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Problematizing student feedback in quality management in higher education

Abstract

Student feedback is increasingly being collected and analysed as a mechanism for assuring the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. However, there are other critical decisions that institutions make based on student feedback, including decisions on rewarding and/or sanctioning academics. This *Briefly Speaking* piece argues that, given the weight that institutions attach to student feedback in making decisions beyond quality assurance, it is of critical importance that its collection and analysis are problematised, so that they are underpinned by theory, and conducted following standard research methodologies, rigour and ethics. Doing so would transform the collection and analysis of student feedback from being a simple quality assurance praxis, into a form of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The *Briefly Speaking* piece provides context of its main thesis by discussing the origins of student feedback, and the challenges associated with the traditional ways of collecting and analysing student feedback. Such challenges raise questions about the scientific validity and reliability of student feedback. The *Briefly Speaking* piece discusses the dangers of relying

on information that lacks scientific validity and reliability in making decisions that have far-reaching implications on the quality of teaching and learning, as well as on the careers of academics. It ends by providing a brief description of more research-orientated approaches to the collection and analysis of student feedback.

Keywords: academics, curriculum, ethics, research, student feedback, teaching and learning

Introduction

The collection and analysis of student feedback is one of the most common mechanisms used to assure and enhance quality in teaching and learning in higher education, particularly in the design and review of curricula. However, the use of student feedback sometimes goes beyond attempts to assure quality as it is increasingly being used to inform institutional reward systems such as personal promotion of academics. In spite of the fact that student feedback can inform important decisions, this *Briefly Speaking* argues that the assumptions underpinning its elicitation and analysis can be flawed, and the methods used to elicit and analyse it may not always bear up to the rigorous academic scrutiny applied to other forms of knowledge-making.

This *Briefly Speaking* piece begins with exploring the origins of student feedback in South African political discourse in order to consider its use in curriculum development and review. It then goes

on to argue for the need to look at student feedback as a form of academic research, and thus, to problematise many of the practices used to elicit and analyse it.

The origins of the use of student feedback

In order to explore the use of student feedback in teaching and learning in South Africa, it is necessary to go back to the debates of late 1980s and early 1990s about the transformation of the education system during the twilight of apartheid. As Hoadley (2015) points out, the thinking at that time was heavily influenced by a body of work exemplified in a collection of essays edited by educational sociologist, Michael Young (1971), which drew on arguments about the way education worked to reproduce existing social structures. The work of Young and his co-authors was driven by a concern that children from working-class families and young people, in general, continued to be ill-served by education even though the education and training system in the United Kingdom was relatively well-resourced. This thinking drew on social constructivism and, of a particular interest, in the way education functioned to 'impose meanings on others' (Young, 1971:2).

As it became evident towards the end of 1980s that South Africa was moving towards democracy, Young's concern with the way education worked to 'impose meanings', was viewed as especially pertinent in a country with a history of educational oppression. Later on, decolonial scholars such as Grosfoguel (2007) and Maldonado-Torres (2007), pointed out that coloniality involves the 'systematic repression of specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, and knowledges' of indigenous peoples (Quijano, 2007:169). In the context of South African history, it was important that any education system in a new democracy should free itself from the colonial oppression of apartheid. It is not surprising, therefore, that the work of Young and others resonated with the ideas of the 'People's

Education Movement' which focused on identifying the possibilities for curriculum change. One solution to the question of whose interests should be promoted by education was seen in the inclusion of 'learners' everyday reality into schooling and a learner-centred pedagogy' (Hoadley, 2015:737) and the concomitant construction of learners as 'co-creators' of the curriculum for the education system.

The result, following the transition to democracy, was Curriculum 2005 (C2005), a radical, outcomes-based approach that drew on learners' own knowledge and experiences of the world around them as they strove to achieve a number of 'critical cross-field outcomes' identified as key to citizenship. As the Department of Education (DoE) noted, at the heart of C2005, was the idea that any content could be used as a means of achieving the outcomes:

No thought is given to the existing curriculum. Instead schools (or local districts) are told they can choose any content and use a wide range of teaching methods as long as these develop citizens who display the agreed-upon critical outcomes (DoE, 2000:19).

