anyone who attends graduation ceremonies in even the most progressive university is left in no doubt who holds power in what amounts to a theme park version of a medieval investiture, the rhetoric provided by universities, which emphasises learning as a joint enterprise amongst a community of scholars, certainly gives the impression of equality or as one university puts it their students are '...full and active partners in learning...' (Dunbar-Morris, 2010: 6). Taras's, (2006) paper only further underlines the power differential which defines the feedback relationship between student and lecturer. Taras points out that the model of developmental feedback which tends to characterise the process of putting together a written article for publication by an academic is rather different from the feedback provided to students who are undertaking a comparably difficult and significant process when putting together an assignment. It is difficult to disagree with Taras' comment that 'These inconsistencies show a lack of equity towards undergraduate students.' (Taras, 2006: 374) and the inequality becomes even more pronounced when we consider the fact that the consequences of failure, due to a lack of feedback on written work, are hardly less significant for a student than for a member of staff.

If we accept that the perspective of the staff outlined above represents a, or possibly *the*, dominant discourse in relation to assessment and feedback in higher education we are left with a problem to resolve which is why students,

apparently, don't "get it". It may be more accurate to suggest that whilst some students do "get it", i.e. they successfully re-produce the values and norms of the dominant discourse in their writing and are thereby seen as good students, enough students fail to effectively reproduce the discourse to suggest that there is a problem which needs to be explained.

For Foucault identity was not a fixed commodity but was a product of one individual's interactions with those around them. Thus in *Discipline and Punish* (1987) Foucault provides us with detailed information related to the execution of the regicide Damiens and we can infer a great deal about him from the manner of his punishment and his death and it is self evident that the French authorities wanted to underline the identity of the condemned man as the essence of evil and deserving of such an horrific punishment. After this harrowing opening Foucault then describes the fairly rapid disappearance of public torture and execution from French life in which the identity of those to be punished undergoes a shift from a fixed identity, defined by the state with a fixed punishment to an identity in which alternative outcomes, perhaps other than punishment, could emerge as alternative sources of power came into play. Foucault expresses this process as follows:

> Hence an ambiguity in popular attitudes: ... the criminal – especially when he happened to be a smuggler or a peasant who had fled from the exactions of a master – benefitted from a spontaneous wave of sympathy: his acts of violence were seen as descending directly from old struggles.
> (Foucault, 1987: 83)

Thus we see for Foucault the malleable and negotiated nature of identity and the self identity of the smuggler or the peasant above hints at resistance to the power of others to impose an identity. In his focus on the relationship between power and identity Foucault's example above highlights the general point that where there is power there is also resistance to that power. We can apply this principle to the way in which students' self identity can become a form of resistance to the power wielded by University staff on behalf of the Academy. Smart and Dixon (2002) make the following helpful observation about what helps to define students' identity:

> Students bring to their university studies their own personal construction of their identities based on their social, cultural and educational histories...and individual students conceptions of the role of assessment will depend in part on their previous experience of it' (Smart and Dixon, 2002: 192-193).

The question here is how far the students' identity can be adapted to incorporate the dominant discourse around assessment and feedback in a university. The success or otherwise of lecturers in embedding the values and norms of their own discourse into the students' perspective will, to a large extent, define the level of success in assessment experienced by the students (Carless, 2006). The centrality of assessment in universities, and the need for students to comply, defines the student experience and requires students to make highly strategic choices in which meeting the perceived requirements of the assessment task may take precedence over the wider experience of learning for its own sake. Evans (2009) acknowledges this rather depressing view of the student experience and suggests that:

> ...rather than come to the university to learn and to develop knowledge that can inform the exercise of their own judgement, what they [students] are instructed to do is to improve their performance. In the improvement of their performance, via the adherence to multiple, minute, rules, they might succeed and receive an award.
>
> (Evans, 2009: 221)

Thus students' focus becomes fixed on grades and degree classifications rather than the feedback on their work because the discourse in the university and in the wider society equates success with grades (Sutton and Gill, 2010). However, research carried out by Butler and Nisan (1986), and Butler (1988) indicates that what improves student performance is feedback not grades.

The influence of self esteem, self efficacy and emotions on students' responses to feedback:

The fourth area we need to consider is the role of emotion in shaping students' perception of and responses to feedback. Foucault does not appear to have written much, if anything, directly about emotions (Tamboukou, 2003) but in his ideas relating to the care of the self do hint at what might be recognised as a more therapeutic turn in his thinking. One of the most significant outcomes of this therapeutic turn was the emphasis Foucault placed on the classical concept of *epimelesthai sautou*, "to take care of yourself." (Foucault, 1988) As part of this focus on the self Foucault argues that

> One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed.
>
> (Foucault, 1988 27)

This precept sounds like an argument for the adoption of an approach more commonly described as reflective writing. The link between reflective writing and the underlying emotions which can be portrayed within it is well recognised (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985). Of equal significance it is possible to argue that the therapeutic turn, implicit in Foucault's notion of "care of the self", can be seen as providing a counter discourse to that which sees the object of education as purely a process of preparing the next generation of workers and which casts students as largely instrumentalist and consumerist in their approach to learning. In such an argument the role of emotion becomes an important and legitimate part of the discourse between staff and students which cannot easily be dismissed as unimportant or too difficult, a point which is well made by Tamboukou when she argues:

> Seen from Foucauldian lenses, 'emotionally literate' teachers will be exercising their caring ... power over their 'emotionally learning' students and will therefore become much more efficient in influencing and guiding them 'giving them lessons for life', ultimately rendering them emotionally intelligent subjects.

(Tamboukou, 2003: 213)

Given the centrality of assessment and consequently feedback on that assessment to students' experience of higher education it would be surprising if students didn't experience an emotional response be it one of joy, dismay or even anger. Dowden et al (2011) suggest that the role of emotion in understanding student reactions to and perceptions of feedback on their work is under researched in the field of higher education. It is worth noting at this point that the role of emotions in learning and assessment is

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well understood in the field of psychology (Bell and Orgnero, 2011) and it is, perhaps, surprising that writers looking into feedback in higher education have not made greater use of the work carried out in other disciplines.

In their own research Dowden et al (2011) noted that almost all of their participants provided evidence of an emotional response to the feedback and 'In some cases feedback aroused strong emotions and, apparently, extinguished any academic benefit of written feedback for students.' (Dowden et al, 2011: 6). Stobart (2008) argues, convincingly, that emotions represent a social construct in response to a given situation, usually one with which the individual is unfamiliar, rather than a specific manifestation of a particular personality trait. Thus, Stobart's work suggests that our students are not inherently emotionally unstable they are simply reacting to the strangeness of the world around them, particularly in relation to assessment and feedback.

Pekrun and Stephens (2010) identify a range of emotions associated with students' experience of learning which include affective, cognitive, motivational, physiological and expressive forms of emotions but more importantly their research indicates that the emotions experienced by students around assessment are long term: ie they pre-date their time at university (See also Falchikov and Boud, 2007). Furthermore, Pekrun and Stephens point to research which suggest that anxiety in students '...interferes with performance on tasks requiring cognitive resources in terms of working memory capacity.' (Pekrun and Stephens, 2010: 268). The idea

that there is a link between emotion and cognition is emphasised by Värlander (2008) who, following on from the thesis established by Damasio (1994), argues against the dualism of Cartesian philosophy which emphasises the separation of the rational mind and the emotions. Recent developments in the science of neurophysiology indicate that areas of the brain, referred to as hubs, provide points of contact between those areas of the brain conventionally associated with cognition and those associated with emotion (Pessoa, 2008). Värlander argues that this relationship inevitably means that:

> Students' emotions greatly influence the way in which they are able to receive and process feedback, and sometimes the value of such feedback may be 'eclipsed' by learners' reaction to it.
>
> (Värlander, 2008: 146)

Värlander's argument about the potentially negative impact of emotions on how students respond to feedback ignores the potential for a positive emotional response to feedback and the literature analysis carried out by Pekrun et al (2002) clearly indicates that a large number of studies have identified very positive emotional responses to learning and the sense of achievement closely associated with assessment and feedback. Although Falchikov and Boud (2007) acknowledge the importance of positive emotions in the learning experience in their study of adult learners, they only identified one case where a student responded positively to the experience of assessment and feedback. In contrast to the single positive example Falchikov and Boud (2007) identify several instances of negative emotions linked to assessment and feedback with this extract serving as a typical

response from the students: 'She reported feeling 'nervous and unsure' before commencing the assessment exercise and 'useless and worthless' during the procedure. She reported blaming herself for what was happening and seeing herself as 'the problem''. (Falchikov and Boud, 2007: 149). Such a response will be familiar to anyone involved in assessing students at whatever level of study and recognising that this is a common place response makes Falchikov and Boud's solution all the stranger when they suggest :

> ...learners should be helped to prepare themselves for receiving and coping with judgements by others through understanding the assessment regime to which they are subject. In this way, they will come to recognise that failure to respond well to judgements is not necessarily a personal failing, but a consequence of the interaction between their experience and a normally fixed system that may be interpreted idiosyncratically by others.
> (Falchikov and Boud, 2007: 154)

It is precisely the students' inability to distance themselves from making a subjective response to the feedback which makes the risk of a negative emotional response so likely. Suggesting that it will be enough for the students to understand the assessment regime, a form of task related feedback, for them to avoid subjective and personalised responses to feedback ignores the extent to which that regime is a manifestation of the wider academic discourse which is owned and controlled by the University and to which the student is subject. Furthermore, whilst task related feedback of the type advocated by Falchikov and Boud is not wholly without value (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) a problem remains which is that

> One of the problems with feedback at the task level is that it often does not generalize to other tasks. Thompson (1998), for example,

demonstrated that improvement was specific to the questions for which feedback was provided and was not used to answer other questions. (Hattie and Timperley, 2007: 91)

Moreover, focusing on the mechanics of the task is unlikely to help students with low levels of self efficacy improve their performance. The concept of self efficacy, and its impact on performance, was set out by Bandura in 1977 in his seminal paper *Self- efficacy:Towards a Unified Theory of Behavioural Change.* In this paper Bandura argued that expectations of personal efficacy are based on four sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological states such as emotional arousal. Of the four influences identified by Bandura, performance accomplishments, a situation in which students experience real success under difficult circumstances, is the most powerful in terms of strengthening students' self efficacy. On the other hand, self efficacy linked to the physiological (eg anxiety, stress, fatigue) or psychological states can be either positive and self affirming or almost wholly negative. Flint and Johnson (2011) point out that even where a student may experience a high level of self efficacy in one situation the nature of self efficacy means that it tends to be context specific and can be difficult to transfer from one situation, or piece of work, to another. Flint and Johnson (2011) distinguish between self efficacy and self concept and suggest that whilst self efficacy is defined in terms of how an individual sees themselves and their abilities, self concept tends to be defined in terms of how the individual sees themselves in relation to others in a similar situation or at a comparable level of ability. Interestingly, Bong and Clark's (1999) research suggests that students' sense of self efficacy may be a more reliable predictor of future performance

than their self concept beliefs. Of greater significance is the assertion by Bong and Clark that feedback has a less powerful impact on students' self concept but appears to have a positive impact of students' self efficacy (see also Schunk, 1991). If we take the concept of self esteem as incorporating the idea of self efficacy (see Davis and Fedor, 1998) we can see how Bong and Clarke's (1999) work is consistent with that of Young's (2000) study of how a group of mature learners reacted to feedback in which she writes:

> High and medium self-esteem students tended to see feedback as something they were able to act on and make use of; students with low self-esteem were more likely to feel defeated and consider leaving the course. The feedback is not seen as indicating potential and direction for change, but as a definitive judgement of ability.
> (Young, 2000: 415)

The students in Young's study exhibited strong emotional responses to the process of assessment and the prospect of feedback on their performance which ranged from cheerfully optimistic, in which criticism was seen as a useful quality, through to black despair, which saw even positive feedback in a wholly negative light. What emerges from the literature in relation to students' emotional engagement with feedback is that for many students emotions can be debilitating. Emotions can prevent students from reading feedback and understanding it in an objective manner which allows them to differentiate clearly between comments about the work and what they see as comments about themselves. Not all students experience feedback as an emotionally negative experience and the degree of high or low self efficacy seems to be a key determinant in the individual student's emotional response to feedback. Because self efficacy beliefs tend to be context specific the kind

of task related feedback advocated by Falchikov and Boud (2007) may be less useful if only because each time the task changes the context changes. Whilst a student may experience high levels of self efficacy and therefore a positive emotional response in one context they may not be able to transfer those positive beliefs and feelings to a different context.

What do academic staff and students think good feedback looks like?

The research cited above establishes the development of the concept of feedback from early applications in the field of engineering, through the development of behavioural psychology and the emergence of cybernetics which saw links between feedback and constructivist models of learning. I have also considered how feedback fits into notions of discourse, power, identity and emotions in higher education and how these themes have influenced both students and lecturers' approaches to feedback. In this final stage of the literature review I will consider the ways in which good and effective feedback can be developed.

Where feedback on learning, in either summative or formative modes, takes the form of comments on assignments the nature of those comments and the extent to which they support and promote student learning is a key issue for students and their lecturers alike. However, despite considerable effort being put into helping students and lecturers understand feedback and produce more effective feedback, there is little evidence to suggest that a significant shift in understanding or behaviour has occurred within the HE sector. The work of writers such as Bloxham and Boyd (2007), Biggs (2006), Brown

(1998), Clegg and Bryan (2006), Falchikov (2005), Gibbs (2006), Nicol (2010), Ramsden (2006), Rust (2002) and Yorke (2003), has been fairly consistent in both spelling out the nature of the problems related to assessment and feedback in universities and in putting forward proposals for how those problems may be overcome. In short these writers consider that the structural changes in higher education, in particular the processes of massification, reductions in funding and consequent increases in class size, have combined to create a near perfect storm around assessment which in Ramsden's phrase remains "...a serious and often tragic enterprise" (Ramsden, 2006: 176). In terms of what could be done to improve the situation Bloxham and Boyd (2007) argue that first and foremost assessment tasks should be designed to promote and support "worthwhile learning" whilst, in Nicol's words "...feedback should be framed as a dialogical process..." (Nicol, 2010: 513) involving staff and students rather than be seen as a monologue in which only the lecturer's voice is heard.

It is worth considering, briefly, what is meant by the term dialogic feedback which in turn rather depends on what the purpose of feedback is seen to be. If a narrow conception of feedback as a corrective process is adopted then the dialogue relating to it need only concern itself with the correction of errors and misconceptions, the equivalent of Higgins et al's (2001) Professor Snape. If, however, we follow the broader view of feedback developed by Blair and McGinty (2012) in which they define dialogic feedback as 'a collaborative discussion about feedback (between lecturer and student or student and student) which enables shared understandings and

subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on the exchange' (Blair and McGinty, 2012: 1-2) feedback becomes a transformative process in which the student learns not only how to improve their work but also how to learn their subject. Nicol (2010) argues that feedback dialogues should follow the same format as the teaching strategy outlined by Laurillard (2002) which is characterised as being:

- Discursive

- Adaptive

- Interactive

- Reflective

The kind of shared understanding likely to be generated by such a dialogic framework should help to resolve the communications problems Higgins et al (2001) see as characterising many of the feedback exchanges in higher education in which the internal dynamics, students failing to understand feedback, are overlooked in favour of external, structural solutions e.g. typed feedback, faster feedback, more feedback. In order to improve feedback practices universities need to have a better understanding of how students and staff think about assessment in general and feedback on assessment in particular. Carless' (2006) study of staff and student perceptions of the quality and usefulness of written feedback suggests that staff have a higher opinion of the helpfulness of their feedback than students do. The solution put forward by Carless and many of the other writers mentioned in this literature review is the development of

> Assessment dialogues can help students to clarify 'the rules of the game', the assumptions known to lecturers but less transparent to students
> (Carless, 2006: 130).

Struyven et al's (2005) review explores a range of literature which focuses on the relationship between students' approach to learning and their approach to assessment and they conclude that

> The way in which a student thinks about learning and studying, determines the way in which he tackles assignments and evaluation tasks. Conversely, the learner's experience of evaluation and assessment determines the way in which the student approaches (future) learning
> (Struyven et al, 2005: 332).

It is the second of Struyven et al's two points noted above which underlines the link which students make between assessment and feedback in that it highlights the strong desire on the part of many students to be told how to improve their future performance. The work of Lizzio et al, (2002) underlines the link which students make between their approach to learning and their perception of the value and utility of the feedback they receive. The link between learning, assessment and feedback was further emphasised in the HEA funded project *The Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback (*SENLEF) (Juwah et al, 2004) which showed that students made clear and consistent links between learning, assessment and feedback on their work at both the formative and summative stages.

Given the centrality of assessment to the student experience it can come as no surprise that students place a high value on the relationship between what they are expected to learn and how that learning is to be assessed. In terms

of what students wanted from feedback on their work Drew's (2001) paper suggests there is a clear link between the way in which feedback is delivered and the messages which feedback should aim to deliver. The students in Drew's (2001) study liked the following forms of feedback:

Students preferred 1:1 tutorials, but knew that staff pressures made this difficult and suggested alternatives:

- o   five minutes at the end of lectures;
- o   using time in group tutorials or seminars;
- o   student involvement in end of semester progress board staff meetings.
- o   They disliked one-line comments and saw typed feedback sheets as excellent, and the tone of feedback was important.

(Drew, 2001: 320)

In terms of what they wanted from feedback, the students in Drew's (2001) study stated that they wanted feedback which helped them to:

'build self confidence, help us evaluate ourselves'
'bench mark so we know what is acceptable'.
'positive help and advice for improvements in the future'
'are we doing as should be expected at this stage of course'
(Drew, 2001: 319-320).

The comments from Drew's participants above are consistent with those of students who participated in the SENLEF study and those who participated in other studies such as those by Brown (2007), Poulos and Mahony (2008), Rowe and Woods (2008), Holmes and Papageorgiou (2009) and Bailey (2009), which suggests a fairly high level of agreement as to what students want from their feedback.

Does feedback improve learning or does it just encourage surface learning:

From the point of view of academic staff the literature relating to assumptions about both the utility and value of feedback and what the students want and do with their feedback is rather less consistent than that relating to the students' perspective outlined above. One perspective amongst some academic staff is to question the value of feedback in terms of its impact on student learning and there is a body of research which lends credibility to this point of view. Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) meta analysis found an effect size of only 0.41 for feedback interventions suggesting only a moderate impact on performance whilst elsewhere in their paper they suggest that 38% of all the feedback initiatives included in their meta analysis had no impact at all. Kluger and DeNisi's work does provide a useful reminder that feedback is a complex area and their work suggests that the key determinant of the effectiveness of feedback on learning is the response it engenders in the recipient.

In a paper published in 2000 Kluger and DeNisi reviewed their 1996 findings and offered the following summary of their work:

> We therefore concluded that the answer to our original question about whether feedback works, should be, "Usually, but not always." Furthermore, we concluded that, under some conditions, feed-back appeared to actually lower subsequent performance.
> (Kluger and DeNisi, 2000: 130-131)

This acknowledgement by Kluger and DeNisi that the impact of feedback on learning was variable and context specific is supported by the research set

out below in this thesis. However, what my research also suggests is that the context of feedback varies from 1st to 3rd year undergraduate and that , in general, there was a higher value placed on dialogic forms of feedback than on transmissive forms of feedback across the range of my participants. What is not clear from Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) study is the type of feedback which was included. If, in common with most feedback in higher education, the feedback was in written form, it is likely to have exhibited the characteristics of transmissive forms of feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane Dick, 2006 Sadler, 2010) in which the student is the passive consumer of the teacher's expertise and is expected to be able to de-code the written feedback and successfully apply it to other, often very different, tasks. Under such circumstances it is, perhaps, surprising that Kluger and DeNisi were able to find such a large effect size.

In their 1996 paper Kluger and DeNesi identified three moderators which had a negative effect on feedback and they argued that 'These moderators suggest that praise, FIs threatening self-esteem, and verbal FIs attenuate FI effects' (Kluger and DeNesi, 1996: 273) The importance of feedback which is responsive to and aware of the students' self esteem is clearly identified in my own research where the emotional aspects of feedback are seen as highly significant by the students. However, my research also challenges the argument put forward by Kluger and DeNisi that verbal feedback has a detrimental impact on students'. In fact my research would suggest that the opposite is true with students consistently identifying verbal feedback in a face to face situation as being of enormous value to them. Although few of

my respondents discussed the use of computerised forms of feedback where it was mentioned it was not seen in a particularly positive light which challenges Kluger and DeNisi's view that computerised forms of feedback are rated as marginally more effective than verbal feedback in complex learning tasks. Praise was the third of the three key moderators identified by Kluger and DeNisi as having a negative impact on feedback and here again for some of my students praise was a positive reinforcer of the feedback message due to its strong links to the students' self esteem. Whilst it is quite likely that praise in itself may simply help to promote surface and superficial approaches to learning, it is also clear that many of the students in my research actively sought positive affirmation. In my research the absence of praise was likely to be at least as significant a barrier to the student's learning from feedback as it presence.

Another potential challenge to the work of Kluger and DeNisi is their argument that feedback needs to be task orientated if it is to change behaviour and that feedback which focuses on the personal tends to diminish the student's self confidence. The task based approach to feedback can only be truly effective if the student and the teacher share a common understanding of the desired form of behaviour (Sadler, 2010), manifested as learning, and have a shared understanding of the steps which need to be taken to improve the work. However, such convergence of views between staff and students are relatively rare and all too often students are left wondering what they did so right or so wrong. Whilst it is clear from my participants that students do not want feedback which attacks them as an

individual, and to this extent my findings are consistent with those of Kluger and DeNisi's, it is equally clear that the majority of my participants wanted feedback which took account of their emotional state which is, of course, a highly personal context. Where my student participants were able to engage with their lecturers in verbal discussions relating to their work it appears the emotional threat posed by potentially negative feedback was reduced.

Another area in which my research appears to challenge the conventional view is in relation to students' conceptions of and approaches to learning. In their (1976) paper, Marton and Saljo differentiated between an approach to learning which essentially relied on reproducing knowledge and transforming knowledge: the first approach they termed surface learning and the second they termed deep learning. The desirability of developing deep approaches to learning clearly underpins Biggs' (2006) conception of the Constructive Alignment of learning, teaching and assessment. Thus the object of higher education becomes one of moving students from the surface and passive approaches to learning which characterise their entry behaviour towards increasingly sophisticated levels of autonomy and deep levels of learning as they move towards the end of their undergraduate programme. Such a view of learning as a progression from one, lower, stage of learning towards increasingly complex and higher stages of learning is consistent with Perry's (1970) view of learning in higher education.

Given the centrality of assessment to the students' experience of learning in higher education it is reasonable to see that feedback on assessed work will

also act as a key influence on students' approach to learning. Comments from year 1 students suggested that there was a reasonably high degree of openness to the possibility that feedback might be the principle agent of change and that the marks themselves were less important. In recognising that the feedback was likely to help them improve rather than the mark itself my first year students seem to be exhibiting some of the deep learning qualities identified by Marton and Saljo in the 1976 study. However, my year 3 students tended to place much greater emphasis on their grades and feedback comments were, in general, seen as helpful at best but not more significant than the mark itself, an approach which exhibits some of the characteristics of a surface level approach to learning. This apparent reversal of the dichotomy, at least in terms of the extent to which comments from my students seem to indicate a reversal in the learning journey predicted by Perry (1970), may sound surprising but there is research which suggests that it may not be so unusual.

In a large scale quantitative study, Peter and Jones (2007) suggested that '...it seems that approaches to study, particularly the inducement of a deep approach, have proven difficult to influence and may be context-specific without being amenable to change.' (Peter and Jones, 2007: 26) Furthermore, Haggis, in her 2003 paper, calls the whole idea of the uncritical acceptance of the surface learning /deep learning dichotomy into question and she argues that the deep/surface model "...has constructed a model of student learning which is based upon a set of elite values, attitudes and epistemologies that make more sense to higher education's 'gatekeepers'

than they do to many of its students." (Haggis, 2003: 102). One might argue that given the dominance of lecturers in universities in relation to the students they teach and the consequent power inequalities it can hardly come as a surprise to learn that the models of learning favoured by the "gatekeepers" trumps that of the student. Furthermore, one might argue, as Marshall and Case (2005) do, that contrary to Haggis' argument, the problem lies not with the model of deep and surface learning but with its inappropriate application. However, what seems unavoidable in my research is the extent to which the staff in my study tend to construct feedback as a process of telling students what they have done well and not so well rather than one in which the students are required to engage in the feedback process as co-constructors of knowledge. The reliance on feedback as telling may not intentionally encourage a surface approach to learning but by denying the student agency in the construction of their own learning the outcome may well be the same.

Fritz et als' (2000) paper also calls the capacity of feedback to have any significant influence on learning into question but although there is anecdotal evidence to support Fritz et al's findings there is little in the way of published research and plenty to suggest the positive role played by feedback. Truscott's (2007) paper seems to come close to Fritz et al's position but in discussing the structure of his research he notes.

> The main evidence comes from controlled experiments comparing the effects of correcting with those of not correcting. This distinction should not be confused with that between correcting errors and providing no

feedback at all. No one, to my knowledge, recommends the latter policy.
(Truscott, 2007: 258)

Crisp (2007) points out that in light of the more or less ubiquitous nature of beliefs about the positive impact of feedback on student learning '...claims are invariably presented as uncontestable 'truths' that academics should accept in faith or at least as 'common-sense' (Crisp, 2007: 572). Crisp does not go so far as to suggest that feedback is not a useful tool but she does suggest that it needs to be used in a more nuanced and targeted manner and that often students have an unrealistic expectation of how much feedback they will receive.

Another perspective amongst academic staff is that whilst feedback may have its uses, those uses are limited in their scope and their capacity to change students' engagement with feedback. This conditional and limited view of the value of feedback is explored in Li and Barnard's (2011) paper which identified three key factors which influenced academic staffs' assumptions about what made good feedback:

- to help students to improve their future writing;
- the importance of providing positive comments alongside the impact of negative feedback on students;
- the need to justify the grade eventually decided.

According to Li and Barnard it was the last of these areas, grading, which confronted the academics with their biggest challenge. Whilst Li and Barnard's participants gave a variety of reasons for their focus on grading over other aspects of feedback, what seems to have been the most

consistent view was expressed by Barnard as: 'There was agreement that their students would be encouraged to do better in the next assignment if they got a higher rather than a lower grade' (Li and Barnard, 2011:146). The assumption by Li and Barnard's participants that their students were primarily motivated by grades rather than written or verbal feedback is, according to Weaver (2007), a fairly widely held view amongst academic staff. Interestingly, in relation to the concerns expressed by the teaching staff in Li and Barnard's (2011) study that poor grades would de-motivate students, most of the students (over 75%) in Weaver's (2007) study thought that the grade had little impact on their sense of self worth. Weaver's research points to a conceptual gap between what lecturers think students focus on in feedback and what actually matters to students. The significance of this conceptual gap is highlighted by Orrell who argues that:

> Feedback at its best is pivotal in the learning and assessment process. Ideally, it is verbally extensive, identifies strengths and suggests strategies for improvement. It is not editing, criticism or justification of assessors' judgements.
> (Orrell, 2006: 444)

The problem is that for many academic staff the focus of their feedback does tend to be towards the process of editing, criticising or justifying. According to Orrell's (2006) research there is another gap between lecturers' espoused beliefs about feedback, in essence that feedback would be most likely to be effective when experienced as a co-learning process, and what they actually did in terms of providing written feedback. Orrell (2006) suggests that, amongst her participants, feedback largely focused on a post hoc justification

of a specific grade rather than a considered and detailed response to what the student had actually written. However, Edlin's (2011) study suggested a much closer relationship between lecturers' espoused views on feedback and their actual feedback practice although her findings were based on a very small sample of 11 lecturers and only five samples of written feedback.

The importance of face to face feedback:

One area where there seems to be some common ground between what the students say they want in terms of the feedback process, and what academic staff see as helpful, is the opportunity for face to face discussion. Although academic staff sometimes complain that when offered the opportunity for face to face feedback students are reluctant to come forward, the students' reluctance may owe a lot to their own level of self confidence and how approachable they perceive the member of staff to be. Brown (2007) noted that some of his students were willing to approach staff but he reported that a more common view amongst the students was consistent with the views expressed by one of his participants below:

> it is not encouraged ... I don't think they (students) would feel brave
> enough to do it ... it maybe depends on the lecturer a bit ... some
> people are more approachable than others. Some you know, you can
> just tell, don't want to be approached.
> (Brown, 2007: 41)

The students in Rae and Cochrane's (2008) study claim to actively welcome the opportunity to engage in face to face dialogue with their lecturers over

written feedback and the same view has been expressed in a range of other studies and yet some studies, for example, Golden, Stripp and Lee (2007), Handley et al (2007) continue to suggest that staff see students as reluctant participants. One possible explanation for why staff and students appear to hold differing opinions on the utility of face to face feedback is provided by Mutch, (2003) who suggests that 'Receiving feedback and discussing it face to face can be a challenging process which, without careful management, can turn into confrontation' (Mutch, 2003: 37). Whilst Mutch's observation is probably true the same point can be made in relation to any communicative exchange where there is an inherent power imbalance between the participants and furthermore the students in Blair and McGinty's (2012) study do not seem to be unduly intimidated by the thought of discussing their work with their lecturers. Indeed one student was recorded as welcoming the opportunity to confront staff:

> ...there seems to be this thing in academic about, you know, standing your ground. So if I've been marked down for something I passionately believe in, then I want to make it absolutely clear that's why it's in there. (Blair and McGinty, 2012: 7)

The capacity to engage in dialogue around assessment, as well as other more specific discipline related areas, can be considered to be an essential skill for undergraduates in terms of enhancing their performance but it is also a transferable skill with wider applications to the world of work (Nicol, 2010; Boud and Falchikov, 2006).

In terms of the direction of travel there is good reason to be confident that moves towards more dialogic forms of feedback are consistent with the wider

body of academic research. In order to more effectively facilitate dialogue in feedback on assessed work the National Union of Students (NUS) launched a student feedback pro-forma in which the student identified areas they would like feedback on. The NUS spokesperson described the pro-forma as '...a practical way of improving feedback and highlights the sort of model feedback students should be receiving (Attwood, 2009). Interestingly the work of Bloxham and Campbell (2010) suggest that such interactive feedback sheets can in fact be a helpful way of opening up a dialogic exchange over feedback between the teacher and the student. Whilst it is possible that there may be a misconception on the part of students between what they want and what is helpful, the work of Beaumont et al (2008) suggests that, at least in the case of first year undergraduates fresh from school or college, there is a clear conception of what is needed and what is helpful in terms of feedback. The key distinction, according to Beaumont et al, is that in schools the increased emphasis on assessment for learning has accustomed the students to far higher levels of formative feedback and guidance than is common in many universities, which have tended to retain the focus of feedback on the summative assessment of learning.

Researchers focusing on higher education have sought to develop dialogic forms of feedback for students and have emphasised the role of peer assessment. Whilst there remain unresolved concerns relating to the validity and rigor of peer assessment (see for example Cartney's (2010) work) there are grounds to believe that with careful guidance peer assessment can be an effective form of dialogic assessment and feedback as indicated in

McMahon's (2010) study. Hargreaves' (2007) study of how a Masters level group decided to transform a summative assessment process into a learning opportunity by the use of an innovative approach to peer assessment underlines not only the value of dialogic assessment but also the value of dialogic assessment and feedback between students and not simply between students and lecturers.

Trigwell et al's (1999) study, suggests that there is a high degree of convergence in the ways different groups, for example students and lecturers, construct their understanding about what good teaching is which, according to Lo's work (2010), leads in turn to heightened levels of student satisfaction. If, as Trigwell et al and Lo suggest, shared conceptions between students and lecturers about what good teaching is can enhance learning, then it would be reasonable to suggest that the same might be true where students and lecturers develop a shared conception of what good assessment and feedback practices are, a suggestion which appears to be borne out by Amrhein and Nassaji's' (2010) research. It should not be assumed that such an argument is suggesting that students' views on what constitutes good feedback should necessarily be privileged over those of lecturers. However, Amrhein and Nassaji's work also makes it very clear that such convergence between student and lecturer, in terms of what makes for good assessment and feedback, are comparatively rare and moreover are rarely implemented due to resource constraints.

Summary of the key arguments covered

In this literature review I have identified a number of key areas most of which will be re-visited in subsequent sections. I began by outlining the origins of the concept of feedback in electrical engineering in the early 20th century before moving on to discuss the relationship between feedback, in the guise of reinforcement, in the early work of behavioural psychologists. I have argued that the work of behavioural psychology has had a significant influence on the development of higher education both in the United States and the United Kingdom and that influence can be seen most clearly in the rise of behavioural learning objectives which were subsequently instantiated into British higher education in the form of learning outcomes by the work of the NCIHE and the QAA. Because part of the discourse around learning outcomes is their relationship with assessment I suggest that they must also have an indirect influence on feedback if only because feedback cannot be divorced from assessment. The origins of the concept of feedback made it highly likely that for many people in higher education feedback became associated with a process of control and predictability. I then suggest that the development of cybernetics in the early 1940s provides a conceptual challenge to traditional models of feedback which linked feedback to more constructivist models of learning and which called for enhanced dialogue between lecturer and student in which meanings were developed and shared rather than simply transmitted. The actual experience of feedback, from both the point of view of the student and the academic were explored through the four lenses of discourse, power, identity and emotion. I argue that in higher education feedback practices frequently privilege that work which conforms

most closely to the dominant academic discourse and as a consequence students are required to learn a whole range of tacit skills and knowledge which are valued over other forms of knowledge and skills. In considering the nature of power in higher education I argue that some academics also engage in acts of resistance which may see them rejecting what they see as unnecessarily restrictive and overly directive policy initiatives, particularly in relation to assessment and feedback, from centralised learning and teaching units or staff who they perceive as administrators. I argue that the process of resistance is closely linked to the identity adopted by staff and students alike and the extent to which processes relating to assessment and feedback challenge staff and students' identities. I also point out that for students assessment and feedback are inherently emotional processes. I argue that the experience of strong emotions by the students, may inhibit, at a physiological level, their capacity to learn from or engage with feedback and that staff need to be aware of this potential barrier. In the final section of the review I outlined what staff and students think good feedback is and I put forward a case for developing more dialogic forms of feedback which are consistent with constructivist models of learning and which may help to reduce some of the anxieties around assessment and feedback which students experience. In advocating the development of a more dialogic approach to feedback I am suggesting that the co-construction of knowledge inherent in a truly dialogic process will minimise the over reliance on tacit knowledge and the focus on grades which have tended to dominate the feedback process. It is, of course, recognised that moving towards the kind of dialogic model outlined above would represent a major paradigm shift in

terms of the ways in which resources are allocated to the provision of assessment and feedback. However, given the centrality of assessment and feedback to the student experience the question facing universities is not whether they can afford to re-allocate resources to facilitate more effective and dialogic forms of assessment and feedback but whether they can afford not to.

Chapter 3

Epistemological and Theoretical perspectives:

My first encounter with academic research came when, as a mature student studying Sociology, I had to work with data derived from large scale quantitative studies. I could appreciate that the studies had a generalised application to the social contexts they described but, as someone who had served an apprenticeship as a bricklayer and came from a solidly working class background, the large scale studies did not seem to describe my experience or my life. About twenty years ago I completed a course in person centred humanistic counselling which was strongly influenced by the work of Carl Rogers. There was much about the training which I found interesting and useful but perhaps the most influential aspect was the way in which the counsellor was trained to work with the client in order to co-construct meaning and understanding of a given phenomenon or event (Lynch 1997, Neimeyer 1998, Rudes and Guterman 2005). One of the lessons I learnt from the training I undertook was that reality was a difficult concept in that the extent to which it had any objective and clearly defined existence varied from case to case and person to person.

At the time I had no knowledge of the term ontology but I have subsequently come to see that the counselling approach I was trained in, and which I embraced, represented a specific set of assumptions about the way in which the world, or at least people in the world, worked. My training encouraged me to believe that individuals made sense of the world in a way which was

real to them but that sense of reality did not necessarily transfer to others hence the requirement for unconditional positive regard, our role as trainee counsellors was not to judge or give advice but to listen and reflect. More importantly, unlike the large scale quantitative studies I had encountered as a student of Sociology, I could see how, by focusing on the individual's life and their sense of truth, I could see both a relevance in what was said to the individual and find an echo in my own experiences I had not encountered before. The insight I had stumbled upon is eloquently expressed by Beck who wrote:

> The purpose of social science is to understand social reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shape the action which they take within that reality. Since the social sciences cannot penetrate to what lies behind social reality they must work directly with man's [sic] definitions of reality and with the rules he devises for coping with it. While the social sciences do not reveal ultimate truth, they do help us to make sense of our world. What the social sciences offer is explanation, clarification and demystification of the social forms which man has created around himself.
> (Beck, 1979 cited in Cohen et al 2005: 20)

At the start of my Doctoral training I read Michael Crotty's book *The Foundations of Social Research* and I quickly came to see a conceptual link between my earlier experience of counselling training and what Crotty wrote in relation to social constructionism which, according to Crotty: '...shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things) and gives us a quite definite view of the world' (Crotty 2005: 58). I found Crotty's distinction between social constructionism and constructivism useful in that Crotty suggests that constructivism applies to the meaning making of the individual which, as far as this thesis is concerned, is certainly something I

am interested in. However, my reading of Schwandt (1998) convinced me that whilst constructivism offered a useful, in Schwandt's term, persuasion, social constructionism appeared to offer a greater emphasis on the co-construction of meaning which is implicit in the concept of intersubjectivity. Gillespie and Cornish (2009) highlight the multiplicity of definitions which have come to be applied to the term intersubjectivity but in this thesis intersubjectivity will be taken to mean the ways in which meaning is created in a social context and is interpreted by multiple actors. Furthermore, intersubjectivity is a key feature of phenomenology as developed by Husserl (Thompson, 2005) which is the methodological approach I have chosen for this thesis. Thus my experience and my reading of theory has influenced the development of my epistemological approach to this thesis which is based firmly on a social constructionist persuasion.

The epistemological basis for social constructionism lies in Weber's focus on *verstehen* (Crotty 2005), usually translated as understanding. As a researcher I am trying to understand the ways in which undergraduate students and university teachers experience and construct the concept of feedback on assignments. Following Schwandt (1998) I would argue that my epistemological position suggests that data are constructed through the interactions between myself and my participants. In order to access these data I needed to engage with and interpret my participants' explanations and descriptions of their individual experiences. It is, however, not enough to simply claim to be adopting a socially constructionist epistemology and Burr (2003) identifies what she sees as the four key characteristics that define a

social constructionist approach and I will use the characteristics to illustrate my thinking in a little more detail.

The first of Burr's defining characteristics of social constructionism is that the researcher needs to adopt a critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge. In terms of my research this characteristic might be seen in relation to an assumption that there is a common, and widely held, understanding of what is meant by the term feedback in relation to students' work. These assumptions may find their clearest expression in the use of words such as "critical", "analytic" and "good" which are frequently applied to students' work and about which there is an assumption that all involved in the feedback process share a common understanding (Chanock, 2000). The words used here as an example illustrate the complex nature of what seems to happen when academics provide students with feedback: these are not complex technical or esoteric words and in many ways their simplicity is the main cause of the problems encountered by students which Chanock notes. The problem, as Glover and Brown (2006) make clear is that many lecturers believe that the quality of their feedback is good but that students don't read or act on receipt of it. Thus the lecturers tend to construct an idea of students as wanting to be spoon fed and of feedback as a largely pointless activity whilst students tend to construct a conception of feedback as unhelpful and frequently irrelevant. Both students and lecturers construct their perception of what feedback is and in particular what good feedback is and it is these constructions which I will be exploring.