Critiques of C2005 emerged very quickly. Jansen (1999:149), for example, claimed that the new curriculum was based on 'flawed assumptions about what happens in schools, how classrooms are organised and what kinds of teachers exist in the system'. Other critiques drew on Bernstein's (2000) distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' discourse (see, for example, Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999).

Horizontal discourse involves the communication of contextualised everyday knowledge which is often reliant on speech. Vertical discourse, on the other hand, involves communication about systematised and theorised knowledge that can explain phenomena regardless of the contexts in which they arise. Vertical discourse draws heavily

on written language, is communicated through formal education, and is supported in homes where caregivers have mastered it by virtue of their own educational experiences. An example of horizontal discourse might involve the answer to the question 'When does it rain?' An individual from the east coast of South Africa might answer that rain falls in summer while another living in the Western Cape would observe that rainfall occurs mostly in winter. Both answers draw on localised, everyday knowledge with the answer 'in summer' only pertaining to the eastern part of the country. An answer to the same question which draws on knowledge of weather patterns involving sea temperatures, and which could be applied anywhere in the world, would be characterised as vertical discourse.

Bernstein's own research (2000) showed that the children of middle-class educated caregivers were more likely to be able to draw on vertical discourse than those from homes where low levels of education predominated. This suggested that their home environments had supported and extended their mastery of vertical discourse. At the same time, these children also demonstrated command of horizontal discourse and could switch between the two forms of communication. In contrast, children from homes which did not exhibit high levels of education tended to be restricted to horizontal discourse. The danger, therefore, was perceived to lie in the reliance, in C2005, on learners' everyday knowledge which could result in learners whose homes did not support vertical discourse being denied access to powerful, theorised accounts of the world around them.

Although C2005 was short-lived, thanks to the critiques noted above, discourses constructing roles for learners as 'co-creators' of the curriculum were not. Critiques of C2005 raised questions about whether or not learners were in a position to 'co-create' the curriculum and, more specifically, about ways in which such processes of co-creation could lead to a neglect of the systematised and theorised knowledge characterising vertical

discourse in formal education, and the concomitant effects of this on some learners. Although C2005 itself did not endure, the idea of learners as 'co-creators' has continued to be privileged particularly in higher education where it is recognised that the 'student voice' is critical in ensuring high quality educational experiences for all.

However, as the next section of this *Briefly Speaking* attempts to show, another step in the reform of the post-apartheid educational system came to complicate the idea that learners should be 'co-creators' of the curriculum.

Learning outcomes and the privileging of skills

The replacement of C2005 resulted in claims, in popular discourse, that outcomes-based education had been abandoned in South Africa (see, for example, Rice, 2010). However, the use of the construct of learning outcomes in curriculum design has not fallen away because of its function as an organising principle in national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Learning outcomes describe the achievements of learners at the end of a programme of study on which certification is based. Without such descriptors, qualifications frameworks will not function and, globally, learning outcomes have come to be used as common languages of description to allow for the recognition of qualifications across borders.

As the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was introduced in South African higher education in the late 1990s, universities were required to register their qualifications' learning outcomes. This necessitated the review of existing programmes in order to identify learning outcomes. Work developing outcomes continued with the introduction of the Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (CHE, 2014), a process that necessitated the design and introduction of new qualifications to replace some

that were being phased out. As curricula were redesigned, academics often came to distinguish between 'knowledge' and 'skills' outcomes in their work on curriculum design and review.

As all this was taking place another discourse privileging the need for universities to develop skills for contemporary workplaces was also becoming dominant. The democratic elections of 1994 opened up the need for South Africa to engage with a globalising economy. As it emerged from apartheid, South Africa was experiencing high levels of unemployment and, at the same time, a skills shortage associated with the denial of quality education to the majority of the population. In this context, it is not surprising that the trade unions were vociferous in calls for skills development in what Jansen (2001) terms the 'race for policy frameworks' that characterised the 1990s. The 'high skills' or 'economic rationalist' discourse (Kraak, 2001) also came to dominate the thinking of students who overwhelmingly saw a qualification from a university as a means of gaining employment and, in the case of many, as a means of lifting their families out of poverty.