The second of Burr's four characteristics of socially constructionist approaches to research require researchers to recognise that our understanding of the world around us is located within a wider socio-cultural and historical milieu. The most obvious socio-cultural distinction in my research is the fact that half of my participants are undergraduate students and the other half are university lecturers. As Nimon (2007) points out, most current undergraduate students belong to the category defined as Generation Y as distinct from the lecturers who belong to the social group commonly referred to as Baby Boomers (loosely those born between 1946 and 1965). In the context of feedback it has been suggested that those defined as belonging to Generation Y have a strong commitment to rapid, almost instantaneous, communication in which technology is used to deliver clear and easily understood messages (Skiba, 2005). Writing in 2001 Prensky described the emergence of Generation Y and their relationship with technology into education as a "singularity". Prensky differentiates between what he calls the Digital Natives of Generation Y, who regard technology as an indispensible part of their lives, and the Digital Immigrants of earlier generations who use technology as a back up to more traditional ways of collecting and interrogating knowledge. Prensky's definition of Digital Native and Digital Immigrant has been criticised (see for example Bayne and Ross 2007 and Helsper and Eynon, 2010) for being too simplistic and for '...de-privileging ... the teacher...' (Bayne and Ross, 2007: 5) but even Prensky's critics recognise that to teach students well it is necessary to first understand them and that consequently teachers need to review their practice in the light of the changing nature of their students and the available technology.

In terms of the historic developments Burr (2004) says need to be identified in the development of a socially constructionist approach to research one need look no further than the massification of higher education since the abolition of the binary divide in 1992 (Gibbs, 2006) and which, since 2000, has seen a drive towards 50% of the 18-30 year olds in the country entering some form of higher education. The consequence of widening participation has not only seen an enormous growth in the numbers of undergraduates in British higher education but also a change in the composition of the student body in terms of their pre-university educational experiences and the type of assessment and feedback practices they are familiar with (Sambell and Hubbard, 2004). The work of Beaumont et al (2008) points to a significant mismatch between students' experience of assessment and feedback prior to entering higher education and their experience once they were enrolled on a higher education programme of study. This mismatch between the prior experience of assessment and feedback and the experience in higher education, which may well have existed before massification but has become more pronounced as a result of massification, is even more noticeable amongst older students entering higher education via Access courses and other non 'A' level routes (Bowl and Whitelaw, 2010).

The consequences of the historic process of massification of higher education has not only created problems for the students who are entering higher education. What is clear from the work of Keane (2006) is that academic staff frequently seem to view the changes in higher education, which are a consequence of massification, through an historic lens which

leads them to question the ability and suitability for higher education of at least some of the students they are working with (see also Fuller et al, 2008). Despite the concerns of some academics there appears to be relatively little research based evidence of a decline in the ability of undergraduate students. Jones (2011) suggests that much of what informs the discourse around declining standards is based on anecdote but nevertheless the impression that, compared to some prelapsarian idyll where well prepared students were eager to engage in learning rather than simply being assessed, contemporary undergraduates are lacking ability and curiosity, is widely held (Smithers (2003), Ganobcsik-Williams (2004), Paton (2012)).

The comments relating to the socio-cultural changes which have been identified as characterising higher education in the early 21st century, in particular the alleged impacts of technology, massification and widening participation, and the rhetoric of decline are all located within a specific historic period. As such their construction represents a norm for that period in the same way that a study of higher education in the late 1960s and 70s might focus on the politicised nature of students and their lecturers. Thus the forms of knowledge generated within a specific socio-cultural and historic context will be specific to that context and will represent a version of the truth for the actors involved in the discourse.

Burr's (2004) third area for inclusion in a socially constructionist approach to research emphasises the ways in which social interactions construct and sustain peoples' knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

The significance of this aspect of social constructionism is that it challenges the idea that concepts such as reality or truth have some sort of objective or absolute quality which exists to be discovered. Berger and Luckmann (1966) were amongst the first writers to recognise that all knowledge is the product of social interaction and they write of reality being what we experience in our everyday life in which common sense and shared understandings of the everyday life are the product of interactions with those around us. This argument does not require that everyone needs to have an identical world view only that there are sufficient areas of agreement for a commonly agreed set of assumptions to coalesce which leads Berger and Luckmann to argue that 'Commonsense knowledge is the knowledge I share with others in the normal, self evident, routines of everyday life' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 23). Thus truth and reality have no objective status other than that which emerges from the collective experience of people. This argument, which lies at the heart of social constructionism, means that truth cannot be discovered, it can only be created in that a word, an artefact or an event can only have the significance ascribed to it by people and in itself it has no inherent meaning or significance. For example the word good, when used in feedback, has no significance in itself, its significance lies entirely in the values attached to it by lecturers and students and that significance and those values will depend on how the idea of good, and what it entails, is constructed by the lecturer and by the student. Where a "common sense" view of the meaning of the word good can be reached feedback is likely to be unproblematic, but where different groups construct and interpret the term good in different ways then the scope for problems is considerable unless

steps are taken to construct a consensual view. It should not be assumed that in adopting a socially constructionist epistemology I am seeking to deny the possibility of an external, ontological reality, independent of human thought, but my epistemology is an acknowledgement that the meaning and knowledge associated with that reality are constructed by humans. Thus the focus of this research is understanding people, in this case a mixture of university teachers and undergraduate students, and their construction of the phenomenon of feedback in its formative and summative forms.

Burr's fourth criterion for socially constructionist approaches to research is that knowledge and social action go together. Using this criterion we may assume that people's actions will reflect the way in which they construct knowledge. If we take as an example the work of Lea and Street (2000) and their investigation into student writing in higher education, it is very clear that where a deficit model is adopted, a model which sees the problems relating to student writing as lying with the student, the response will be to try to "fix" the student and so bring the students' writing abilities into alignment with the expectations of the staff. It is also important to recognise that students also construct and then enact knowledge, in their case the knowledge will tend to define what they want from a university either at the level of the institution or at the level of their interactions with the staff. Research by Glogowska et al (2007) exemplifies the ways in which students' construction of self knowledge influences their decision whether to quit their university course or whether to continue with their studies. In Glogowska et al's research it is clear that those students who chose to leave, constructed their identity as "failures" or

"outsiders" or "poor" or "victims" yet at the same time other students in the research project, who faced similar experiences and challenges, chose to stay. The different responses of those students who decided to stay is captured by their language when they spoke of their 'determination', 'stubbornness' and 'inner strength'. It will, of course, be noted that these specific terms have no meaning beyond that which the students and the researchers chose to give them: what matters is the social and historic context in which such knowledge and the corresponding actions emerge.

Throughout this review of the epistemological basis of social constructionism I have argued that in order to make sense of my participants' world view it is essential to recognise the extent to which that world view is a product of their interaction with those around them. In recognising the extent to which the understanding of and response to a given phenomenon, in this case feedback, is driven by the social construction of reality, social constructionism provides a method of enquiry which links my stated ontological view to a specific theoretical perspective, in this case interpretivism.

Crotty (2005) argues that interpretivism represents an attempt to develop a way of understanding the world which is not based on positivist empiricism. Within interpretivism lies the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed as a result of interactions between an individual and a phenomenon or a group of phenomena and the ways in which that reality is explained to others (Groenewald 2004, Weber 2004, Kelliher 2005, Scott and Morrison 2006). Coming as it does from a socially constructionist and

interpretivist perspective this thesis does not seek to establish a statistically reliable, generalizable and objective truth (Robson, 2002). However, it would be wrong to assume that the research conducted for this thesis has no value beyond meeting the requirements of the EdD and it is important to recognise the distinction which can be made between what Smaling (2003) defines as statistical generalization and theoretical generalization (see also Kelliher, 2005). Thus the research carried out for this thesis is intended to make a theoretical contribution to the wider debate concerning the way in which university lecturers and undergraduate students construct the idea of what good feedback is.

Chapter 4

Research design:

This research was based on data which were collected via semi-structured interviews with 9 members of academic staff drawn from different disciplines from both of the campuses of the university where the research was conducted. In addition to the staff who participated I also carried out semi structured interviews with six first year undergraduates and eight third year undergraduates. All the interviews lasted for between 40 and 50 minutes, were recorded in a private room using a digital recorder and were professionally transcribed. Each participant was sent a complete transcript of their interview for member checking (Carlson, 2010) and they were given the opportunity to delete anything they felt uncomfortable with. Aside from a few minor changes, in relation to homophones and the spelling of names, no significant amendments were asked for by the participants.

My original intention had been to recruit undergraduate students from years 1 and 3 from across the university but this proved to be problematic because I had no effective way of contacting potential participants. Furthermore, the logistics of organising interviews around students' time tables over two campuses in the time available to me meant I had to use a different approach. After discussing the problems I was encountering in designing an appropriate method of collecting data from students with my Doctoral supervisor, I decided to restrict the student sample to those from one Department located on one campus. There were obvious disadvantages

associated with drawing all my student participants from one Department in terms of the extent to which any data produced might have wider applicability. There was one big advantage arising from recruiting my student participants from one Department which was that the social influence on their construction of what good feedback was would be enhanced because the students knew each other and shared a common experience of assessment and feedback. Two of the staff participants came from the same department as the students whilst the rest came from other departments across the university. Whilst it may be objected that staff from different academic disciplines will tend to have different views on feedback these staff had already worked together as part of the university feedback working group mentioned above and had developed common criteria for evaluating the quality of feedback. Furthermore, the staff participants were subject to the same constraints in terms of university wide assessment regulations and feedback processes which have become increasingly homogeneous, partly in response to the demands of the NSS, and partly with a view towards greater consistency from a quality assurance perspective. It was reasonable to see the staff participants as having a great deal in common when it came to thinking about feedback. The small size of the sample group will prevent meaningful statistical generalizability and consequently the analysis of the data from the interviews will be informed by the principle of theoretical generalization in which findings from one specific context will provide theoretical insights which will be applicable to other, similar, situations, in effect the kind of 'modest genalization' Ragin (1989) describes.

I wanted to work with 1st year undergraduates who may have already received some formative feedback but had not yet gone through the process of receiving summative feedback and 3rd year students who had experienced both formative and summative feedback. With the first year students I was interested in the extent to which their construction of what constituted good feedback was influenced by their experiences gained from the courses they studied or their experiences in the workplace prior to starting their undergraduate studies. I was also interested in exploring the extent to which the first year undergraduates' view of good feedback came to be shaped by their interaction with academic staff once they had started their course. With the third year students I was interested in exploring how the experience of receiving feedback on their work and how their interactions with their peers and lecturers over the preceding two years had shaped their views on what good feedback was.

My student sample was recruited after e-mails which were sent to all first and third year undergraduates in the relevant Department, along with a participant information sheet which described the research and what agreeing to be involved would mean., The e-mails generated 20 replies from a mixture of first and third year students and I met with them individually and in small groups to explain the project in more detail after which six students, four first years and two third years decided to withdraw. By focusing on students in one Department and on two very specific groups of students, my sampling was consistent with Schatzman and Strauss' (1973) conception of selective sampling in that I invited first years whose experience of feedback

at university was limited and third years whose experience of feedback at university was extensive.

When it came to recruiting staff to participate in my research I already had a group in mind who had collaborated together in a university wide review of written feedback on students' work. Although these academics came from different disciplines and did not usually work together, they had combined in pairs and then small groups to identify aspects of good and weak feedback from samples of work which had recently been reviewed by external examiners prior to the university's exam boards. I knew all but one of the members of staff who participated in my research and had worked with several of them on the feedback project which meant that in Mercer's (2007) term, I enjoyed what could be described as an intimate relationship with these participants.

Before continuing with my commentary on how I designed my research it is worth pausing to reflect on the growth of insider research into higher education in the UK and elsewhere. Trowler, (2012) has pointed out that the emergence of EdDs with their emphasis on candidates focusing on their own professional context has seen an increase in the volume of literature related to insider research but he also points out that much of that research focuses on organisational aspects of universities. A scan of the house journal of the Institution for Institutional Research, *Research in Higher Education,* confirms Trowler's point and the same is broadly true of the European Association for Institutional Research and its house journal *Tertiary Education and*

Management. The bi-annual, peer reviewed Higher Education Close Up series of conferences does offer a much greater focus on aspects of higher education which move beyond the largely organisational aspects of researching universities to engage with the pedagogy of higher education. Foreman - Peck and Winch (2010) have produced a detailed and useful guide to conducting institutional research and, as philosophers of education, they have addressed some key issues which came up for me, notably the question of the generalizability of small scale research. Whilst acknowledging the value of generalizability Foreman- Peck and Winch note that generalizability, even in large scale projects, does not guarantee that the results can be applied directly to policy, they still need to be interpreted and furthermore in both large and small scale projects the context of the research is a key determinant to its wider application.

As an insider researcher I was very familiar with the context of my research and I was also confident that my colleagues and the students I was working with shared a recognition of the significance of feedback: what I was less sure about was the extent to which their views of feedback overlapped. My colleagues certainly reacted to me as an insider and assumed a common understanding of the institutional context in which they worked as well as the nature of the students they worked with. One of the down sides of my colleagues' openness and willingness to share their experience was a tendency for the interviews to drift into anecdotes rather than stay focused on the questions being asked and I sometimes found it difficult keep the interview on track. However, as a researcher informed by a socially

constructionist epistemology I came to realise that for many of my colleagues the anecdotes provided a key narrative arc in the co-construction of an understanding of what good feedback meant to them and I realised I had to be open and responsive to their narrative. Indeed I can go further and would argue that it was precisely the anecdotes, and the implied shared understanding and experience, rather than the more guarded responses to my interview questions, which allowed me to really start to understand what my colleagues were thinking when it came to feedback. The importance of recognising the role of what amounted to story - telling in my staff participants' answers is emphasised by Holloway and Jefferson who write in relation to their own research:

> The focus of our analysis is the people who tell us stories about their lives: the stories themselves are a means to understand our subjects better. While stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths, story-telling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations.
> (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000, cited in Elliot, 2006: 20 – 21)

With the student participants I could not assume much if anything in the way of shared experiences but I knew from my training as a counsellor that it was important to establish a high degree of rapport with them and to show an empathic response to their experience. I was careful to negotiate a time for the interviews which suited the student participants and I selected a room which was private and comfortably furnished with leather upholstery rather than the standard classroom equipment of desk and tables. The arm chairs were comfortable and relaxing and they helped to create a relaxed and informal relationship between me and the student participants. The physical environment was an important consideration because I wanted the students

to feel safe, secure and valued. All of the student participants made positive comments about the furnishings and said they felt relaxed in the room we were using. I also ensured that there was at least a one hour gap between each of the student participants' interviews, partly to allow me time to reflect on what had been said and make field notes and partly to ensure the anonymity of the student participants who would not see each other entering or leaving the room.

Ethical issues and power relations

Formal ethics approval was sought from my university and my research proposal was sent to the relevant Faculty Research Ethics Committee where it was considered by the committee members. After receiving written confirmation from my supervisor that she supported the research proposal, the ethics committee approved my research proposal. The only concern raised by the ethics committee was in relation to my status as an insider researcher and the committee required me to take steps to protect the identity of the participants from each other and from anyone reading the finished project. A further consideration was the requirement of the 1998 Data Protection Act which places a responsibility on academic researchers to protect the identity of the sources of their data.

In order to meet the requirements of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and the 1998 Data Protection Act in relation to protecting the identity of my participants the following steps were taken. Each individual participant was contacted in isolation, and communication, particularly via e-mail, was not

copied to any other participant. As a consequence, unless participants chose to reveal to other students or colleagues that they were participating, the identity of each participant was shielded from the other participants. There were, however, two key problems which I faced when addressing the issue of anonymity. In the first place it was clear that any individual could choose to disclose their status as a participant to a colleague or peer and they could also choose to disclose what they said in their interview. I concluded that outside of the thesis itself there was little I could do to shield the participant's identity or what they said in their interview if they chose to disclose it to others because this information belonged to them. In this regard I was acting in manner consistent with the BERA guidelines on ethical research which state that: '...researchers must also recognise participants' rights to be identified with any publication of their original work or other inputs, if they so wish.' (BERA, 2011: 7). The other problem relating to anonymity which I faced was the inability of effectively protecting the site of the research, although I have not named the university where my research was conducted it would only take a few minutes on the internet to locate it. Walford (2005) suggests that the selection of the site of research is a key component of the issue of anonymity in research and he cautions against selecting a site simply because it is accessible or convenient. However, whilst acknowledging the general point Walford makes the emphasis on the importance of studying one's own professional practice which underpins the whole EdD programme made it highly likely that I would want to conduct my research in the University where I worked.

Given that I could not, nor would I wish to, prevent participants from engaging in acts of self disclosure nor could I effectively protect the site of the research, the question of whether the idea of anonymity in my research was even possible (see Walford, 2005) had to be confronted. The problem I faced was the tension between two ethical principles: non maleficence and benefice. I was keen to avoid acting or, more accurately, writing in a way which could be harmful to my participants, particularly those who were members of staff. I also wanted my participants to gain some benefit from participation, largely expressed in terms of developing a greater insight into the process of feedback and how it is constructed. The solution I applied to maximising anonymity whilst creating a space in which my participants could explore the concept of feedback in a way which was useful to them was to strip out all and any direct and indirect identifies. Thus there are no names or pseudonyms used for the participants just numeric and letter based identifiers which only identify the status of the participant as a 1st or 3rd year student or a member of staff. Nothing I wrote in the analysis of the data nor anything in the data themselves allows the reader to determine the sex, age or ethnicity of the participant. I also removed from the interview extracts any reference to the subjects studied or taught which further reduced the possibility of a reader being able to identify which department the participants taught or studied in. The fact that the data would be shared with other colleagues in the University was made explicit in the Participant Information Sheet (see appendix 1) which was sent to each participant and was reviewed with the participant prior to the actual data collection taking place.

Walford (2005) argues that researchers use the promise of anonymity as a screen behind which they can conduct some questionable research or hide some questionable data. For me I offered anonymity to my participants as a way of encouraging them to be open about their views on feedback either as a student or as a member of staff. Clearly the students' concern might have been that any negative comments which could clearly be linked to them personally might lead to retribution from staff who felt that had been unfairly criticised. For the staff the veil of anonymity would offer them some protection in the event that they chose to criticise their students, which some did, or the wider university, which some did. From my point of view what was important was that the views of staff and students were heard and it was less important to me to record who actually expressed which views.

A problem inherent in insider research is that of the power relations between researcher and participant. Walker suggests that "...there is no equality of power in the research relationship between teacher and students ...and it would be patronizing to pretend otherwise." (Walker, 2001: 35). Costley et al (2010) point out that inequalities of power do not only exist when lecturers interview students: they are also present when lecturers interview their colleagues. As I carried out my research I was always conscious of the actual or potential power imbalances between myself and my participants. In the rest of this section I will explain how I sought to manage the data collection process in a way which was designed to minimise any negative consequences of the power relationship between me and my participants.

From start to finish the process of data collection took a little over 9 months as dates for interviews were set up, cancelled for various reasons and re-scheduled and whilst I found the delays frustrating I did not feel able to assert my needs and interests over those of my participants who I knew were facing similar time pressures and constraints to those which I faced. In fact, my status as an insider researcher probably gave me an advantage over an outsider as I could afford to be flexible in my data gathering timetable as my time in the university was not limited. As Hannabuss suggests, as an insider I knew:

> ...how far old friendships and favours can be pressed, just when and where to meet up for interviews, what the power structures and the moral mazes and subtexts of the [university] are and so what taboos to avoid, what shibboleths to mumble and bureaucrats to placate.
> (Hannabuss, 2000: 103)

There is a considerable risk attached to interviewing participants with whom you are already very familiar and that is that they may wish to simply tell you what they think you want to hear (Robson, 2002: 172). In the interviews I encouraged the participants to talk freely about themselves, their work and their experiences of feedback and I sought to create a relaxed conversational approach when exploring uncertainties or ambiguities. The structure of the interviews was based on an interview schedule with subsidiary questions derived from the participants' earlier answers being used as probes. The probes sought to develop rapport and understanding and were typically expressed as "can I just check I have understood that properly?" or tentative hypothesis such as "are you saying that...?" or "does that mean...?". Furthermore, I consciously tried to encourage openness and honesty on the

part of the participants by telling them that they could check and, if necessary edit, their transcripts. Above all my position as an insider researcher ensured that from the start the interviews were characterised by an easy and unforced rapport with no long embarrassing silences and a willingness to be open about what I was doing as a researcher.

Costley et al (2010) highlight some of the potential pitfalls of using colleagues as participants and at the start of each interview, which were conducted in the member of staff's office, I took time and care to explain my purpose and the use I would make of the data provided. I explained that each of my colleagues would have the opportunity to check and edit the transcripts of the interview before the data were used and I emphasised their right to withdraw at any stage up to completion. When explaining why I was carrying out this particular piece of research I was careful to explain to student and staff participants that they were helping me to understand something which I personally found puzzling in my own practice and there was no attempt to present myself as an objective, disinterested seeker of some undiscovered truth. However, I also thought that the issue of feedback would be of interest to my participants, both the students and my colleagues, and in conducting my research to paraphrase Jensen (1997), my goal was not to convince my participants that my position was superior, but to develop a discourse that may be of use to them in their exploration of the issues. I was careful to explain to all my participants that my intention was not only to understand their construction of feedback but also to meet the requirements of the EdD.

Methodology:

Methodologically this paper is based on a phenomenological approach.

Cohen et al define phenomenology as:

...a theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value; and one which sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality."

(Cohen et al, 2005: 23)

Rather more succinctly Lester suggests that phenomenology is "...the study of experience from the perspective of the individual" (Lester, 1999: 1). As indicated above, my epistemology is derived from social constructionism and interpretivism which contains within it a variety of methodological approaches (Crotty, 2005, Cohen et al, 2005) of which phenomenology is only one. Both social constructionism and phenomenology make use of the process of intersubjectivity whereby the intention is to develop a shared or common understanding in relation to a given phenomenon, as far as that is possible, between participants and the researcher. My participants were invited to discuss a given phenomenon, in this case feedback on students' work, and then to reflect on how they came to think about feedback in the ways they did: in effect they discussed the distinction that Husserl (1982) makes between noema (the object) and noesis (the perception of the object). The distinction between an object or an event and the ways in which that object or event is perceived or experienced by different individuals is a key characteristic of phenomenological research and lies at the heart of my thesis. The connection between the concept of noema and noesis and their

relationship to the student, and staff, experience, is explained by Greasley and Ashworth as:

> The intentional object or noema is the study material and the study situation and all that this entails for the student, and the approach or noesis is the inner response to these, the mental orientation which is appropriate.

(Greasley and Ashworth 2007: 832)

Establishing trustworthiness:

Interpretivist research can be open to the accusation that it is subjective and at its worst may represent little more than what the researcher thinks the participant meant or means in any given answer (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al, 2005). Morse et al (2002) have argued for the adoption of reliability and validity checks which are more consistent with a positivist paradigm. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the concepts of reliability and validity, stemming as they do from positivist approaches to research, have no relevance to qualitative research and they suggest using alternatives terms such as trustworthiness in lieu of validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba's position can be seen as representing an extreme and rather narrow conception (Cho and Trent, 2006) whilst Rolfe (2006) argues that the most appropriate approach to the issue of validity and reliability in qualitative research is to recognise the multiple forms of research which are defined as qualitative and accept that such multiplicity militates against the development of the notion of "...a universal set of quality criteria" (Rolfe, 2006: 309). I believe it is important to establish the trustworthiness of my research, albeit not in terms of a positivist paradigm as advocated by Morse, but at the same

time I would argue that in adopting Rolfe's argument I would risk of undermining the credibility of my research.

Following Whittemore et al (2001) a four stage approach was developed to establish the trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation process without recourse to the discourse of the positivist paradigm. The four stages were:

- Credibility: Do the results of the research reflect the experience of the participants in a believable way?

- Authenticity: Does the interpretation and presentation of the data represent the participants' perspective in terms of their different experiences and voices?

- Criticality: Does the research process demonstrate evidence of critical appraisal?

- Integrity: Does the research reflect recursive and repetitive checks of validity as well as a humble presentation of findings?

I believe that by adopting these four stages in the design and execution of my research I have taken the necessary steps to produce data which is academically rigorous and trustworthy.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis and discussion:

Data from the interviews were analysed using NVivo 9 a computer based qualitative data analysis program. I decided to use NVivo 9 for two main reasons, the ease with which data could be handled and manipulated and the ease with which data generated in NVivo could be imported into a word document. I had used an earlier version of NVivo when working on my Institutional Focused Study and so I was familiar with the basic package. I found NVivo 9, which was the most recent version of the program, easy to use and in fact quite surprisingly intuitive. The advantages of using a computer based qualitative data analysis program such as NVivo is attested to by several writers (Welsh, 2002; Ozkan, 2004; Lu and Shulman, 2008) who all emphasise the flexibility offered by such programs and the ability to visit and re-visit data on multiple occasions as the coding and analysis process becomes increasingly sophisticated.

Whilst I found NVivo a simple and effective package for data analysis some writers, (see for example St John and Johnson, (2000) for a helpful review), have suggested that the capacity of computer aided qualitative data analysis to help the researcher handle large amounts of data may lead the researcher to focus on the quantity of data rather than its meaning. Whilst the number of interviews I conducted could not be described as large, the volume of material generated ran to over 70,000 words which certainly represented a

large volume of material. I addressed the volume of material by taking a slow and methodical approach to the analysis taking 31 days to complete the analysis of the transcripts. Taking my time to complete the analysis allowed me to reflect on what I had learnt and how the data might inform my ideas about the social construction of feedback by staff and students.

Some writers, notably Seidel (1991), have suggested that reliance on technology can create a barrier between the researcher and their data as context can be lost when focusing on a single word. Seidel's concerns seem rather odd given that the process of coding leads to data reduction (Miles and Huberman, 1994) which, as a process, invariably leads to the fragmentation and fracturing of data to the extent that the original context, in the sense of the specific location of a word or phrase within a text, is easily lost. One of the more useful functions of NVivo 9 is the way it allows the researcher to code a single word or a short phrase using the Code in Vivo function. The word or phrase becomes the label for the coding node, thus effectively de-contextualising it along the lines complained of by Seidel, but the program allows the researcher to easily locate the word or phrase within its narrow context (2 or 3 words either side) or broad context (a complete paragraph or larger section of text). NVivo also allows for individual words to be searched for which, when found, are usually located within a larger piece of text which again provides the necessary context.

Before detailed analysis and coding of the transcripts began I developed a system for identifying individual participants whilst maintaining an appropriate degree of anonymity. Student participants were coded as student 1A, student 1B, student 1C etc. if they were first year students and student 3A, student 3B, student 3C etc. if they were third year students. Staff were simply coded staff A, staff B, staff C etc. Because I had drawn on Foucault's ideas about discourse, power, identity and emotion in my literature review I wanted to use these terms to provide the theoretical framing for the coding of my data.

After the initial read through which familiarised me with the text I then undertook a more detailed read through which allowed me to code individual words and phrases which were deemed to be significant. By the time I had completed analysing the student data I had produced 57 nodes each with varying amounts of data attached in relation to the students' data whilst the staff interviews generated 30 nodes with data attached. I then went through each node and if necessary re-coded data to more appropriate nodes, this was easily done and is one of the great advantages of using computer based data analysis. Finally I looked at each node and decided whether it was a subset of one of the 4 a-priori themes I had identified at the start of the process or whether it sat outside the themes.

By reviewing and revisiting each node several times I was able to create what NVivo describes as tree nodes, that is a node which contains within it

several sub nodes which are linked to it. For example under the Node emotion I grouped any data which referred to a specific emotion such as delight, sadness, stress, happiness, fear whilst under identity I placed data dealing with descriptions of the individuals by themselves for example student 3G said "I'm quite a practical person." whilst student 3 H said "I'm not very academic – I am and I'm not.", a pleasantly ambiguous and apparently contradictory statement. For Power I included those pieces of data where the participant appeared to be implying they have power to use or that they see power being used in a positive or negative way by others such as student 3 C's views on who should provide feedback on their work: "From a purely selfish point of view I'm just in it to get the best degree that I possibly can and I just want to hear from the people who are going to impact on that degree". Also coded under power was this extract from Staff B's interview "it's impressed upon them that it's got to be absolutely accurate what they write [sic]". Coding data under discourse was relatively straightforward in that I decided to include any material where staff or students were discussing the wider fields of assessment in general and feedback in particular because in these comments participants were, or at least appeared to me to be, rehearsing forms of truth and knowledge, processes and concepts which Foucault identifies as lying at the heart of discourse. For example, student 1B commented on their perception of their lecturers' approach to feedback "I just felt that we didn't really get much guidance and they were kind of happy if everyone got a grade C.", In answer to a question about why they didn't want feedback at the end of a module Student 1C said "Because that's too late. For me, that's too late." In response to a question about how feedback

could be improved, staff member C said "I think at the moment it's a very mechanical process. I think most of us are dealing with a huge number of scripts." As coding and data reduction continued a number of patterns began to emerge with the most obvious being the clustering of responses and participants around some key nodes.

When the codes were grouped under the 4 key themes of discourse, power, emotions and identity it becomes apparent that for the student participants the nodes grouped under discourse and emotions represented the two most common themes. Thus, in terms of understanding the social construction of feedback by staff and students we need to recognise that there is a common emphasis on the development of a discourse which can be seen as a process of truth and knowledge creation which is common to both groups. However, there is a significant difference in that students appear to focus on the emotional aspects of feedback whilst the staff appear to be rather more focused on the manifestation of power within feedback. The discussion of the data will be in three sections. The first section will focus on student data, the second on staff data and the third will seek to draw comparisons between the two sets of data.

The students' perspective:

In the following extracts from the transcripts of interviews with students and the subsequent section looking at the staff perspective, questions asked in the interview are indicated in bold type to distinguish them from the participants' answers. Interviews with both first and third year students began by inviting them to talk about their education and or work experience prior to starting university. This approach to the interview served to provide some reassurance for the participant, by asking them to comment on an aspect of their life they were very familiar with. I was particularly interested in the views of the first year participants, who at the time of their interview, had not experienced any summative feedback on their assignments. I wanted to explore the extent to which their views on feedback were the product of their prior experience of feedback. Thus participant 1C, a mature student who had completed an Access to Higher Education course prior to attending university, described her experience of feedback on the Access course as:

> you'd submit a draft, you'd have some feedback on that draft and then you'd submit your final one...That was the standard way of doing it and when we initially started the course, we were allowed two submissions of a draft but then in the later stages, once that first term was out the way, then it was just one draft and one submission and that was it. (student 1C)

This view of feedback, as an ipsative process which has been defined as assessment which '...compares existing performance with previous performance. (Hughes, 2011: 353) allowed the student time to develop and improve their work. The same ipsative process was noted by those participants, three out of six amongst the first year participants, who had attended school sixth forms or sixth form colleges prior to starting their

degree. When asked to define what they thought feedback was there was an enormous emphasis by first and third year students on the role of feedback in improving learning and the following extract from participant student 1D is fairly typical:

> For me it's ... sort of when you get a paper and give it into the teachers you have something back so you can improve on it, that's what feedback means to me, either if it is negative or if it is positive feedback you can still improve on your paper, so feedback is meaning improving something. (student 1D)

The participants were aware of the variability in the type and quality of feedback on offer to them as can be seen in these extracts from student 1B and student 1E

> We only got feedback on our essays ...and it wasn't always very constructive at sixth form college but I actually did an Access to Higher Education Diploma last year and the feedback I got there was a lot more constructive. (student 1B)

> I think when I was in my first year in college we had an essay to hand in for performance studies and my tutor ... gave it back to me two days before it had to be re-submitted, so I found that very unhelpful. (student 1E)

These extracts suggest that far from being tabula rasa when it came to understanding what good feedback was, the year 1 participants recognised at least some of the characteristics of good feedback. Taken together, these extracts illustrate three of the ten key elements of effective feedback identified by Nicol and MacFarlane – Dick (2006). Participant student 1 D emphasises the importance of feedback in helping students to close the gap between actual and desired levels of performance. Student participant 1 B

highlights the importance of feedback which fails to address positive motivation and student participant 1E highlights the importance of timely feedback. As a consequence of their prior experience they had a very clear idea of what good and bad feedback was which provided a yardstick by which subsequent feedback could be measured.

The third year students also had a well developed concept of what feedback was which was clearly informed by their experience prior to starting their degree as can be seen in this extract from student 3H

what's been the most useful piece of feedback you've had?

The one that sticks in my mind – whether it's useful or not, but I guess it is – is when I was doing GCSEs and my English teacher got really frustrated with me ... she's really good – we had to write a paragraph about something – and she red-penned everywhere ... but at the end of it, it said 'this is actually a really good beginning piece of work, if you'd written more or if you'd finished it, this could have been a such-and-such a grade'. (student 3H)

It is profoundly disappointing to learn that after three years of undergraduate study the best piece of feedback this participant could identify was something from at least 6 years earlier.

Not all participants drew on their school or college experience when discussing their concept of good feedback, participant student 3G had worked as a manager in a bar and had been closely involved in providing and receiving feedback as part of their job as is clear from this extract:

Did you receive feedback whilst you were running the bar?

> Yes, from my General Manager and from my Area Manager regarding the events, whether I'd met targets that I'd set out for myself in my business plans; if I hadn't I had to try and explain why I hadn't met them, how I could have improved it so that next time I did an event I'd learnt from the previous one. Then also feedback from the staff towards my training that I'd done ... it was important to know that they'd got it and that I was clear. (student 3G)

In this extract we can also see a dialogic process in which the participant, in conjunction with their line or area manager, was able to review their progress against targets and discuss areas where they may not have been successful with a view to improving practice in the future. Student 3B provided an interesting contrast with the other participants in terms of how they had constructed their conception of good feedback in that they had previously studied at another university and had transferred. When invited to discuss the feedback they had received at their previous university they said:

> Feedback was pretty good. Like, it was detailed and you knew exactly what to work on next time and, they would also give you face to face feedback before you submitted and things like that, they were very helpful, very helpful, very good feedback from them (student 3B)

Taken together these extracts suggest that the student participants had already developed a coherent and effective conception of what constituted good feedback prior to commencing their course of study. Although the examples provided by the participants came from different sources, schools, sixth form college, FE colleges, employers and higher education there are some consistent themes which are worth pulling out.

- Good feedback allows students to improve on earlier attempts

without a penalty being applied

- Feedback which is delivered late in the learning process is of little use

- Good feedback practice encourages a dialogue between the person giving the feedback and the person receiving it. The dialogue is one in which ideas can be challenged and explanations can be offered.

- Good feedback is personalised and usually offered face to face

In terms of the overarching themes used to analyse the data the comments from the participants above come under the theme of discourse, not because of the language they use, but because they represent a moment of historical truth telling and knowledge creation. The participants, independently of each other, produced a concept of feedback which exhibited striking similarities. The participants were not asked to theorise their answers, as they might in an essay, but to describe the experience of good feedback as they saw it. The fact that the definitions they produced, and experiences they commented on, closely correspond with the work of Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) or Sadler (1989) does not necessarily suggest that they have been influenced by some sort of meta-narrative in relation to feedback, only that they know what worked for them. In terms of understanding the student participants' social construction of feedback, the discourse they have established defines their conception of the truth about what they think good feedback is. Because this particular form of knowledge pre-dated their experience of

study at university they were still able to refer back to their truth even though it had been laid down, in some cases, years beforehand.

Following on from discourse we should consider the data from the student participants which relates to Power. As has already been noted in the literature review Boud (2007) has highlighted the dominant discourse in higher education as being concerned with assessment or more specifically the measurement of certain assessment outcomes and how well students have met them. In my interviews all of the student participants indicated that they valued the opportunity for dialogue with their lecturers as a form of feedback and the following extracts illustrate this common perspective amongst the students:

> ...when I met with [names lecturer] earlier today, she was saying to me, "Yeah, this is really good, maybe you can think about this." So that's face to face, talking to her and that's just helping me with the learning process and actually getting the essay down. (student 3A)

> I took an assignment for tutorial last year and again we pulled out the things that could be improved but we also came up with strategies, me and my tutor together, to help me achieve it (student 3G)

> Face to face. Because you can question if you don't understand something or if you don't think something is quite right or you need to, if you are face to face it is a lot easier, you have got your evidence as well if you need to have that. (student 1F)

> I have had some feedback from a tutor which was very very helpful but I think when it's face to face if they say something like you need to improve this and you don't understand it you can say, "Well how can I do that?" instead of it being over a few days over emails it can be within ten minutes and it's all sorted. (student 1E)

The process by which knowledge and learning is shared by the student and their lecturer, which these extracts illustrate, suggests that in terms of power there is a degree of equity between staff and students which allows them to address the process of learning how to meet a specific standard. What is less clear from the extracts is the extent to which the standard being aimed at, and the learning processes associated with meeting it, is one determined by the lecturer and the student together as co-learners or whether the standard is that expected by the lecturer or set in response to an external body's requirements. If staff and students are engaged as equal partners in the co-construction of knowledge to meet an agreed standard, whether internally or externally set, it would be reasonable to assume that the validation of the outcome of that process, i.e. the actual assessment, is something which can also be shared. In the interviews the student participants' views about the use and value of peer assessment were sought and the following extracts are typical of the views held by all the student participants:

> I think if a lecturer said something to you you'd take it a bit more seriously than if a peer did, because a peer may say, "I'd do it this way" and you think I'll do it this way and then you fail and you think if I'd stuck to my way actually I would have passed. (student 1E)

> I think if a student was to read it, if we were to... like no names, just look at each other's piece of work with no names on, that sometimes you might get a different feedback to what you would get from a lecturer. Because a lecturer knows what they're looking for. (student 3B)

It seems that whilst my student participants were willing to engage in a process of knowledge construction with their lecturers, it would be an

exaggeration to suggest that they were ready to take on the full mantle of power explored in Shor's (1996) book *When Students Have Power*. Further evidence of the rather limited use or conception of their own power by the student participants can be seen in relation to the degree of self efficacy they exhibit. Across both first and third year students 12 out of the 14 participants made statements which pointed to very low levels of self efficacy in the area of assessment and feedback and the following extracts typify the wider responses:

> Yeah, I'm a worrier, I don't have a lot of self-belief ... maybe I'm just wimp and don't like being honest with people (student 3A)

> I guess I seek other people's praise quite a lot; if I'm doing something right and someone praises me then I think oh brilliant, I'm doing it right, I'll continue to do it like that. (student 3 G)

> I'm a person who needs constant reassurance that I'm doing the right thing. Because everything is so easily interpreted in a different way... I like to know that I'm doing it right at some level. (student 3 F)

> it is very scary when you're in the first year, you're writing something and you think I don't even know what I'm doing. (Student 1A)

> even when I think to myself, when I've really analysed something and I've come up with an idea about something, it's then putting me in self-doubt as to really was that my idea or has it been thought of a hundred times before? (Student 1C)

> I can't do anything (student 1D)

Thus we are faced with an interesting situation in which my student participants can actively engage in a shared dialogue with the lecturer in which a degree of equity is implied, in that ideas can be challenged and explanations and justifications sought. The level of student self criticism shown in the extracts above suggests that the process of academic

socialisation, which emphasises the power and authority of the lecturer and is mentioned in Lee and Street's (2000) work, has taken a strong hold on the students. The similarity of the responses from students in their first year of their degree and those in their third year echoes Pajares and Johnsons' (1994) findings which resulted from a longitudinal study of students' self efficacy in relation to their written work. In their study Pajares and Johnson noted that; 'the confidence of our participants in their usage, grammar, composition, and mechanical skills did not increase, but, as judged by their essays, the skills themselves did improve' (Pajares and Johnson, 1994: 323). In my study all the year 3 participants had successfully passed enough modules to enter the third and final year of their degree, so objectively they were successful students with well developed academic abilities, but they seemed to be reluctant to accept this view of themselves. In the case of the first year participants they had not yet had any work summatively assessed and so their concerns might be more readily understood, but to do so would be to ignore the evidence of success prior to arriving at the university. For example, when discussing their experience of assessment on an Access to Higher Education course taken before joining the university student C commented on a particular piece of feedback they had received:

> It was from my psychology teacher where she'd given ... feedback on an essay and because ... she was a professor of psychology, and she said if I'd have been marking that in a university grading, I would've given it a 2:1 which was, for me, which was exactly what I needed to hear ... It was like ah, right, okay. I can work at university level. That's all I need to know just in that one sentence. (student 1C)

Later in the interview it became clearer why, despite having received such

encouraging feedback, participant student 1C was still lacking in self belief when they said:

> I value the expertise and knowledge of my lecturer and I hope that they'll impart that information to me to improve myself (student 1C)

For this participant self belief was almost entirely defined in terms of what they saw as more powerful and influential, peoples' perception of them, evidence, perhaps, of Foucault's concept of the "statutorily defined person".