As researchers such as Wheelahan (2010) and Allais (2013) point out, the identification of knowledge needed to underpin outcomes operates on a 'just enough' principle. This can result in curricula becoming 'knowledge poor' and, even more importantly, in failing to introduce students to the entire 'structure' of knowledge in the areas they study. The result is that students may well graduate with only the knowledge necessary for them to operate in the contexts for which they have specifically been trained to work. As the world of work changes, those contexts may cease to exist, and students may not be able to perform other work as they lack the overall knowledge to do so. The privileging of skills over knowledge can therefore be seen to have the potential for deleterious consequences for students who continue to call for them and who, in doing so, dismiss the need to engage with theory and conceptual thinking.

What does all this have to do with student feedback? If students have little understanding of, or appreciation for, the value of theories and principles that can move across contexts to explain the world around them (regardless of their origins in the Global South or the Global North), then there would be a need to exercise caution in relation to their responses to the 'what' of learning. It may well be that students' express opinions and make observations about course design that privilege the teaching of skills over theorised and principled knowledge. Taking these observations at face value, given the argument about the value of systematic bodies of knowledge made above, could well result in students suffering harm in the long run.

This situation is not helped by the 'students as clients' discourse which is dominant at many universities (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) and amongst students themselves. The use of student feedback, if not carefully conceptualised and managed, has the potential to link with discourses in ways which are not necessarily beneficial to students themselves.

This is but one example of the way theory and research can be drawn upon to problematise student feedback. It brings into focus the more important considerations about the extent of the validity of student feedback itself, considerations which need to be located in an examination of ways of academic knowledge-making themselves.

Feedback as a form of research

Understanding the elicitation and analysis of student feedback as a form of research producing valid and reliable knowledge, is critical given its uses in contemporary universities as noted above. In spite of the need for knowledge produced as a result of using student feedback to be valid and reliable, and of the status of universities as knowledge-producing institutions, the rigorous

scrutiny that accompanies the conduct of academic research sadly is not always applied to its use. One reason for this could be that the elicitation and analysis of student feedback is perceived simply as a quality assurance mechanism and, therefore, not worthy of the same serious academic consideration that would be afforded to a piece of research. The position underpinning this section of this *Briefly Speaking* is that decisions made on the basis of student feedback are very important such that rigorous scrutiny of the ways in which it is elicited and analysed should not be neglected.

On what is feedback sought?

In many cases, attempts to elicit student feedback on teaching and learning are based on statements about what are perceived to be 'minimum standards' or 'best practices'. Often, these 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' draw on global discourses constructing 'good' teaching'. Before adopting this kind of approach, it is necessary to ask whether 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' can be the same across the board. Are 'minimum standards' the same in a university that draws on its historically advantaged past and is rich in resources, as in an institution where the legacy of the past is still experienced and where academics and students work in poor conditions? Is 'best practice' the same in a university where lecture venues lack basics such as stable electrical connections as in those where state-of-the-art technology is available to support teaching and learning? Is 'best practice' necessarily the same in a university which enrolls large numbers of students from poor schools in rural areas as in one which recruits students from some of the best schools in the country, and who come from homes with high levels of education and ample financial resources?