As noted above, not all of the student participants were as lacking in self belief and participant student 3C described them self[2] as "cocky" and came across in the interview as being very focused and driven. For example when asked about peer assessment and feedback participant student 3C said:

> Yeah I'm not so sure that I would be that bothered about what they thought ...I'm more interested in the people who are going to impact on my degree at the end. From a purely selfish point of view I'm just in it to get the best degree that I possibly can and I just want to hear from the people who are going to impact on that degree. (student 3C)

Outwardly this particular participant exhibited what might be seen as a highly instrumental approach and, when asked to expand on this point, they said:

> ...the feedback should always be predictable, it should relate closely to the marking criteria and it shouldn't come as a sort of surprise that if you're getting marked down for having missed out a section or not done a section it should be perfectly clear to you at that point that that is what's happened. (student 3C)

Another way in which this participant differed from the others was in their

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[2] This rather inelegant phrase is used here to hide the sex of the participant in order to maintain confidentiality.

insistence that the summative grade attached to an assignment was of greater significance to them than the feedback

> It's the grade, it's always the grade. There's no point getting feedback from a really nice friendly lecturer saying well done for getting a two and you've done brilliantly if what you wanted was the first. (student 3C)

Across the students as a whole there was ambivalence around the role of grades on summative work in that whilst all the students welcomed the grades almost all of them said that they recognised that it was the feedback, written or verbal, which would help them improve. Not all the students found grades motivational but none wanted to be without grades as the grades allowed them to compare their performance with their own previous performance and with that of their peers. However there were noticeable differences between the views of first year participants and those in their third year with the following being typical of the third year responses:

> It's [feedback] not the point. The point is the grade. That is what you are marked on and that's what society marks you on. You can't go for a job and go 'oh, do you know what? I got a third but they said it was lovely' (student 3D)

The views of the first year students show a more relaxed approach to grading, possibly because none of their assignments from their first year count towards their final degree classification, and the extract below is typical of the first years' view:

> I'm not worried this year about my grades because I just want to get the feedback on how to improve so if I come out you know of my first year and I've got really low grades I'm not going to think oh, I'm going to look at the feedback and think right this is where I'm going wrong and then … a grade's just a number really right? (student 1A)

The responses from the third year students, which emphasises the importance of grades, is consistent with the findings of MacLellan's (2001) quantitative study which saw third year undergraduate students identify grades on their assignment as the primary purpose of assessment, a view shared by the staff in her study. Research conducted by Fraser and Killen (2003) points to a high degree of convergence between third year undergraduates and academic staff when asked to identify factors which are likely to result in success in their academic studies. The same study suggests that there is far less convergence between the views of first year undergraduates and those of academic staff in terms of what will lead to success. At first glance the degree of convergence between the views of the third year students and their lecturers in relation to the importance of grades can be seen as a strength and, as student 3D above noted, society judges on grades not feedback. However, whilst it is likely that third year students' attitudes towards the primacy of grades is evidence of their successful socialisation into the wider discourse which permeates higher education, the focus on grades and outcomes, rather than learning as a process, may indicate that third year students are less empowered because of their focus on what might be seen as a surface approach to learning.

The responses of the first year students to the significance of grades on their work appears to be rather more relaxed than that of the third years. The way in which my first year student participants seem to privilege feedback over grades appears to challenge research by Francis (2008) which suggests that

first year students are far more cautious and timid in their approach to assessment in general and tend to rely heavily on their lecturers to provide a lead. Francis suggests that first year students '... who are entering higher education for the first time are likely to display high confidence in the lecturer as an assessor' (Francis, 2008: 549). The evidence from my student participants tends to emphasise what their lecturers could do in terms of explaining feedback and grades rather than simply judging them and attaching a grade to their work.

In terms of power it would appear that, for my third year student participants, the shift away from a focus on learning from lecturers via feedback and discussion, towards a situation where the validating property of summative grading of work is seen as more important, may represent a dislocation and relocation of power away from the student and towards the lecturer. In this reading the students come to construct themselves as increasingly powerless as they move from the cheerful optimism of student 1A, 'I'm not worried this year about my grades ...', to the bleak resignation of student 3D, 'It's [feedback] not the point. The point is the grade...'. However, it is equally possible to argue that what the third year students' comments exemplify is the recognition of the inevitable power inequalities between themselves and their lecturers. In recognising the authority of the lecturer as an expert the third year students may simply be exhibiting a more mature and sophisticated interpretation of the asymmetrical nature of power in a university.

The third area I want to consider, briefly, is identity, which I see as being

closely related to power. It is important to recognise that whilst identity might be thought to be a simple label which is attached to an individual, in a socially constructionist analysis identity is something an individual creates for themselves. This point is well made by Sarup (1996) who describes identity as 'a construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices' (Sarup, 1996 cited in McCarthey, 2002: 12). We can clearly see the consequences of the interactions with people, places and practices involved in the construction of my student participants' identity which was common to all of my student participants in the extracts below:

> [they] could read between the lines to think that you pretty much haven't put any effort into this, you're a bit lazy...I'd feel awful to think that I would be thought of, you know, that's the type of person I am and that's the type of work that I produce. (Student 1C)

> I'm a bit weird really, if someone tells me I'm going to fail I'll prove them wrong (Student 1A)

> I am very hard on myself. Very hard on myself. (Student 1F)

> I'm quite a practical person. (Student 3G)

> I'd hate to think I was patronising. I think that's one of the worse things that you can say to somebody who really doesn't think they are trying their best not to be. (Student 3 F)

> I want to be the best that I can be, whether that's the best in my class this uni or the world, I want to be the best I can be. (Student 3D)

My student participants chose to identify themselves as hard working (3), driven (2), self critical (5), practical (1), not patronising (2), and ambitious (1). These behavioural characteristics are closely associated with the

conceptions of what actions and qualities define good students explored by Grant in her 1997 paper *The Construction of Student Subjectivities* and are likely to be a combination of previous and current educational experiences. The risk is that the participants' experience of feedback may simply instantiate those identities associated with being a "good" students and so make it difficult for them to change and develop alternative, and perhaps more productive, constructions of identity such as risk taker, adventurer or challenger. The extracts below suggest that students are most likely to see feedback which confirms their own identity constructs as being the most useful:

> Yeah, it [feedback] is a constructive process and I think as well, when there is so many outside pressures as a mature student has with trying to manage a family, your work life and everything, it is a great motivator to keep you going on the course. (student 1C)

> ...if I'm doing the right thing it's nice to be told and that feedback spurs me on to continue to work harder to achieve, strive to achieve more. (student 3G)

Lave and Wenger, (2005) have emphasised the importance of identity in the learning process and it is likely that feedback which coincides with a student's sense of identity will be more acceptable to the student than feedback which challenges their identity. The obvious difficulty for lecturers and students alike is that identity is not a fixed entity, it is contextualised and also varies between the past and the present or what students once were and what they see themselves as being now. As has already been noted, students do not arrive at university as novices when it comes to thinking about feedback, they are experienced consumers of and possibly

practitioners of the art of effective feedback. The risk of what can go wrong when feedback is directed at the wrong identity is exemplified in the extracts below:

> I went to see a lecturer about where I have been patronising and she said 'it's the language you've used'. I was just really on my high-horse about it because of the language that had been used in my feedback but they hadn't pointed out the language that I'd used and hadn't seen my point of view at all because of what they wrote in the feedback. (student 3 F)

> **But what stops you from going is that you're worried you would be made to feel foolish?**

> Yeah, yeah, yeah pretty much [laughing]. And, I know it's not just me that, when we all talk, there is people that will say, "I'm not going to go and, I'm not going to ask that again, because the answer I got the first time..." (student 3B)

In my study most of my student participants (9 out of 14) actively sought feedback which confirmed their identity and to which they could relate and the following extract is fairly typical:

> **So is there a sense that the value of the feedback is related to how useful it is in terms of helping you develop?**

> Yeah because I can relate to that, I can use that advice and I think that probably definitely made the feedback more relevant to me. (student 3A)

The idea that the students in my study wanted feedback they could relate to was further emphasised by their focus on feedback which should be, as far as possible, personalised. The role of personalised feedback seems to relate to the extent to which the students perceived themselves as being or becoming effective learners. More than half of the students commented on

the extent to which their perception of feedback was proportionate to the degree they thought it spoke to them as individuals as this aspect of their identity is exemplified in the next extracts:

> it kind of gave me personally a boost because I thought I'm on the right track, someone likes what I'm doing; if I keep doing this and working harder I'm just going to get, hopefully, better at it. So for me personally it was quite a good bit of feedback, not necessarily from her point of view but from something that she had heard and passed on. (student 3G)

> **So in that sense it is also about feedback being personal, is that what you are saying?**

> Yes but not too personal. I think ... personal feedback is good to a certain extent but not when it puts somebody down personally to do with their personality or their characteristics and things like that. (student 3E)

> I think for me, personally, I think feedback can be a great motivator and also, boost your confidence as well if you're told you're doing something well, of course you want to keep on doing that well and it just makes you feel good all round anyway doesn't it. (student 1C)

> I think when it is given, like I say, if there was something bad to say, it should always be supported by a positive to gee that person up, motivate them and inspire them to do more really. (student 1F)

These participants all sought feedback which confirmed their progress and motivated them and to which they could make a personal link which fitted their identity as an effective learner. In conjunction with the development of an identity which defined them as an effective learner, most of the students also discussed feedback in terms which suggested a good/bad dichotomy in which good students get good feedback as the following extracts illustrate:

so most of the time I read it and think 'okay yes, I know what to do for next time', if such a situation should arise. But it's nice - it makes me feel good sometimes if you ... I think – and I know a lot of what they say I'd definitely read it and take it in. (student 3H)

Yes, because if I see it as, if it's not an A [grade], this is going to come out wrong, basically I have done something wrong, I have missed something out to get the golden ticket, so tell me what I need to do. (student 3D)

Because I feel that no matter how good you are at something there is always something you can improve on, there is always somewhere to go up from that. So I think it is really important that even though you can see that you have done well by your grade and the comments you have been given, I think it is always important to be given a next step ... And it is hard to discuss what they mean by certain terms as well, clarifying oh that was really good, well what constitutes good, how could I make it...is good alright or is it really good or is it excellent? It is not defined as anything it is just good. (student 3E)

... when you were doing something that you have done for quite a long time and then someone comes along and says actually this is a really good piece of work, if you haven't heard it before ... you know it is very very good. (student 1A)

It's like I never, I don't know how well I have to write to get those [marks] or which good words or sentences I need to use. So it's the first time giving it in. If they tell me this is a 40% essay then I will know for the other essays that this is how I need to write to get that amount (student 1D)

The search for feedback which defines good or bad performances suggests that many of the students in my study have a fixed view of what good feedback is, and thereby what a good student, looks like. This construction of the concept or identity defined as a "good student" may well suggest a certain inflexibility of mind when my student participants are confronted with ideas or practices, not only in relation to feedback but in learning and teaching more generally, which challenge their sense of identity. The extent to which my participants might prove resistant to feedback which is seen as

challenging their self identity is neatly encapsulated by this comment from participant student 3C:

> I only want feedback to tell me what I need to do to get what I feel I want to get.
> (student 3C)

The inclusion of the word "feel" by participant student 3C in this extract is telling. I would argue that it indicates the extent to which their sense of identity is not a product of a carefully constructed cognitive process, but is instead based on a subjective assessment of what they want and what they think they need in terms of feedback.

The fourth, and final, theme I will consider is the role of emotion in students' construction of feedback. Falchikov and Boud, (2007) have highlighted both the importance of the links between students' emotions and their experience of assessment and the limited amount of research which has been conducted in this emergent field. In their introduction to the 2005 edition of the journal *Learning and Instruction* Efklides and Volet argue that during the learning process emotions are multiple, situated and dynamic. Thus in my analysis I will consider the feelings and emotions expressed by the student participants, the context in which the emotions are located and the dynamic relationship between feelings, emotions and learning.

As already noted emotions are multi faceted and their impact on students' responses to feedback should not be under-estimated as the following extracts make clear:

when you're **passionate** about a subject you need someone to say to you you need to take this out, you've repeated yourself here, you need to do this, you need to add this. Not just to say it's too long cut it down. (student 1A)

I've finished all of my assignments apart from one essay which I'm doing now. I'm already kind of like **panicking** about it because it's not a very clear question and I suppose I just want to make sure that I'm on the right lines. (student 1B)

I recently had an observation feedback which directly after having that observation your emotions are a bit heightened anyway, you probably don't take it all in, the feedback that you're given and I definitely can say recently, there was a number of things that my tutor gave feedback on that I can't remember them commenting on. (student 1C)

Passion and panic are strong emotions and a combination of the two can have debilitating consequences. An emotion such as passion might lead the learner to expect whoever is providing the feedback to exhibit a similar and corresponding level of passion overlooking the value of a dispassionate commentary from an expert. The sense of disappointment experienced by the learner if their passion is not, or does not seem to be, reflected in the feedback is likely to have a negative impact on learning. In the case of participant student 1B the panic they experience suggests a poorly developed level of self efficacy, a point which their search for reassurance in the following extract only underlines:

It's just praise isn't it. I suppose I'm a bit like a child. I like to have the odd well done, that was good. (student 1B)

The significance of student 1B's acknowledgement of their child like state above underlines the point made by Jussim et al, (1987) who have argued

that:

> People interpret and judge their achievements and abilities in ways congruent with prior self-conceptions, actively searching for self-confirming feedback and often resisting feedback inconsistent with their self-perceptions
>
> (Jussim et al, 1987: 95)

If we now consider the role of feelings and emotions linked to the students' sense of self worth and the consequent impact on the students' response to feedback, we can clearly see the effects of negative feelings and emotions indicating limited self worth:

> if he or she gives it [the feedback] after the deadline and say here you go you have got a fail but here is what you need to improve, that would not really help me a lot that would just **depress** me even more. (student 1D)

> I **love** to hear it but I am also slightly … **embarrassed** but, I always look to how I can do better. I always push myself more and I know that's **wrong**. (student 1F)

> **Okay. So if you saw an assignment coming back to you that had lots of feedback attached to it…?**

> I'd be very concerned

> **You'd be worrying about it?**

> Yeah. Whereas technically, I suppose, it could be nice comments but normally, it's not. (student 1B)

It is worth remembering that these are first year students who have already started to construct a conception of feedback as a potentially painful learning process. Furthermore, at this stage of their course these participants had not received any summative feedback on their assignments and the anxieties they mention are a combination of projections onto what is yet to come as

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well as a reflection on their prior experience of feedback.

NVivo 9 offers the opportunity to search for single words or phrases and a search though the year 3 transcripts for words or phrases expressing a positive emotional response to feedback produced no hits. A similar search looking for words and phrases associated with negative emotions derived from a list of key emotions produced by Cowie and Cornelius (2003) produced the following extracts:

> Tone of voice puts me off, definitely. If they're obviously **annoyed** or **angry** – even though I've gone and said 'I think I've done this wrong', I think a lot of the time it's a breakdown in communication. (student 3F)

> … and I think the thing that has always **angered** me or **upset** me most about the feedback is how disorganised it can be. (student 3C)

> I would sit at home and still be **embarrassed** and go 'oh damn' (Student 3 D)

Anger, frustration, disappointment upset and embarrassment are powerful emotions and it is significant that they are more prevalent amongst comments from the third years than from the first years possibly reflecting the heightened anxiety of those for whom assessment is a higher risk activity. The feelings and emotions of the year 3 students, identified above, are entirely consistent with the argument advanced by Young in her 2000 paper where she argues that, 'one of the most powerful and potentially dangerous dimensions of students' feelings about feedback is the extent it impacts on themselves as people' (Young, 2000: 414). On the other hand, as noted in the literature review, Värlander's (2008) research tends to emphasise the positive effect of emotions and feelings on students' learning. However,

consistent with Young's work and my own findings, the work of Falchikov and Boud (2007) suggests that emotions and feelings may have a more detrimental impact. The overwhelming impression from my research is that there is a dynamic and significant relationship between my student participants' emotions, feelings and experience of feedback. The dynamic nature of this relationship becomes clear when we consider the student participants' definition of what the best form of feedback is:

it sounds to me as if you would value a conversation?

Yeah definitely, definitely because then you feel sometimes talking to someone it **eases** you a bit. (student 1A)

How would you feel if you just got the grade and no feedback?

No, no, I think I'd possibly be a bit **disappointed** because again, there's no personal element to it. I think is quite important for me. It would be almost... Yeah, that's it – almost like a robot's marked it isn't it? (student 1C)

How do you like to get feedback?

Face to face. Because you can question if you **don't understand** something or if you don't think something is quite right or you need to, if you are face to face it is a lot easier, you have got your evidence as well if you need to have that. There could be a **misunderstanding,** emails and letters are a nightmare, sometimes they can be taken completely the wrong way. But face to face, if there is a **misunderstanding** or if you are not sure how someone is trying to say something, you can talk about it, I like to talk!
(Student 1F)

Feedback is not necessarily written but it can be somebody who is sitting next to you telling you this is **good**, this is really **good**, but this part just cut that out you don't need that. So if the lecturers come and talk to me I would be **happy** with that as well. (Student 1D)

The extracts above serve to highlight the extent to which these first year students make a significant emotional investment in their feedback and the strong, if not universal, desire amongst them for verbal feedback. In effect, at an emotional level, it would appear that my first year students wanted a feedback process which offered them reassurance in an environment which was still unfamiliar to them. In terms of the third year students, whom it is reasonable to assume are more familiar with the learning environment of the university there was a more positive view of written feedback:

> … with written feedback I know they are going to be **honest** with me. In terms of when I get it from my essay, I'll go and pick it up and I know that it's **completely honest** because they don't know me and **I don't them and they can be completely honest.** (student 3A)

> I think personally the clearest way of doing it to avoid ambiguity is written, typed and referring clearly to specific measures. That's how I would mark a piece of work if I was a teacher. (student 3C)

At first glance these comments in favour of written feedback appear to contradict the comments about verbal feedback to third year students discussed above in the section dealing with student discourse and power and feedback. In practice what seems to be happening is that the third year students are differentiating between feedback in general, which they seem to prefer to be in written form, and discussions with specific lecturers who are known to them and who they feel they can trust. This distinction may imply that the students differentiate between the feedback in terms of its utility, the extent to which it is helpful, and its warrant, the extent to which it is valuable in that it was delivered to them personally by a lecturer they feel they can trust. The issue of trust in lecturers' capacity for objective judgement of a

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students' work was echoed by participant student 3B who said:

> Obviously, there's a few people you think, "Oh I hope they don't get it" but you get that anywhere, we've always got that. Someone where you think, "Please don't, you'll be the one who picks up my piece of work" (student 3B)

A similar point is made by students 3A and 3F:

> This is hard, we were speaking about this yesterday from uni, because different lecturers have different ideas of what they want. And in a way you almost need to know who's marking it as to what you are going to include. (student 3A)

> It might be the marker themselves have got a bias ... there are some who do ... have a set opinion in a certain way and I know from talking to an ex-student from a few years ago that he was getting really really mega high marks and then he did this one assignment for a certain lecturer, and because of a point of view he'd taken and the stuff that he took, he got really bad marks. (student 3 F)

These extracts suggest that, for at least some of the third year students, knowing, or at least believing, that lecturers' varied in terms of their assessment and feedback practices, was a further cause of emotional conflict which the process of providing written feedback helped to reduce as it tended to de-personalise the comments.