Even more importantly, are 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' necessarily the same across the world? South African universities increasingly

draw on the notion of the need to identify themselves as 'world class', thanks to the aspirations to be acknowledged by global ranking systems (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). What this can then mean is that the 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' developed as a result of research and thinking in the Global North, which dominates the literature on teaching and learning, are then imported as 'standards' against which localised practice needs to be measured. How much consideration is given to the idea that these 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' might not be relevant to contexts in the Global South or to the idea that drawing on them can constitute a form of recolonisation? The definition of quality used in most quality assurance systems is that of 'fitness for purpose' (Harvey & Green, 1993). When 'minimum standards' or 'best practices' emanating from the Global North are used in quality management work, does this mean that teaching is being reduced to a globalised 'norm' in a world of multiple difference? Apart from obvious differences in the ways resources are distributed and can thus be available to draw upon, what do the use of 'minimum standards' and 'best practices' mean for social and cultural differences where people draw on different ways of being, on different understandings of knowledge and knowing in learning contexts?

The point of asking questions such as those posed above is not to say that student feedback on teaching and learning should not be elicited and analysed, but rather to call for consideration of what is being tested as it is used. Even more importantly is the need to consider who decides what should be tested. This, in turn, leads to the need for the considered conceptualisation of instruments intended to elicit feedback from students of the same order as that involved in the design of tools intended to capture data in a piece of research.

The purpose of using feedback

In a spirit of ongoing quality enhancement, most universities now emphasise the development of staff in their capacity as academic teachers. Programmes such as the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), run by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), also identify the importance of staff development, and provide funding for this purpose. According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Training (MoHET, 2017: para. 1.4), the UCDP 'is meant to be transformational [and] should assist to support initiatives where relatively rapid and large-scale change is needed'. This suggests the need for innovation in teaching and, indeed, most staff development programmes now focus on developing the capacity of academic staff to draw on pedagogical approaches that differ from those they themselves experienced as students.

Many students encounter new pedagogical approaches as uncomfortable (Behari-Leak, 2017) and resist them. Students long-schooled into understanding learning as a passive process involving the regurgitation of knowledge as 'facts' are likely to be discomforted by approaches that challenge them to move towards completely different understandings of learning and themselves as learners. Resistance to new approaches can take the form of negative feedback which, depending on how it is used, can then impact on the future career of an academic. If academics are to be encouraged to innovate, a 'safe space' is needed for them to be able to try out new approaches without fear of negative consequences. If student feedback is to be used in decisions related to, for example, probation and personal promotion, and if it is to be scrutinised by those holding positions of power such as heads of departments, course co-ordinators, deans and, increasingly, those in human resource divisions, how 'safe' are the spaces in which they teach? Is there a case for treating feedback on an individual's teaching, and which is intended to

enhance quality, from feedback on course design which is more 'removed' from an individual's pedagogical practice? Is it possible to develop and implement a policy that distinguishes between different purposes for feedback, and which procedurally sets up different routes and different audiences for each category?

Yet another question emerges in relation to the trialling and testing of innovative approaches when questions attempting to ensure 'minimum standards' or 'best practice' are used. How can a set of standardised questions possibly capture the wide range of innovations possible and allow students' responses to them to be assessed? As already indicated, standardised questions can have the potential to 'flatten' practice into a globalised set of norms which fail to acknowledge innovation and, thus, can constrain the transformation to which the system claims to aspire.

This latter point is all the more significant given the reliance on the use of reflective portfolios to drive pedagogical change in many staff development initiatives. Brockbank & McGill (2001:34) describe a reflective portfolio as

. . . a compilation of learning intentions, accounts of learning activities, learning outcomes, records of reflective dialogues. It includes evidence from a variety of sources including your private learning journal/diary/log, and most important of all, a reflective document detailing your learning process.

The analysis of student feedback is increasingly part of the 'evidence from a variety of sources' on which academic teachers are encouraged to reflect. However, the very idea that a reflective portfolio should comprise 'a compilation of learning intentions, accounts of learning activities', and so on, suggests the need for a very different approach to eliciting feedback involving questions which test

- i) the learning intentions of academic teachers

themselves and ii) the specific ways these are captured in practice. This means that the academic teachers themselves need to be involved and guided in developing the questions they need to ask, rather than having a standardised set of questions imposed upon them. Online tools are available to generate survey instruments so the practicalities of allowing academic teachers to develop individualised questions should not be too hard to overcome. Key is the development of those questions so that they 'test what they intend to test'. Developing questions to guide a piece of research requires rigorous thinking, and this should also be the case for questions intended to elicit students' experiences of the acts of teaching of elements of course design being examined.

All this suggests a different role for quality professionals. Rather than simply developing and administering standardised tools that attempt to capture feedback and analysing the results, the questions posed earlier in this piece suggest the need for a more thoughtful role involving providing guidance to academics on ways they can 'test' their own teaching against students' experiences of it, and analysing students' responses to that testing. It also suggests the need for a closer alliance with those working in teaching and learning centres who run professional development activities. Such an alliance would involve those with expertise in teaching and learning supporting academics as they identify the beliefs underpinning their practice and the ways those beliefs inform practice itself. This could then extend to providing guidance in the kinds of questions that need to be asked and the methods used to get answers to them. The role of educational experts does not end here as the interpretation of students' responses also requires thoughtful consideration of what students say (and their possible reasons for saying it) against the thinking behind the use of the teaching approach being tested. All this locates the elicitation and analysis of student feedback in the realm of research and, significantly, transforms it from a

quality assurance mechanism into a form of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

Student feedback as a form of research

All academic research is guided by thinking which has its roots in beliefs about what can count as knowledge and how it can be known. In the natural sciences, knowledge is commonly conceptualised as existing independently of human thought and existence. As a result, knowing becomes a process of discovering or uncovering that knowledge in ways that ensure it is not sullied by human action. Objectivity is prized as researchers seek to use empirical methods to observe and measure the independent world. This observation and measurement commonly involves numerical work and the use of statistics to infer what is believed to be fact.

Approaches that have served the natural sciences so well for centuries and which have led to huge advances (the development of a vaccine to contain Covid-19 being but one example) are understandingly dominant. However, in any work involving people it is important to ask whether approaches that have produced such enormous scientific advances are necessarily valid.

When students are asked about their experiences in the realm of teaching and learning, what is the status of the responses they provide? Does this exercise try to observe or measure something that exists independently of human thought and action, or which is the result of human thought? In student feedback, the response a student provides, whether it is a tick in a box or a sentence or through spoken or written answer to a question, is simply their 'truth' and not something which exists independently of them. From this perspective truth is multi-faceted and relative. There is no one 'truth' but rather as many truths as there are students. The situation becomes even more complex when considering what happens when someone ticks a

box or responds to a question using words and phrases. Someone, the analyst, has to interpret those responses. A response which already involves an individual's interpretation of teaching or curriculum design is then reinterpreted by the analyst in a process that the research handbooks term the 'double hermeneutic'.

Even more problems arise considering how to make sense of students' responses as a whole. One student may tick a box on a Likert scale responding that he or she entirely agrees with a particular statement. Another student may tick a different box saying he or she completely disagrees. What is the best way to reconcile opposing answers? Is knowledge like democracy where the majority position wins?

The observations and questions posed above are aimed at showing that eliciting and analysing student feedback is not a simple matter and that approaches used in some knowledge areas cannot be applied to these tasks unproblematically. So, what are the implications of all this for using feedback to enhance and assure the quality teaching and learning?

The first is that feedback cannot be used to prove that teaching or course design is definitively good or bad, or that one thing is the result of something else. Feedback can provide insights into what is going on in a classroom or a course and, as a result of those insights, the academics can begin to understand what appears to be working or not working, particularly if theory is drawn in to assist in conceptualising what is going on. Feedback can also provide insights that will allow individual academic teachers to improve their practice, and which will allow those who are guiding them to provide informed advice and guidance.

Another implication of the status of student feedback as a set of multiple perspectives on a particular topic or theme, involves the need for students' views to be considered in relation to those of other stakeholders in a process the

research handbooks often term 'triangulation'. In the case of a course, other stakeholders could be external examiners, employers and other members of a department or faculty. In the case of teaching, other perspectives could include those of academic peers or colleagues and, of course, the voice of the academic teacher himself or herself, in describing the reasons for teaching in a particular way and what he or she tries to achieve. This balancing of one set of perspectives against another is still an act of interpretation, but doing this aims to limit bias and ensure that whoever is looking at the course or the teaching has as close to a 360 degree view of it as possible.