The importance of emotions in the construction of the idea of feedback, for some of the third year participants, is clearly illustrated in the following extracts in response to the question of what they thought feedback was:

Feedback to me is giving me **praise** for the positive things I'm doing, because that's going to **encourage** me to keep doing those and ingrain them into myself that that's the **right way** perhaps. (student 3G)

I'd want **the praise**, if that's what you can call it – I'd want the feedback to say 'actually, this bit was really **good**, this bit was **really good** ...' – because at the end of the day, you're never going to get 100% anyway but obviously there's still that percentage that you haven't got. (student 3H)

I've got to pass all of my assignments and I want to do as well as I can **because it looks good**. So I guess **that's what I'm more worried about there.** (student 3A)

Once again we can see students constructing the idea of feedback primarily in terms of an emotional response defined in simplistic concepts such as good/bad, right/wrong, praise and encouragement.

Taken together these data relating to the role played by emotions in the construction of feedback by the students in my research raises some significant issues. The third year student participants' concerns over trust in the lecturers' objectivity and a desire for feedback which is primarily concerned with praise, suggest that whilst some of the third year student participants have developed what might be seen as a degree of emotional toughness, a significant number still saw feedback very much in terms of their emotional needs. If we compare the third year students' responses to those of the first year we can see that for many of the participants, if not quite all of them, the centrality of the emotional aspects of feedback play a key role in the way in which they think about feedback and the way in which they

respond to feedback. The level of self efficacy exhibited by individual students in both the first and the third years seems to have been a key factor in influencing their capacity to respond to feedback in ways which moved beyond the emotions and allowed them to focus on feedback as an aid to learning. In his 2006 Paper, Carless suggests that it is the students' ability which influences their capacity to move beyond the emotional aspects of feedback and that this ability leads to better results which in turn reinforces their sense of self esteem. However, the work of Dowden et al (2011) suggests that even the more able students can experience a negative emotional response to feedback if the focus of that feedback is on what students might see as trivial issues at the expense of conceptual and intellectual issues. As has been seen in the extracts from my student participants, several of them see feedback in terms of praise and reassurance which suggests that they experience low self esteem even when their results suggest that they are being successful. Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest that praise orientated feedback tends to have an overall negative impact on students' learning either because it does not require students to confront the weaknesses in their work or because it can reinforce a students' self image and reduce the likelihood that they will engage in further learning in case their self image is challenged. This point is also noted by Stobart (2008) who has argued that for some students praise can be counter - productive in the way it can challenge their self identity.

The discussion, particularly amongst the third year students, about

relationships with the lecturer, raises issues about how far the students felt they could trust the lecturers' fairness and objectivity and closely mirrors the views of the students in Orsmond et als' (2005) paper. However, whilst the participants in Orsmond et al's study tended to emphasise what they saw as the lecturers' lack of knowledge or interest of the subject or in them, the participants in my study tended to differentiate between feedback from lecturers they felt they knew well and from those who they thought had preconceived ideas of what the work they were submitting should contain. The fact that my first year student participants appeared to be more enthusiastic about verbal feedback as a principle than my third year participants, who tended to favour written feedback, may reflect the greater emphasis on the developmental nature of feedback and assessment in the first year of the course. At the same time, whilst we should note the emphasis placed by the third years on written feedback, they did recognise the value of verbal feedback but they seemed to see written feedback as almost contractual in nature.

The staff perspective:

As already noted answers from the staff tended to be grouped under Discourse and Power, with rather less emphasis paid to issues of Identity and Emotion. In his 2006 paper Carless discusses his use of a neutral interviewer which he used to explore sensitive themes with some of his students and whilst that would have been appropriate in my research unfortunately time and resources did not allow me that luxury. As a consequence of me being the interviewer and the staff participants all being know to me, albeit some much better than others, it is likely that the staff may have held back when discussing controversial or sensitive themes and issues. The fact that none of them asked to have anything deleted when they read through their transcripts would suggest that where they do offer a strongly held view it is a genuinely congruent one. In this section I will discuss the data from the staff interviews starting with Discourse and then moving through Power, Identity and finally Emotions. As with the focus on the student participants' discourse the emphasis here will be on the creation a truth and knowledge on the part of the staff as they discuss their views on feedback.

My analysis of the staff discourse suggest that there are three key themes which are common to all the staff interviewed although the degree of commonality varies. The first, and in many ways most obvious theme of the staff discourse in relation to their construction of what feedback is, is their status as conscientious producers of feedback. The second theme is one of

resistance to the use of learning outcomes, an issue closely associated with assessment and feedback. The third theme which emerges from the staffs' discourse relates to their perception of the level of engagement of their students, not simply in terms of feedback but more widely across the whole range of learning.

As suggested the first theme to emerge from the staffs' discourse is their perception of themselves as conscientious producers of high quality feedback as the following extracts illustrate:

> And I think... what has to be done here is it's for the mantra that we tell our students to be repeated everywhere, 'You're getting high quality feedback'. Because they are getting high quality feedback, I can assure you. (staff B)

> I think most of us are dealing with a huge number of scripts. I think probably the majority of us start off very conscientiously and really try and tailor the script, the comments to the mark and to assign the best way possible, either step the nearer the deadline gets. I don't think any of do things in a haphazard way. I think everybody does their best (staff C)

> my marking process is to read the work, to make notes about the work, to then re-read my notes, if I've made some kind of weird statement that: "What did I mean? What was that they wrote on page eight? Then I'd go back and check that and re-read a bit of it, so then I'll coalesce my notes into the feedback and then I'll have a little bit of a think about it and think generally what does this ... what does what I'm saying about this piece of work indicate in terms of grade mark for me? (staff E)

The conscientious approach to feedback by staff outlined here is not reflected in the feedback from students completing the NSS in 2011 where only just over 50% of the participants rated the quality of their feedback as good. However, in less formal evaluations conducted across the university a more positive picture emerges. For example, in a survey of nearly 2000 students conducted in 2011, the student union at the university invited students to comment on how helpful they found their written feedback. Across the university as a whole about 28% of students reported that their feedback was always helpful whilst a further 45% said that it was mostly helpful. The findings from the student union survey can be read in two ways: either the lecturers can relax because over 70% of the students surveyed recognise the effort they put into providing high quality feedback, a view consistent with their own discourse, or fewer than 30% of the students surveyed thought that the feedback provided, contrary to the lecturers' discourse, was really helpful.

The second key theme which emerged from my analysis of the staffs' discourse was that of resistance. Whilst all of the staff interviewed indicated an awareness of the need to ensure that their assessment and feedback practices were designed to maintain academic standards, it was interesting to note that several participants acknowledged adopting approaches which actively undermined one aspect of academic standards which was the use of learning outcomes as the basis for assessing and feedback back to students:

> I think we've been overcome by learning outcomes and performance indicators. (staff E)

... your learning outcomes are actually value driven and so you are going to be driven down a route of giving some feedback which is focussing on the – yes, the achievement of the learning outcomes, but the engagement, the depth of understanding – it goes beyond the learning outcomes. (staff I)

I think learning outcomes are useful for people who don't teach to measure what's being done and to measure the performance of staff. It's amazing how rarely students actually look at learning outcomes, how rarely they do. (staff B)

What these comments suggest is the existence of a discourse of resistance amongst academic staff against what Atkinson (2003) has described as "regimes of truth" and, at the same time, the existence of alternative conceptions of truth in relation to assessment and feedback amongst the staff. Of the remaining staff participants only two spoke with any approval of the role and use of learning outcomes within the assessment and feedback process:

I relate the papers that I give to my students to the learning outcomes. And I make sure that all the learning outcomes are represented in the papers where they should be and then I do the marking scheme accordingly. So in a sense every question amounts to a learning outcome and the feedback on that question will be related to a learning outcome. (staff H)

what do you see as the relationship between feedback and the learning outcomes? Do you see there is a relationship? Is there a relationship?

I think there should be a relationship. I don't think that relationship is always clear. Sometimes you see the learning outcomes in the module guide compared to the assignment guidelines and then you've got to marry that up with the marking criteria and I think that can pose quite a

problem because you are hoping that the learning outcomes are what you are going to learn from this module or learn from this course programme. (staff D)

The views expressed by staff participants D and H can be aligned with the definition of learning outcomes advanced by Hussey and Smith (2002) which was discussed in the literature review above. The views of the staff who are critical of the use of learning outcomes more closely matches Quinn's (2011) discourse of performativity which is also discussed in the literature review above and which, Quinn suggests, highlights staff resistance to what they see as the centralising tendencies of modern universities. The key point to note here is that, for many of the staff in my study, an important part of their discourse relates to establishing their capabilities as providers of feedback with any shortfall in the students' perception of feedback being attributably to the requirements of the university and the insistence on the use of learning outcomes.

The third key element of the staffs' discourse in relation to their provision of feedback relates to what might be seen as the type of student they are asked to teach.

> I was teaching about five sessions in a day and it was exhausting and as I say around 50 to 60% of the people that attended didn't want to be there, so that was quite tricky. (staff A)

> an anecdotal observation or observation which I can't quantify, is that my work centred students who tend to be part time and older, engage with the feedback more and typically want to talk about their feedback rather than the traditional BA students full time, or some of those do as well.(staff I)

most of our students have got their eye very much on the summative marks all the time, they're not, many of them are not here with a burning thirst to drink deeply of the well of knowledge they're here to get a degree and the best degree they can get, and I don't mean they're necessarily kind of lazy, but they're much more instrumentalist in their approach and so anything that doesn't count has to be discarded because they haven't got time. (staff F)

Thus the third element of the staff discourse suggests that regardless of how good the staff are at providing feedback there will always be a group of students, the exact proportions seem to vary, who are completely resistant to their best efforts to provide them with feedback or, possibly, anything else associated with a university education. Coupled with this deficit model of the student is the idea of the student as consumer which suggest that some of my staff participants have detected a shift in the relationship between the student, the lecturer and the assessment and feedback process as is clear from the following comments:

> The other thing is if you think about it on a very basic cost benefit model and from a marketised model, they are paying for a service, so I think that influences the way I am as well, because I do tend to think of it a bit like that. ... They are paying for me really as a kind of consultant as such to teach them. So I wouldn't be very happy if I went into a situation where I was only going to get one form of feedback and it was at the end. (staff A)

> I think nowadays as tuition fees have come in then students expectation levels have increased quite dramatically and certainly at a university like this one whereby we have a number of part time students and we have a number of students who are paying for themselves then they want value for money and I do think feedback is about value for money. (staff G)

Interestingly none of the students I interviewed mentioned this cash nexus which may suggest either that the construction of the consumerist student is largely a product of the staffs' discourse than that of the students or that, for the students, the discourse is so deeply internalised that they don't think to mention it. It is also noticeable that the staffs' view of their feedback as being of high quality matches that of the staff in Carless' (2006) study. Like the staff in Carless' study my staff participants believed that feedback needs to relate to improving learning rather than simply improving student satisfaction. The importance of seeing feedback as a way of improving student learning was commented on by all my staff participants and the following extracts are typical:

> I think the main purpose of feedback is to enhance someone's learning experience, to be able to constructively inform them where they are weak, where they are strong, where they need to build upon. (staff A)

> So I think it's impressed on our students just how interested we are in their work, how closely we've read their work. I think... certainly with first years we're mainly looking at structural problems. I think get structural right and usually they've got quite a good time after that. (staff B)

> To develop the student; to develop their ability to write academically and to use the resources effectively that they're using; to develop their understanding of the topic. It is to do with development basically. (staff C)

The focus on improving and supporting student learning, which is clear from the above extracts, suggests that there may be a mismatch between what the staff are providing and what the students want. In my analysis of the

student data, whilst there were students who saw feedback primarily as a way of improving their learning, this perception was closely linked to the view that feedback should meet their emotional needs as well. The extent of the mismatch between what my student participants, in the main, wanted and what the lecturers thought they needed is exemplified by the following answers to a question inviting the staff to identify one way in which feedback to students could be improved:

> Make feedback far more frequent. ... if you are talking about the relationship between working and university, it in no way prepares people for life in a marketing department, because your targets are hourly, daily, weekly, but never over the three month period. (staff A)

> Reduce workload. Smaller number of scripts to mark which I know has to go back to other things as well. (staff C)

> I think for every tutor to give constructive, useful, typed feedback. No annotations, no putting things on bits of paper and I think everything should be you know literally typed on a standard sheet. That's what I want. (staff D)

> One thing we need to do is change somehow students kind of functional approach to learning. Because anything that isn't summative is optional extras and frills which you don't need to do but somehow we need to embed the expectations that you are constantly doing work which is formative. Not easy. (staff F)

If you could make one suggestion for how feedback on students' work could be improved, what would that suggestion be?

> Design modules well Constructively align your module, get them designed, feedback is underpinned by that (staff I)

These comments can be summarised as follows:

1. Increase the frequency of feedback and link it to target setting

2. Make feedback appropriate (to who or what is less clear)

3. Reduce staff workload (x 2)

4. All feedback to be typed

5. Change students' approach to learning (x2)

6. Improve module design.

Most of the staff responses to this question related to structural improvements in the provision of feedback and are very much along the lines already promoted by the university. Only one of the above comments suggest improving the link between feedback and learning but that link tends to cast the students in a deficit form because their approach to learning is seen as too "functional". What these comments suggest is that there is a mismatch between the staffs' discourse which emphasises the importance of feedback as a way to enhance learning and their advocacy of a course of action, which is decidedly structural rather than learning or learner focused. The fact that many, perhaps even most, of the strategies for improving feedback advocated by the staff are already in place and students are still unhappy with their feedback, raises questions about how the gap between the staffs' discourse, which emphasises the importance of feedback for learning, and preferred line of action, which tends to focus on the structural aspects of providing feedback, can be closed.

Closely associated with the issue of discourse is the question of power. As we have already seen, students readily acknowledge the asymmetrical

nature of power in their relationships with their lecturers and whilst that awareness may not reduce their anxiety is does seem to be broadly accepted as inevitable and possibly even desirable by the students. However, as Foucault points out, power does not simply come from above and the following extracts illustrate how the staff in my research have experienced students attempting to exert power over them:

> it's when you're confronted by students who refuse to accept what you're saying, that's actually when the hard work really begins, then you really think okay, you know, you really have to do your job then and explain in detail exactly why... a particular part might be weak. (staff B)

> people challenging my feedback and the mark that they have got and wanting to know the absolute ins and outs of why I have awarded that mark which from their point of view might seem quite reasonable, but actually I don't think assessment is as scientific as just the learning outcomes and the marking criteria. I think it's much more subtle than that and influenced by lots of things (staff E)

For these staff participants allocating marks is a symbolic as well as a practical manifestation of their power as academics and, whilst they accept that some of their students will challenge the marks, it is fairly clear from their comments where they see the nexus of power remaining. If we interpret the staffs' conception of power as characterising a distributive model of power (Heiskala, 2001) in which an increase in one person's power in a social relationship must lead to a reduction in the other person's power and vice versa, then any attempt by students to exercise power must be seen as a challenge to the power of the staff.

Another way in which the staffs' conception of power is manifested is in their construction of some students as deficient not in terms of ability but in terms of their approach to learning or feedback as the following extracts illustrate:

> And you do get students...that is another thing that is quite frustrating is students that 'I just want to pass'. What is the point of just passing? I don't personally find that...I don't see the point of that. If you are going to get a university education, why would you just want to pass? To me I would want to get high marks and I don't understand that. (staff A)

> ... you might get your grade, but not be picking up your feedback until the September or the October and I know I've stood in administrative offices when students have done that and they've looked at the feedback and then they've gone, "Oh yeah, well I can't remember what on earth that module was about now. I don't remember what ...", you know, "... no idea what that was about. Forgot." (staff E)

This deficit construction of some students as being, apparently, willing to settle for poor grades with a low expectation of themselves, is a sub-theme of a more general consensus that students do not place enough value on the feedback they get, in effect rejecting the efforts of the staff to help them improve. In his 2006 paper Carless suggests that it is a widely held belief amongst university academics that students attach less value to feedback than to the grade their work receives. Amongst the Staff involved in my research there was a rather mixed view of the extent to which students value their feedback as the following comments make clear:

Do they value feedback?

Yeah. Yeah, they do. I think they appreciate it. I think... yeah, (staff B)

What value do you think students attach to the feedback on their work?

I don't know in all honesty. I really don't know … is the answer to that, which is not very good is it really. I guess if we knew more about that, we'd have a better idea of why we're scoring so badly on the NSS (staff C)

what value do you think students attach to the feedback on their work?

Some students a lot; for some students they can see the value I know what I now need to do, I've been pointed in the right direction; I understand how I have achieved this mark or a lesser mark or a higher mark (staff I)

Overall staff participants varied in their views about whether students valued their feedback as can be seen from the comments above. However, if the question about values is changed to one about grades there is a far higher degree of consensus amongst the staff:

I think [students] are socially acclimatised to wanting to know a number in a lot of cases rather than just the feedback …from all of the observation I have of doing this job, the mark is the thing that they think about primarily. (staff A)

I think, unfortunately, that on the whole, students are more interested in the mark I guess one would hope that they do read the feedback … the fact they don't, the work quite often seems it's not a major part of their lives, that the mark is more important. (staff C)

Well I do think that there are some students who will just be interested in the mark. That's it. Full stop. (staff E)

students always want a mark don't they? They want to know where they are. Feedback without a mark can leave them still in a bit of a limbo

without being able to pinpoint how well they're doing ... Without putting a mark on it students can interpret it in quite different ways. (staff F)

Seven out of nine of my staff participants clearly indicated that they believed the mark was more important to the students than the feedback which makes their rather mixed views on whether students value feedback even more difficult to interpret. As has already been noted, my first year student participants did not see marks as particularly important whilst feedback was seen as valuable. The opposite was true of my third year student participants for whom the marks seem to have mattered more than the feedback. This distinction between first and third year students may offer an explanation of the apparently ambiguous responses from the staff in relation to whether students value feedback. However, none of the staff made any distinction between first and third year students' valuing of the mark over the feedback and this does suggest that the staff see the students as a fairly homogeneous group with similar needs and values. It is possible that in assuming that the students all value marks over feedback the staff are, in practice, projecting their own values and assumptions about the importance of the mark on to the students as the following comments illustrate:

I think that is more of a society wide and a social process really because if you look at anything, discussing a degree is, "Oh what did you get?" It is not, "How well did you do in these areas?" It is, "What did you get, did you get a 2:1, did you get a first, did you get a 2:2." (staff A)

Ultimately... the number is important of course because it depends on what degree they get and then the employer might be saying oh, we

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only take 2:1 and above or whatever. So ultimately it has some importance. (staff B)

The allocation of marks and ultimately the awarding of a degree classification is a central plank of the culture of all academic staff in British universities and it represents a very public and very obvious expression of power. The assessment of work and the allocation of marks is a rite of passage for university academics and it can come as no surprise that staff see marks and marking as of enormous significance. Anyone who has sat through a university exam board where final marks are agreed will recognise the centrality of the allocation of marks whilst the first question put to an external examiner is whether they agree with the marks. What seems clear from the comments made by staff in my research is that, whilst they think students may or may not value feedback, they are almost unanimous in their view that students do value marks.