A third implication of understanding student feedback as representing a set of multiple and varied interpretations of a course or of teaching, is that it cannot be used as a means of saying some courses or some academic teachers are better than others. Ranking systems where the interpretation of student feedback involves allocating numerical values to, say, Likert scale responses, and then totalling those numbers, might provide an indication of student satisfaction. However, what does student satisfaction mean? Students may well be happy with a course or with an academic teacher because they are not challenged, experience the course as 'easy' and do not have to work hard. The converse is also true: students may not be happy with a course or an academic teacher because they are challenged, experience the course as hard or difficult, and are required to work hard. A statement in a curriculum vitae which notes that an individual has consistently achieved high scores in student ranking systems actually means very little if not much is known about the students and why they awarded the scores they did.

In summary, students' observations and experiences of teaching and course design have to be understood as relative, and as influenced by myriad conditions. Of course, an attempt can be made to analyse those observations and experiences more closely by, for example, trying

to look at the way different groups of students respond to a course or to teaching, and a pressing case can be made for doing this. It may well be the case that black students from working-class households in historically disadvantaged communities respond in ways that are very different from those of their white peers from privileged households. In a context in need of transformation, and where student performance data (see, for example, CHE 2020) consistently shows that, regardless of the institution at which they are registered, the field of study and the level of qualification for which they are enrolled, black South Africans do less well than their white peers, there is cause to explore why and how the teaching and course design might be contributing to this injustice. However, analysis of feedback which takes into account of the wide range of socio-cultural backgrounds in South Africa requires the collection of demographic data and doing more than simply administering a survey type instrument to a class. It requires probing more deeply into what appears to be going on and to identify not only what students are saying, but who is saying it and why they appear to be saying these things.

It is to the array of methods that can be used to probe students' responses to teaching and course design more deeply that this piece now turns. However, it is first necessary to consider the ethics of feedback.

The ethics of using student feedback

National bodies associated with research, such as the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Universities South Africa (USAf) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), all subscribe to the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, of 2011 (www.singaporestatement.org). This statement is underpinned by the principles of

honesty, accountability, professional courtesy and fairness and good stewardship.

Most universities have now instituted policies and procedures to address ethics, and proposals to conduct academic research now generally need to be approved before the research can proceed. Although collecting and analysing feedback from students essentially constitute a form of research into teaching and learning, ethical concerns are rarely taken into account. This does not mean that attempts to use feedback to enhance and assure quality should require ethical approval in the same way as a full piece of academic research, but, at the very least, there is a need to take into account the principles underpinning ethical practice.

As indicated above, the Singapore Statement identifies 'professional courtesy and fairness' as a principle that needs to underpin all research. In this context, it needs to be asked whether requirements that individuals should submit to quality assurance mechanisms that scrutinise their practice as a matter of course using instruments they have had no part in developing, constitutes 'professional courtesy and fairness'. At the very least, there is need to involve them in considerations about which questions are asked, how they are asked and what happens to the responses to those questions. Even if it is decided that consent from unions and professional associations to the elicitation of student feedback means that a university is able to go ahead, what of 'courtesy' and 'fairness' to individuals? Statements pertaining to research ethics often refer to the need for the 'respect and protection' of the individual (see, for example, HSRC, nd) and, elsewhere, the concept of 'do no harm' is paramount, although there are also challenges to the idea that this itself is sufficient (see, for example, Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2000). What often appears to be missed in the use of student feedback in quality assurance is the potential for harm to be caused to academic teachers either formally, in the sense that the 'goods' of the university might be denied to them,

or individually, in the sense of the emotional and psychological harm negative responses can cause.

A lengthy exploration of research ethics is beyond the scope of this short piece but, for now, it is important to make two points. The first is that the collection and analysis of student data is not unproblematic in the context of concerns for ethics in research and the way these have been addressed in university policies and procedures. To claim that eliciting and analysing student feedback constitute 'quality assurance' and not research, is disingenuous as the potential for, at the very least, discomfort and, at most, actual harm, is inherent in what is done. In addition, if the use of feedback is not understood as a form of knowledge production, what is it then? Is it simply a bureaucratic task undertaken in the name of quality assurance, another bureaucratic endeavour? If it is believed that quality assurance is of value, that it really is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, it is then essential to consider the use of student feedback as a form of knowledge-making that can help academic teachers address problems and make things better. The second is that, if it is agreed that it is important to use student feedback, at the very least there is need to ensure that academic teachers and course designers are happy with the questions being asked about their work and that they feel secure in the way responses to those questions are analysed and used. Further to this, while not requiring ethical approval for the use of feedback, academics should be invited to be involved in the design of the tools that will be used to explore and analyse their work.

It is in the spirit of the concerns discussed briefly above that this *Briefly Speaking* now moves to look at the range of methods that can be used to elicit feedback.

Beyond the survey

The benefit of survey instruments is that they can be administered to large classes of students very easily, either electronically or in paper-based format using scanning systems. Surveys then consist of yes/no or Likert scale questions, often referred to as 'closed' questions, that can be analysed by a machine or a computer. Although this kind of approach to collecting and analysing student feedback is very efficient, it will only provide relatively superficial understandings of the teaching practices or elements of course design being tested. Using open-ended questions that require students to respond more fully does not allow for efficiency in processing, but it will provide more depth of understanding. The problems associated with analysing longer responses will be addressed later in this piece by considering the frequency at which feedback needs to be collected and relating this to the purpose of feedback itself. For now, two other methods of eliciting feedback need to be discussed.

Interviews

In research on teaching and learning, interviews are often used to probe students experiences and to provide in-depth understandings. Interviews can be one-on-one or take a 'focus group' approach where a group of students are interviewed together. One of the problems with using interviews to elicit feedback relates to the need for students to be able to share their understandings and experiences freely. If the academic teaching the class does the questioning, then students may feel constrained as he or she is likely to know them or will usually be able to identify them. To a lesser extent, this constraint can be managed if another academic from the department is willing to conduct the interview although even here there are problems. An academic colleague may not be completely unbiased and the academic teacher whose work is being explored may also feel uncomfortable with this situation. A way to resolve

this situation would be to draw on the services of experts working in teaching and learning centres or quality management offices to conduct the interview. As already noted earlier in this piece, ideally the academic teacher should be involved in designing the questions to be asked so that they take into account the rationale for the particular approach used in classroom practice or course design as well as the practice itself.

In research, it is usual for interviews to be transcribed for analysis. This is not necessarily the case when interviews are used to elicit responses from students. Notes made by an interviewer, or an observer, can suffice and can be written up as a brief report. This is much less consuming than transcription. The report on the interview(s) can then be considered in relation to the views of other stakeholders in order to get a picture of the course or the teaching. If support from an expert in higher education teaching and learning is available, then theory can also be used to inform the thinking involved.

Small group instructional diagnosis

Small group instructional diagnosis (SGID) was developed as a result from funding intended to improve post-secondary education in the United States in the early 1980s (Clark & Redmond, 1982). SGID begins with a facilitator and an academic teacher discussing matters that the teacher would like to be probed. Amongst other things, these issues might include the use of a new technique or concerns on the part of the teacher about why things appear to be happening or not happening in the class. As a result of this discussion, a focus for the SGID session is decided upon and a series of questions or statements for discussion identified.

On the day of the SGID, the class is divided into small groups of five or six. The facilitator is introduced to the class by the teacher who then leaves. Each group then selects a spokesperson.