The third of the four themes arising from the interviews with staff in my research relates to the construction of the staff identity. I discussed the significance of lecturers' sense of identity quite extensively in my Institutional Focused Study so my treatment of it here will be briefer. I will explore the extent to which the sense of identity which emerges from the staff I have interviewed for this project suggests that they see themselves as co-constructors of learning alongside their students or transmitters of learning engaged in a largely one way dialogue. As has already been noted in the analysis of staff discourse, the staff in my project saw themselves as

conscientious producers of high quality feedback. As we have seen with the students, the staffs' construction of their individual identity was a combination of their past experience and their current practice as the extracts below illustrate:

> ... when I worked in industry I had people working for me, and I think that has influenced the way that I interact in feedback. Because I was line managing people every day and so I had to learn very quickly about managing and improving people without being negative and without de-motivating them, without being personal and by trying to get the best out of people. And a lot of the ways and techniques I used then I have transferred into what I do now. (staff A)

> I think that's really important, that we are no cleverer than they are at all, we're just further down the road. We've read more, we've been assessed more, we've published, we've got more qualifications. That's it. We're just further down the road and we're helping them on that journey...(staff B)

> I feel like a very old person with 30-something years experience behind you and of course we all have the right to question, but to be challenging the things that you're questioning them on and the mark that you're assigning as a consequence of your professional educator understanding of what they're writing about and describing (staff E)

> ... as a person who is quite mechanistic in their approach doing this step, then that step and whatever, ... I tend to prefer to give feedback that is quite mechanistic in that way, rather than feedback which is global and more generic. (staff G)

> A teacher is like a priest he's getting there with a sense of purpose and a sense that goes beyond the time of today and you must forget if you're hungry or cold or whatever ... And your relationship with your pupils or students should be that of a priest with his congregation ...So I see it as my duty. I don't judge if they don't take the feedback the way I would like them to do.(staff H)

It is perhaps revealing that amongst the metaphors used by the staff to define their personal identity; manager, mechanic, fellow traveller, experienced professional and priest, the idea of themselves as first and foremost teachers is noticeably absent. However, these metaphor's used by the Staff to define their identity closely resemble the four "theories of teaching" identified by Fox (1983). Fox suggests that university academics adopt one of four approaches to teaching which he defines as (parenthesis added):

- the transfer theory with sees knowledge as a commodity to be transferred from one vessel to another. (Mechanic)
- The shaping theory which treats teaching as a process of shaping or moulding students to a predetermined pattern. (Manager)
- the travelling theory which treats a subject as a terrain to be explored with hills to be climbed for better viewpoints with the teacher as the travelling companion or expert guide. (Fellow traveller)
- the growing theory which focuses more attention on the intellectual and emotional development of the learner.(Priest)

In each of the metaphors the expertise of the member of staff is emphasised and one is bound to wonder what the status of the students is in this exchange, parishioner?, apprentice? tourist? trainee? novice? The power inequalities implied in these metaphoric relationship between staff and students may well be a fact of university life but it may also suggests that, despite statements to the contrary which emphasise a dialogic exchange, these particular members of staff see feedback as an essentially transmissive process in which their expertise is dispensed to their students.

However, the relationships between the staff and their students, alluded to in the staffs' choice of metaphor to describe their identity, may also indicate their perception of themselves as being, in Vygotskian terms, more knowledgeable others whose job is to scaffold their students' learning, a key role in theories relating to the social construction of learning. In the role of the more knowledgeable other the key to success lies in the social exchanges inherent in learning conversations which in turn points towards a heightened level of intersubjectivity in which the status of the student and lecturer is established as that of co-constructors of knowledge and learning. It is clear from the staff comments below that they do place an emphasis on dialogue with students:

> I say to them in the first week, "You should be starting to write up your assessment as soon as possible because that will give you three months to do it. What I won't be amenable to is in the last week of teaching you coming to me and saying, "I have got a plan and I haven't done anything"", I won't be able to help you because it is too late. (staff A)

> So you probably do need that face to face dialogue and at least when I'm talking to students in a tutorial group I'm getting nods or blank stares and so you know when you feel the message is actually getting across or whether you're saying something which just doesn't make any sense to them. (Staff F)

> I think the most appropriate way in terms of instant feedback is one to one conversation so verbally and face to face is in my opinion far far better because as you're talking to somebody you can see their facial expressions and you can change the way you put something across and you can see whether they understand or they don't understand so one to one is in my opinion the best way of doing it. (staff G)

In the first of these two extracts we can see a dialogic process at work but it does not suggest dialogue in a Frieirean sense, in which the student and the lecturer collaborate as co-constructors of learning, but it more closely resembles a Socratic form of dialogue in which the lecturer knows at the end of the dialogue what they knew at the outset only now the student shares that point of view. The interviews with the staff all indicate that they thought verbal feedback was useful and a good way of checking that their students had got the message. This focus on checking that the feedback message was received and understood hints at what Stobart (2008) defines as the Retroactive approach to feedback in which the lecturers emerge as the principal learners as they check that their message has been transmitted and received and, presumably, adjust their teaching accordingly. There is little here to suggest that for the staff, whose views are quoted above, feedback is anything more than a transmissive process in which their expertise is delivered in written or verbal form to their students and as such it is difficult to read their comments as a manifestation of a more socially constructionist approach. There may be a paradox in that most of the staff in my research do seem to define themselves as more knowledgeable others but, instead of that being a step towards developing a more socially constructionist approach to feedback and learning, it only seems to instantiate their identity as "experts" whose job is to transmit their knowledge to their students in the way expected by the students or required by the university..

The final area I want to consider, in terms of the data derived from the staff interviews, is perhaps the most difficult as it deals with the theme of emotions. As Arthur (2009) has pointed out, the issue of lecturers' emotional

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engagement with and response to the assessment of students is an under researched area. Arthur suggests that the focus on performativity, which she locates within a Managerialist discourse she sees as central to staff culture in British Universities, tends to emphasise concepts such as objectivity and rationality rather than the more affective aspects of emotion which do not form part of the discourse of professionalism or quality assurance. However, as has been noted, for the students included in my research, the emotional aspect of feedback was of considerable significance and consequently it is possible that if lecturers displace the language of emotion with that of performativity in their construction of feedback, then the potential for a mismatch is likely to be increased. In terms of their use of language which may indicate their emotional response to feedback the staff in my research varied in what they said:

> I am very brutal about that but that is because I don't want to give them false hope either or a misconception that I can suddenly turn something around and help them because then I would get 70 people coming to me in the last week which I couldn't cope with. (staff A)

> more recently I have become much more defensive and say where I might write a page of feedback, now I'm on the verge of just writing what in the past I'd seen to be quite poor practice of just a few lines. I'm almost completely sold on tick a few boxes and put a few words at the end, so that I'm not opening myself to somebody picking over every single thing that I've written in my feedback in response to their work. So I've become quite defensive in the last academic year, if the truth be known and that sort of feels quite new to me. (staff E)

> my view is that an individual likes praise and praise leads to improvement in performance so consequently feedback is an

opportunity to give praise, however poor that piece of work is there is usually something in it, even if they've spelt their name correctly, to where you can give praise so therefore I think as a starting point the feedback should have praise within it. (staff G)

It is noticeable that only participant, staff E, felt able to discuss the emotional aspects of feedback in relation to their own feelings, whilst the other participants quoted above all spoke of the emotional aspect from the point of view of the students. Staff participant E's comments are remarkably similar to those identified by Stough and Emmer's (1998, cited in Hartney, 2007)) research whilst Smith and King, (2004, cited in Hartney 2007) suggest that lecturers who anticipate an emotional response to feedback by their students may unintentionally provoke exactly the emotional response they were anxious about in the first place. Staff participant E is a very experienced lecturer having taught in higher education for over 20 years and in this regard they are very different from the relatively inexperienced post doctoral teaching assistants included in Stough and Emmers', (1998) research. However, as is clear from the extract above and from other comments they have made which I have included in my analysis, at the time of the interview staff participant E was experiencing a crisis of confidence and, like the participants in Stough and Emmers' study was consciously seeking to use feedback strategies designed to minimise their exposure to being challenged by their students. For staff participant E the emotions they experienced when providing feedback to their students were wholly negative and so it is, perhaps, unsurprising that their students appear to have picked up on and responded in unhelpful ways to the negative emotions.

In the case of staff participant A, whose views are quoted above, the interpretation is less straight forward because there appears to be a recognition that the process of receiving feedback can leave students emotionally compromised and feeling vulnerable whilst at the same time they seem to be adopting a "tough love" (Fram and Pearse, 2000) approach based on a view which can be summarised as this will hurt but the student will appreciate it later. Staff participant A spoke in terms of seeing their relationship to their students as a coaching one in which high levels of performance are expected and are conveyed to the student whilst assistance is conditional on what the student is able to do for themselves. For confident, high achieving students such an approach may well be successful but for weaker and less confident students the message may well be emotionally more problematic.

At first glance staff participant G's comments, rooted as they are in the recognition of the importance students place on praise, suggest an emotional awareness which is commendably attuned to the students' needs. Whilst the comments from the students included in this research do suggest that students can be praise orientated, the risk of empty praise, that is praising even the most insignificant achievement as appears to be the case with staff participant G, may ultimately devalue the praise or, possibly worse, serve to reinforce the least significant elements of the students' learning. Furthermore, the use of praise with little discrimination between significant and minor achievements can be seen as a manifestation of a largely behavioural approach to learning in which feedback is focused on the ego,

how the student feels, than the task, what they have achieved.

Staff participant H made it clear in their interview that they recognise the students' need for reassurance in their feedback but the students this member of staff is discussing are high performing students who received marks of 90% on an assignment but who insisted on coming for a tutorial to discuss their work. I asked if the students came wanting to know what they would have had to do to gain the missing 10% but apparently that is not why they come suggesting that the reassurance the students are looking for is egocentric in that they want to be told, again, just how good they are. It is clear from what participant staff H said in the interview that the written feedback they provide to their best students tends to focus on the ego rather than the learning as the following extract makes clear:

> When the student is doing well I just do ticks because they are giving me the right solution and write 'Excellent work, well done'. (staff H)

Given the apparent brevity of the written feedback participant staff H provides to their very best students it is, perhaps, unsurprising that they come for verbal feedback albeit with no desire to know how to improve simply to be told that they really are as good as the mark suggests. Interestingly the process of verbal reassurance does not seem to apply to the weaker students. Staff participant H says of their approach to feedback to weaker students:

When the student is weak I fill the paper with red and I circle everything that's wrong and put the right solution. ... I give very prescriptive explanation of what needs to be done (staff H)

According to staff participant H, weak students are less likely to come for additional verbal feedback and yet they may well be in greater need of reassurance than the stronger students. At the emotional level staff participant H appears to recognise the role reassurance can play in the feedback process but it is less clear that they are directing that insight towards those students who are most likely to benefit from it.

What emerges from this discussion of the staff's perspective is that the staff involved in my research were very strongly committed to the idea of feedback and saw it as a way of helping students to learn. Moreover, they believed that the feedback they personally provided was of high quality. The staff I interviewed recognised the importance of establishing and maintaining effective work relations with their students but they frequently expressed views about students which indicated a deficit model in which the students were not able to, or were not always keen to, take any responsibility for their own learning. The discourse established by the staff in my research closely matches that of the staff in Carless' (2006) paper in that staff tended to believe that their feedback, if the student used it appropriately, was helpful and likely to promote learning and where that did not happen the problem lay elsewhere. The staff I interviewed seemed to be very well aware of the university-wide drive to improve student satisfaction in relation to feedback as defined by the NSS but few of them seemed willing to problematise the

relationship between improving student satisfaction and promoting student learning. The staff certainly talked about how feedback could improve learning but much of what they said in terms of how feedback could be improved related to the kinds of structural changes, such as the speed of feedback and providing typed feedback, designed to improve student satisfaction scores. The drive to improve NSS scores is a university policy and staff can hardly be blamed for seeking to conform to the policy requirement. However, the consequence of adhering to such a policy may actually have a negative impact on student learning by preventing staff experimenting with alternative, perhaps more dialogic, forms of feedback to students.

In terms of their views on power the staff in my study placed a significant emphasis on the importance they thought students attached to the mark, the awarding of the mark being a fairly clear manifestation of the academic's power. Whilst the staff were quite correct in seeing the grade as of vital importance to third year students the same importance was less evident in the case of the first year participants which suggests that staff may assume that the student body is more homogeneous than it appears to be. In terms of their sense of identity the use of metaphors by a number of my staff participants was interesting in the way it seemed to suggest they saw their relationships with their students as being one in which power resided with the member of staff. One should not be surprised by manifestations of the inequalities of power in staff student relationships but in this case it may also support the contention that at least some of the staff in my research see the

feedback process as essentially a transmissive one in which knowledge is simply dispensed among the students rather than co-created through dialogue. Perhaps unsurprisingly the staff in my research said little about the emotional aspects of feedback, certainly in terms of their own emotions, preferring to maintain the objective and rationalist discourse in which emotions play little if any role. The issue of emotions appears to be a major disjunction between the staff and the students included in my research. In the student responses there were frequent references to the emotional aspects of feedback but responses from the staff indicated an apparent reluctance to take the students' emotional state into account when presenting feedback.

The Social Construction of feedback by staff and students:

In this section of the chapter I would like to draw together some of the discussions which have emerged from my data analysis and the discussion above in order to highlight the ways in which the staff and students in my research construct the idea of feedback. However, before proceeding it is worth revisiting the concept of social constructionism which, in line with Schwandt (1998), I have presented as being a process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified.

One of the most obvious ways in which staff and students engage in the vital process of constructing meaning is with reference to their previous and present experiences. For the students in my research, especially the first year students, their prior experience of feedback at school or college or, in some cases, at work, clearly provided them with a model of feedback which they could use as a benchmark to compare feedback gained at university with. This construction of feedback mirrors the findings of Beaumont et al (2008) who highlight the three stage cycle of feedback characteristic of the assessment for learning model common to most schools in which students are given preparatory guidance, in task guidance and finally post submission performance feedback. It is, perhaps significant, if rather depressing to note that amongst the third year students there were few examples of good feedback cited (see also Stobart, 2008) and in one case the example chosen came from their GCSE course. Thus the first significant aspect of my student participants' construction of feedback, which is derived from their school or

work experience, is that it is a process designed to support their learning and development and which is closely bound up with dialogic exchanges with their assessors.

Some writers (see for example Furedi, 2012) have suggested that there is a qualitative difference between the expectations of schools and those of universities in terms of what the student is required and expected to know and be able to do for themselves. Nevertheless, expecting students to unlearn processes which were likely to have proved successful over a lengthy period of time is asking a great deal. Dialogue with teaching staff in relation to assignments, especially prior to submission, is also seen by the students in my research as an important part of their construction of what good feedback is. Encouragingly, the staff included in my research seem to recognise the value of dialogue but in the majority of cases the dialogue was provided after the assessment event. Where staff do engage in verbal feedback with students as a formative feedback process the emphasis tends to be on telling the student what the staff member thinks they need to know. In one sense this is, of course, right and proper, staff need to make judgements about what will help the student and where the gaps in the student's knowledge are. However, as noted above in the analysis of the staff interviews, whilst staff do value dialogue, with only one or two exceptions, the staff in my research saw dialogue as an essentially Socratic and transmissive process where the answer is pre-determined and the students are led to the right answer by careful or even leading questions. Like Meno's slave the students' role in the dialogue is to follow the questions

and reach the right conclusions rather than grapple with the problem in conjunction with the lecturer in order to co-construct new knowledge. However, it is also important to note that the students' construction of their own identity in relation to feedback and learning did not suggest the high levels of self efficacy that a truly Freirian dialogue might demand and this is particularly evident if we consider the students' reservations about the value of peer assessment and feedback.

In terms of their identity students' sense of themselves as learners appears to remain highly dependent on the expertise of the lecturer. However, it would be wrong to assume that the students brought nothing to the table in terms of understanding what feedback is and what works for them. In this regard there is a significant gap between the students' and the staffs' perspectives. The key point to note about the ways in which the students constructed their identity and how the staff constructed the identity of the students is encapsulated in Sarup's definition of identity as 'a construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices' (Sarup, 1996 cited in McCarthey, 2002: 12). Just as the students' construction of their identity is a product of their past and present experiences of people, places and events so too is their construction of feedback and here there is a gap which most of the staff in my research seem unaware of or unsure how to close.

The relationship between the staffs' construction of their identity as

conscientious producers of good quality feedback will tend to make it more difficult for them to see the gap between their feedback practices and those the students are looking for. This gap becomes even more evident when we consider the use of metaphor by the staff to describe themselves. In each case the chosen metaphor places the member of staff in a position of power over the students in which feedback is to be transmitted, absorbed and faithfully reproduced. So prevalent is the construction of the staffs' identity of themselves as the dispenser of learning, that when asked how feedback could be improved most of the staff chose to focus on the structural aspects of feedback which they were familiar with. One member of staff, participant H, did suggest that the best way to improve feedback was "...as a discussion, that is the most appropriate and the most useful for students." Unfortunately, the context of this comment was summative feedback on a written exam rather than a dialogic and formative process.

Another important part of the staffs' construction of feedback was related to their perception of power which, in general, they believed they had, despite the occasional challenge from students. The manifestation of the power of the staff found its expression in the allocation of marks to student's work thus privileging summative feedback over formative and at the same time reinforcing their belief that students valued marks over other forms of feedback. In terms of the significance of marks to the students it rather depended on which group were being asked. For the first year students in my research marks were important but it was not clear that they were seen as overwhelmingly more important than feedback. In general the first year

participants tended to recognise that it was feedback not marks that helped them to improve their work. The opposite seems to have been the case for my third year students who, whilst appreciating the role of feedback, particularly informal dialogic forms of feedback before submission, recognised the importance of the mark to the wider world and consequently appeared to be more mark orientated than the first years.

There was no evidence in the staff data to suggest any differentiation between the first and third year students and the comments from the staff, particularly in relation to the significance students attached to marks, suggested that they saw the students as a homogenous mass with comparable needs and opinions. Whilst it may be objected that the staff were not invited to differentiate between the students, equally there was no prohibition on them doing so. As a consequence, not only did staff tend to speak of students as a whole entity, they also, overwhelmingly, focused their comments on summative feedback rather than formative feedback. At best this construction of feedback as secondary to the mark is an incomplete and partial construct and it does not reflect the perspective of all the students which is, often, rather more nuanced.

The area in which staff and students' constructions of feedback seem to be furthest apart is that of the role played by emotions. Numerous writers, Falchicov and Boud (2007), Stobart (2008), Pekrun and Stephens (2010), Dowden et al (2011), have pointed to the sense of vulnerability which many

students experience in relation to the assessment and feedback processes. As has already been noted, the degree of self efficacy experienced by the students' in my research was frequently rather limited and, notwithstanding the student who described themselves as 'cocky', the general impression was one of self doubt and anxiety. It is clear from the comments from both first and third year students that they are looking for reassurance in the feedback they received alongside indications of how they could improve their work. Whilst improved learning is undoubtedly the primary purpose of both formative and summative feedback, a student who does not feel reassured by the feedback is likely to be less able to respond effectively to messages aimed at improving their learning.

Whilst one or two of the staff did refer to feedback which provided praise it was not clear how genuinely congruent that praise was. Furthermore, where comments from the staff did indicate a genuinely congruent expression of the emotional aspect of learning and feedback, it tended to be expressed in a way designed to appeal to the ego by the use of the term "excellent", with little indication of what, specifically, was excellent about the point being commented on. Consequently there was little to indicate what the parameters of the term excellent meant in the specific context. Staff participant A spoke in terms of being brutally honest when giving feedback to avoid raising any false hopes on the part of their students. However, if students are already feeling vulnerable an emotionally challenging approach may be counterproductive although with more confident students such an approach might well be effective. Requiring students to confront the reality of

their performance is clearly an integral part of feedback, but being brutal about it may not always engender the best outcome for the student. In fact, as is clear from the students' comments above, students tend to avoid those staff they think or believe will be unduly harsh in their treatment of them when assessing their work and providing feedback on it. For a "tough love" approach to work at all students need to be sufficiently emotionally secure to get beyond the tough part.

One possible explanation of the, apparent, emotional disconnect between staff and students is the reliance on anonymous marking of scripts. Anonymous marking inevitably makes it much more difficult to produce written feedback which is sensitive to a specific student's assessment and feedback anxiety. Another factor which may explain the apparent emotional disconnect between the staff and the students, when giving feedback, may be the extent to which so much of the pastoral side of the lecturers' role, dealing with extensions and other crisis in a student's life, has been passed onto other professionals within the university. It is also important to acknowledge that some writers (see Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009) have argued that there is already far too much emphasis on the emotional, or what they describe as the therapeutic, aspects of education and that emotions have no role in learning once they move beyond, as Jean Brodie might have put it, recognising the beauty, truth and elegance in a specific discipline. British higher education tends to be dominated by the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy (Maher, 2004) and whilst it may be commendable for the staff in my research to focus their feedback on the objective and the cognitive

rather than the subjective and the affective aspects of learning, such an approach runs the risk of winning a feedback battle and yet losing the war. It may well be that Furedi is quite right when he suggests that when dealing with an anxious student '...it is far better to have a discussion about the subject of the essay ... before gently directing them to the library than to short-circuit the process of discovery through discussing early drafts with them.' (Furedi, 2012) but such advice assumes a Cartesian separation between emotions and cognition which is disputed by the work of Värlander (2008) and Pessoa (2008) whilst the work of Pekrun et al (2002) points to a clear link between emotions and learning. In short, and with due acknowledgement to the views of those who argue that education is not therapy, there is a strong case for academic staff to recognise the role of emotions in students' learning and to use that recognition in the construction of feedback to students.