Questions identified by the teacher and the facilitator are then presented to the class and groups are given a maximum of ten minutes to discuss their responses to them. At the end of the time allocated for discussion, the class is brought back into plenary and spokespersons are asked to report on the results of their group's discussion. The task of the facilitator at this point of the procedure is to try to get consensus from the class as a whole with regard to what will be reported back to the academic teacher in charge of the class in response to each question or statement. When this has been achieved, the intervention is concluded, and a report is written by the facilitator detailing what has emerged. Ideally, the facilitator is someone who can provide support and guidance to the teacher as the insights derived from the class are discussed and who can identify ways in which any problems can be addressed.

An SGID session can usually be completed within the 45-50 minutes allocated to most lecture sessions in universities. The advantage of using the SGID technique is that it can allow for the elicitation of in-depth feedback in large classes. In principle, it would be possible to divide a very large class numbering hundreds into smaller groups and then conduct an SGID session with each one. Clearly this is more demanding logistically than simply administering a survey type instrument, but the insights that can result are often more valuable than those derived from any number of surveys.

The frequency of collecting feedback

Because of its construction as a quality assurance mechanism, feedback is often collected routinely at the end of every course or module. However, if the use of student feedback is viewed as a form of research, the practice of collecting it routinely needs to be questioned. In most teaching situations, feedback collected routinely fails to identify anything new. The course is running as it usually runs, students are mostly happy so the results of the survey or of whatever method is used

are filed away for quality assurance purposes in a process focusing on a means rather than an end. At the end of the next iteration of the course, feedback is collected once again.

While this kind of practice might address the need for 'quality checks', it does little to enhance teaching or course design. It can also result in students and teachers failing to take the use of feedback seriously. A more thinking approach would be to reduce the number of times feedback is collected to simply check quality and, instead, to see it as a form of investigation into the way a new approach or initiative is experienced or to explore a particular problem that has arisen. This would mean that feedback is collected on a 'need to know' basis. If the frequency of collecting feedback is reduced, there is more time to be devoted to designing more thoughtful means of eliciting it and to reflect on what emerges from it. Perhaps most importantly, a shift from the routine use of feedback would shift understandings of it from the realm of quality assurance into those concerned with knowing more about teaching and learning in order to improve it.

Formative and summative feedback

In assessment, it is common to make a distinction between formative assessment intended to develop students' learning and summative assessment intended to measure it. This same distinction can be applied to the elicitation and analysis of student feedback. Making this distinction has a number of consequences, the first of which is that, if it is to be formative, feedback has to be collected and analysed while there is still time for any problems that emerge from it to be addressed. This means that feedback needs to be collected while teaching or a course is ongoing. The potential for feedback to be developmental also opens the way for more informal ways of collecting and analysing it to be used.

An informal means of collecting feedback could involve an academic teacher asking students to respond anonymously to a question or a statement in one or two written sentences at the very end of the class. These responses are then collected as students leave and can be read quickly by the lecturer once the class is over. The availability of quizzes and other tools in learning management systems makes informal approaches to the collection and analysis of feedback even easier. This kind of ongoing enquiry into what is going on in a particular teaching space is particularly valuable not only in order to check that all is well, but also as a means of developing ever deepening understandings of teaching and course design. Eliciting and analysing feedback are relatively low stakes (as is formative assessment) and encourage the reflection so many involved in the development of academics as educators value so highly. Evidence of this ongoing enquiry into teaching and course design can be included in a reflective portfolio and can also serve as a means of demonstrating concern for quality.

Conclusion

This *Briefly Speaking* has sought to problematise the use of feedback in quality management and, also, to ensure that the time and energy spent on collecting and analysing it is of value. However, one more point needs to be made to bring the piece to conclusion.

This piece began by noting that the collection and analysis of student feedback is one of the most common methods used to assure and enhance quality. A glance at the criteria for programme and institutional reviews used by quality assurance agencies across the world shows this to be true. Although criteria related to the collection and analysis of student feedback exist, review processes are often satisfied by evidence of the existence of the mechanism itself and not of its quality. The point of this *Briefly Speaking* has been to argue for the need for the quality of the

mechanism itself to be considered by contemplating its underpinning rationale, its ethics and its prospective efficacy. If this does not happen, a lot of time and energy is being expended for potentially little result.

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