Chapter 6

Conclusion, Implications and recommendations:

As noted in the introduction, the origin of the research which underpins this thesis began just over two years ago when I came to realise that the tacit knowledge I had used and assumptions I had made when providing formative feedback to an undergraduate student had completely misled her. Over the past two years I have immersed myself in the literature of feedback, some of which is discussed in my literature review but a lot of which was filed under interesting but not particularly helpful or relevant to this thesis.

In the literature review I explored the origins of the term feedback, which I located in the early days of wireless technology and systems engineering. However, I noted the way in which feedback quickly became associated with the work of behavioural psychologists. I argued that the development of cybernetics by Wiener in the 1940s, and its subsequent evolution into second order cybernetics, allowed links to develop between cybernetic models of feedback and constructivist models of learning. I noted that whilst second order cybernetics and constructivist theories of learning provided a plausible alternative paradigm for learning and feedback, it was the development, and subsequent adoption, of Bloom's taxonomy in the Dearing Review and later by the QAA which was to have the most significant impact on British higher education. The focus on the link between feedback and Behavioural psychology led to a discussion about the pervasive nature of behavioural models which can be found throughout UK higher education. My research

indicates the reliance on transmissive and essentially behaviourist approaches to feedback amongst the staff I interviewed. In positioning themselves as the expert and the student as the novice the staff exhibit an approach to feedback consistent with Watson's definition of Behavioural Psychology as "the prediction and control of behaviour."

In my literature review I argued that it was the development of Cybernetics by Weiner in the 1940s and, more importantly, the refinement of cybernetics which was found in Second Order Cybernetics, which offered an alternative model of feedback in which communicative processes built on shared common understandings were developed so that feedback became a dialogue not a monologue. If we take this injunction to see feedback as a shared process of knowledge construction rather than a simple process of knowledge transmission and link it to the work of writers such as Sadler (1998) and Ramaprasad (1983) a much more dialogic model of feedback starts to emerge.

The contribution of Higgins et al (2001) and in particular of Nicol (2010) provided a significant boost to the search for an alternative model of feedback based on constructivist and dialogic principles rather than those of systems engineering and behaviourism. The greater use of dialogic approaches to feedback was supported by the majority of my student participants who welcomed the opportunity to discuss their work both as formative and summative submissions. The lecturers I interviewed seemed

less sure about the value of discussion and their approach to feedback was much more consistent with the point of view of Bailey and Garner (2010) who suggest that staff are still heavily influenced by the institutional demands in relation to feedback rather than those of the students. The gap between the views of the students in my research and those of the staff in relation to how best to provide feedback is consistent with the work of Poulos and Mahony (2008) who point out that there has been relatively little research into the student perspective on feedback.

In my literature review I made a strong case for the adoption of more dialogic forms of feedback in higher education based on based on the communicative models of second order cybernetics and a constructivist approach to feedback in which the teacher and the student collaborate as co-constructors of knowledge. However, I found relatively little evidence that constructivist or cybernetic values were influencing feedback. In the main, feedback was seen by the staff in my research as something which is done to the student rather than developed with the student there is a corresponding absence of any real sense of agency on the part of the student. The accompanying sense of crisis in relation to the lack of emotional resilience to the experience of assessment and feedback is a direct product of the sense of powerlessness and inadequacy frequently expressed by the students in my research. Boud and Falchikov (2007) are amongst the relatively few writers who have looked at the relationship between feedback and the students emotional response to that feedback which is a little surprising given that the links between learning and emotions are well established in the field of

Psychology (see for example Demasio, 1996 , Varlander, 2008, van Dinther et al 2011). The significance of the emotional aspect of my students' engagement with the feedback they were provided with is a social construction which can best be understood through the lens of Harré and van Langenhove,'s (1999) concept of positioning theory.

In positioning theory the actors interact around three linked elements of storyline, positions and actions-acts. Both actors (student and teacher) need to establish and understand the storyline. In the case of my research the storyline indicates that knowledge lies with the teacher and is transmitted to the student, both actors understand this element of the position with the student as the novice and the teacher as the knowledgeable other. In terms of the positional aspects of feedback the reliance on written feedback often means that feedback occurs at a distance and is delivered anonymously to the student after the summative assessment event. Thus the positional element of the model developed by Harré and Langenhove sees feedback as occurring at a distance with both the student and the teacher physically separated. The actions and acts, possibly verbal almost certainly emotional, are the responses to the storyline and the position adopted by staff and students. Interestingly Positioning theory not only provides us with a model of how the feedback interaction is set up, it also suggest that both staff and students actively collaborate to maintain it, thus the staff maintain their status as knowledgeable other and the students maintain their status as passive recipients.

The idea that students adopt an inferior position in their relationship with their teachers when dealing with feedback, and the extent to which that position is something both parties are complicit in establishing and maintaining, may help to explain the role of praise on the part of teachers and students alike. Kohn (1994), writing in his article *The Risks of Reward* and Stobart (2008) have both highlighted the ineffectual nature of praise in feedback when it is simply targeted at the ego. The role of praise in feedback needs to be divided into two types: praise related to effort and praise related to ability. Research by Dweck (1999) suggests that praise related to effort can have a positive impact on students learning from feedback and their willingness to remain engaged in difficult tasks but praise linked to ability tended to have a less positive impact and lead to a reduction of engagement where a student was not successful. The emphasis placed on the role of praise in the feedback process by the staff in my research only underlines the extent to which their feedback practice was underpinned by an implicitly behavioural model of learning. My research suggests that rewards in the form of ego centric praise were offered by the staff and sought by the students, a process described by Deci and Ryan (1985 cited in Kohn 1994) as 'control through seduction'. In my research we clearly see the staff providing feedback in the form of praise related to ability and we also see students actively seeking ego (ability) centred forms of praise. In both cases the value of the associated feedback is likely to be less effective because it focuses the feedback debate around what students are rather than what they can do.

The design of the thesis has sought to draw on aspects of Foucault's theories particularly in relation to the four key themes of Discourse, Power, Identity and Emotion which have run right through this thesis. At an epistemological level I have made it clear that I have adopted a socially constructionist approach to the analysis of the data. Using this approach I have sought to explore the ways in which staff and students included in my research have engaged with and sought to make sense of the phenomenon of feedback. Although my findings are limited to one specific institution at a specific point in time, nevertheless, I do believe that my analysis and interpretation of the data which has been presented in this thesis is, in Guba's phrase, trustworthy. I have, as far as possible, let the data speak so that the reader can hear the voice of the participant and in so doing they can judge for themselves whether my interpretation is accurate and credible. There were, inevitably, data which were not included in the final analysis but often this was due to the need to conserve wordage or because adding it would, in my judgement, do little to clarify the narrative.

This is a relatively small scale piece of research located within the context of a specific post 1992 English university and yet my findings do have a wider application due to their theoretical generalizability. In terms of the data derived from the students it is clear that students arrive at university with a well defined sense of what they think good feedback is and this will have been derived from previous experience of study or employment. This is not to say that students necessarily know what is best for them but it does suggest that staff should not simply assume students are tabular rasa when it

comes to understanding feedback processes. It may be necessary for students to learn that feedback processes in universities are different from those they may have previously experienced, but that process of learning is likely to be more effective if it is the result of discussion and, where possible, negotiation rather than if it is seen as an imposition by the powerful onto the, relatively, powerless. The evidence for this argument lies with the data from the third year students. After almost three years of receiving written feedback the third years struggled to identify instances of helpful, written, feedback. However, the same group were frequently able to identify instances where discussions with staff led to a better understanding of what they needed to do to close the gap between actual and desired levels of achievement.

The second generally applicable point to emerge from my research relates to the role emotions play in students' responses to and perceptions of feedback. Almost all the students in my research identified a strong emotional element in their commentaries which suggested that staff providing feedback ought to show some awareness of if only because of the risks of unintentionally damaging some fragile and emotionally vulnerable students. It would be wrong to assume that staff don't care about the emotional well being of their students, but the systems designed to benefit students, such as anonymous marking or the use of students advisers to deal with students' periodic crisis such as the need for extensions, may actually hinder the development of the close, personal links between staff and students which would allow academics to be more aware of the emotional needs of the students in

relation to feedback. The solution to both of these issues is, I would suggest, the same and it is a greater use of dialogue around learning, teaching and assessment.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the staff are not necessarily free agents. If staff do tend to adopt a largely transmissive approach to providing feedback it is pertinent to ask how far that is the result of the wider institutional context with its focus on improving student satisfaction around feedback as measured by the NSS. Furthermore, staff are constrained by the need to deliver courses in the most economical way possible with relatively scarce resources and it is a measure of their commitment that they try as hard as they do to produce feedback which will be helpful to their students. If we add to this increasing class sizes, the ever present need to research and publish, preparations for periodic review, QAA or any one of a number of reviews and audits carried out by professional bodies, it is legitimate to express surprise that students get anything but the most basic feedback at all. For whatever reason it does seem that there is a mismatch of expectations between the tutor and students and this seems especially noticeable in some of the assumptions staff make about students such as they are instrumental in their approach to learning and are only interested in marks. What I think my research suggests is that whilst students may appear to be instrumental in their approach to learning there was relatively little evidence of students settling for a basic pass if they had a clear idea of how they could improve their work and gain a better grade. Furthermore, my research suggests, the issue of marks is complex and varies from first years,

who seem to be less focused on marks and more on feedback, to third years who seem to be far more focused on marks. This distinction in focus in relation to marks between first and third year students is predictable given the greater emphasis on the need to graduate and get a job in the third year but its effect may be to discourage staff and third year students from engaging in feedback practices designed to strengthen learning rather than merely recording progress.

Implications:

The most obvious implication of my research is in terms of my own practice which is where the project, and indeed the whole EdD began. I have come to realise that much of what I had assumed in relation to my own feedback practices was based on tacit knowledge which applies equally in my dealings with students and my colleagues. In the past I tended to assume a common understanding of the function and form of effective feedback. What the research I have carried out for this thesis has made clear to me is the extent to which my colleagues also construct their own concepts of good feedback as do our students. To a very large extent what seems to drive our thinking as lecturers is the desire to improve student learning but to some extent this desire is displaced by an institutional emphasis on feedback aimed at addressing what are seen as weaknesses within the NSS. I do not believe that it is enough to say to our students "this is feedback" and I think that what we should be asking of our students is "what do you want from feedback?" This may seem an idealistic and time consuming process but, as my research suggests, by engaging students in a dialogue about feedback and

learning, where the outcome is not pre-determined but is fluid and open, we are likely to have a much more satisfactory result. I am not suggesting that the decision making process around feedback should be handed over to the students merely that we do recognise that they have experience and a point of view and by finding out what they think we may be in a better position to use feedback to help them learn. Such an approach is, I would argue, consistent with Carless' call for a '...fundamental reconceptualization of the feedback process.' (Carless et al, 2011: 395).

My original plan was to recruit participants from across all five faculties and with three first years and three third years from each faculty but, as indicated in the section on research design, this proved logistically impossible for me to organise. What did emerge from having all the student participants from one department was the extent to which the construction of feedback varied from first to third year, particularly in relation to the importance attached to marks over feedback and in the off the record discussions some of the third years acknowledged that they were aware that their priorities had shifted. Drawing staff from across the university was a potential limitation because of the different academic disciplines they belonged to. There was a risk that what would shape their views about feedback would overwhelmingly be their discipline particularly because the NSS data showed some disciplines performed much better than others in relation to the feedback they provided. However, in practice recruiting staff from across the university proved to be an effective way of taking a snap shot or cross section of the staffs' views which were remarkably consistent regardless of their background and

discipline and I suspect this may be a product of the drive to conform to the perceived requirements of the NSS.

Recommendations:

This research has raised a number of important issues which can be addressed at an institutional level. The recommendations are presented below and are derived from my data from both students and staff.

Key finding from my research	Proposed changes to practice
Students arrive at university with a well developed sense of what good feedback is	Discussions about the types of feedback new students can expect at university should be part of the induction programme for all new students
Most of the students in my research recognised the benefits of dialogue as part of the feedback process	Opportunities for dialogic feedback at the formative and summative stages of assessment should be integrated into all modules and should be linked into the personal tutorial system which can be used to monitor feedback across modules as well as within individual modules
Students are reluctant to engage in peer assessment in either formative or summative stages	The requisite skills need to be built into programmes of study from induction onwards. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on the reflective aspects of learning and the opportunities for collegial learning via the use of group assignments and opportunities to develop confidence in using the stated assessment

	criteria and learning outcomes in order to be able to critically assess their own work and that of their peers prior to submission.
Students often experience high levels of anxiety in relation to assessment and feedback	HEIs need to consider whether the advantages of anonymous marking outweigh the disadvantage of reducing students to a number which may reduce or even remove the need to ensure that feedback is carefully targeted at a specific individual. Personalised feedback can help to reduce the anxiety level of students by increasing their sense of worth and self esteem as a co-constructor of knowledge
The 1st year students in my research placed a higher emphasis on feedback over grades than the 3rd year student in my research did	Develop a culture of valuing feedback over grades by moving the whole of year 1 to a pass fail basis with detailed feedback and cross modular feed forward as a way of building the recognition of the importance of feedback as an aid to learning. In years 2 and 3 use grades but develop feed forward which will go across modules
Staff are conscientious producers of feedback	Encourage staff to involve students in the feedback process to create more time and space and relieve pressure on staff
Staff see their role in providing feedback as closely related to the maintenance of academic standards.	Staff need to make greater use of dialogic exchanges with students so that a shared conception of the academic standards required and expected can be developed
Staff frequently hold or develop deficit views of students academic capabilities or commitment to feedback	Staff need to spend more time with students outside of the learning environment and get to know them as people and understand their world view and how it impacts on their

	approach to learning
Although the staff I interviewd espoused certain values which emphasised the importance of seeing the individual student and responding to them in practice responses to attempts to improve feedback tend to be institutionalised and focused on structural issues not necessarily student issues	The institution needs to recognise that feedback works best when it is a dialogic rather than a transmissive process and that effort and resource could be more effectively put into encouraging more open, personalised and dialogic forms of feedback
The staff I interviewed tended to hold a distributive model of power in which power was a finite resource and sharing it reduced the individual's own power	Staff need to be encouraged to re-consider the view of the student as a passive, powerless recipient of knowledge and start to think of students as co-constructors of knowledge and shares of power

In terms of recommendations it seems clear to me that the most useful step would be a much greater emphasis on establishing a dialogue between staff and students around feedback in which the staff recognise the significance of the students' prior experience and the students recognise the constraints, especially that of time, imposed on the staff. To some extent this process already exists in the pre-course induction programme but that programme is aimed at new first years and therefore does not reflect the changes in the students' needs and constructions of good feedback over the whole time they are studying. A programme of induction for students at the start of each year, perhaps even at the start of each semester, in which a dialogue around assessment and feedback is entered into would help to address the changing needs of students over the whole of their course.

At an institutional level there should be an equal, perhaps even greater, focus on the importance of feedback to students as a way of enhancing learning and not simply raising satisfaction. In terms of the emotional needs of students it is essential that staff recognise the emotional dimension of learning and the high levels of emotional capital invested in the learning process by the students. I am not suggesting here that staff should take on a quasi counselling role when providing feedback to students, but the adoption of a more reflective approach, which recognises the limits of the technical rationalist model of learning, might help to open up the possibility of a more empathic approach to feedback by staff. At the same time students need to be encouraged to adopt a reflexive and self regulated approach to learning along the lines advocated by Boud (2007) and Carless (2011) in order to help them monitor their own performance and engage in a dialogue with staff as co-learners not simply helpless novices.

At the start of this thesis I posed two research questions:

• What influences the social construction of the concept of good feedback by academic staff and undergraduate students ?

• What steps can be taken to close any gaps in contrasting constructions of what constitutes good feedback by academic staff and students?

Throughout this thesis I have argued that four key themes influence staff and students' construction of feedback and they can be summarised as discourse, power, identity and emotions. I have argued that whilst there are

overlaps between the staff and student conceptions of what constitutes good feedback there are also significant gaps, especially in relation to the emotional needs of students. What my research also highlights is the importance of a dialogic process, in which knowledge and learning is co-constructed by staff and students, as the most effective way of closing that gap.

Appendix 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1. **Title of project:** Lost in translation: what lecturers mean by good and what students think feedback is for

2. **Purpose and value of project:** This project is designed to increase my and thereby ultimately xxxxxxxx University's understanding of how staff and students construct their concept of what the role and purpose of feedback on students' assignments is. By developing a clearer understanding of what both staff and students think about feedback it should be possible to develop more effective forms of feedback.

3. **Invitation to participate:** I would like you to participate in this research because I am interested in understanding what you think the purpose of feedback is, what good feedback looks like and how feedback can be used more effectively to support student learning.

4. **Who is organising the research.** The project is being run by Phil Long and it is the basis of his Doctoral thesis.

5. **What will happen to the results of the study.** The data will be used to inform my Doctoral thesis – some of it may also be shared with others (the data will be completely anonymous) within xxxxxxx as part of our on-going actions to improve feedback to students.

6. **Source of funding for the research.** N/A

7. **Contact for further information** Phil Long, Faculty of xxxxx xxxxxxxx University

   Direct line: 0845 196 3557

1. **Why you have been invited to take part?** You have been invited to participate either because you are a member of staff or because you are an undergraduate student.

2. **Whether you can refuse to take part.** You are under no obligation to participate and are free to decline this invitation without any consequences for yourself.

3. **Whether you can withdraw at any time, and how:** You can withdraw from the project any time up to the publication of the data in the final research report and you will be offered the opportunity to check the data relating to you prior to it being used. If you decide to withdraw from the project please can you send me the withdrawal slip which is attached to the consent form.

4. **What will happen if you agree to take part** You will be invited to attend an interview. The interview will last about an hour, the interview will be recorded and you will be provided with a copy of the transcript to check and, if you wish, edit, prior to its inclusion in my research..

5. **Whether there are any risks involved** It is not anticipated that there will be any physical risks associated with taking part in the project. If you should feel that you do not want to answer any particular questions then simply tell the researcher. Agreement to participate in this research should not compromise your legal rights should something go wrong

6. **Are there are any special precautions you must take before, during or after taking part in the study.** There are no special precautions required.

7. **What will happen to any information/data that are collected from you.** The data will be used in my Doctoral thesis and some of it may subsequently be shared with colleagues from xxxxxxx who are interested in improving the quality of feedback on students work.

8. **Whether there are any benefits from taking part** Participating in the research project as a member of staff will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on a key area of your own practice and help develop a clearer understanding of how academic staff think about feedback. As a student you will have an opportunity to discuss and potentially influence the development of the way in which feedback is used and how it can be further developed to help you and your fellow students to improve their work.

9. **How your participation in the project will be kept confidential?** Its is intended to include 15 members of teaching staff and 15 undergraduate students from across the university so material from teaching staff will be given the code T1, T2, T3 etc and from students the codes S1, S2, S3 etc will be used. The data collected will be stored in a secure filing cabinet and the transcripts of the interviews will be encrypted and stored on a password protected private PC.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP,

TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the project: Lost in translation: what lecturers mean by good and what students think feedback is for

Main investigator and contact details: Phil Long, Faculty of xxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxx University, Direct line 0845 196 3557

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.

3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.

4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I

agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project

as outlined to me*

Name of participant (print)...........................Signed......................Date................

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the main investigator named above.

Title of Project:

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed: _____   Date: _____

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