

Students' Experiences of Assessment Feedback: Perspectives from a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Students' experiences. Assessment feedback. Phenomenological approach. Qualitative Orientation. Written tests.

ABSTRACT This paper presents findings of a study that explored students' experiences of assessment feedback at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. While the study was framed within the qualitative orientation, it started by collecting data using a questionnaire from a sample of two hundred second and third year students from the Faculty of Management Sciences. From this sample, ten students were selected purposively for in-depth interviews as follows: four from the department of Office Technology and two each from the departments of Accounting, Marketing and Public Management. The study revealed four major findings: (1) that written tests were the dominant form of assessment tasks, (2) that a mark only without comments was the dominant form of feedback, (3) that while students appreciated the value of feedback the quality of comments, where given, were poor and (4) that feedback was not promptly given to students. Given these findings, the paper provides some recommendations to help improve assessment feedback at MUT.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study that focussed on students' experiences of assessment feedback at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. The study entailed finding out if students understood and found educational value

in the feedback they received. Further, the study aimed at establishing the extent to which students in the Faculty of Management Sciences understood, responded to and benefitted from assessment feedback. Engaging with the students within the phenomenological orientation was helpful in tapping on their own experiences in meaning making (Vos, Strydom, Fourche and Delport 2008; Waters 2013).

Luckett and Sutherland (2000) and Meyer (2009) argue that while students value feedback for their learning in South Africa, they are generally not satisfied with its quality and the way it is given. Further, Sing (2008) in her study on *hospitality management students' understanding of and response to assignment feedback at a university of technology in South Africa*, found that students were ill-equipped to deal optimally with qualitative feedback. Feedback ought to be constructive and clear to students for them to make meaning of it and if they are not able to do so, they ought to be assisted by their educators.

A commissioned study by the Council of Higher Education in South Africa studied the year 2000 cohort entering the university sector and established that, by the end of 2004 only 30% of the total first-time entrants into the sector had graduated, 56% of the intake had left their original institutions without graduating and 14% were still in the system (Scott, Yeldand Hendry 2007). Effective and meaningful feedback would be useful to the South African university education sector given the high drop-out and low throughput rate (Letseka and Maile 2008). With this as a background, a study on students' experiences of assessment feedback in South Africa is critical and could contribute to positive practices regarding assessment and feedback in universities.

This paper is in six sections. Section one briefly reviews the literature around feedback. Section two outlines the theoretical framework. Section three discusses the methodology of the study. Section four discusses the results. Section five presents recommendations and, lastly, section six provides the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baume and Baume (1995) contend that feedback is a form of communication suggesting that it is a two-way process between lecturers and learners. The learners' input can take the form of their evaluation of the type of feedback to improve on their performance and thus contribute to their learning process. Infact, teaching, learning and assessment are interlinked and ought to be regarded as simultaneous activities (Black and William 1998; O'Dohertyand Shannon 2011). Assessment feedback thus should not only be used in judging the academic performance of the learners without aiding learning (Hargreaves 2005).

Giving proper feedback to students is one of the most important interventions in improving the quality of learning (McKenna and Quinn 2012). When learners are well guided and given effective and educationally-sound feedback, they stand a better chance of being successful (Orsmond and Merry 2011). Given that in South Africa, the higher education sector suffers from a low throughput rate the importance of students' success cannot be overemphasised.

Giving effective assessment feedback is more than allocating marks and passing or failing students (Ramsden 2003). Rowntree (1987) contends that allocating marks only is not helpful to students as it does not explain what they have done to merit a grade and what they could do to earn a better one. In this regard, feedback should provide an opportunity for students' to improve on their understanding and performance (Robbinson and Carrington 2004).

Assessment is generally viewed as summative or formative. Summative assessment is conducted at the end of a learning programme, or after completion of a particular module and is referred to as terminal assessment (Van Rooyen and Prinsloo 2003). In other words, summative assessment measures the sum of students' performance (Morgan, Dunn, Perry and O'Reilly 2004). Formative assessment, on the other hand, takes place during the process of learning and teaching (van Rooyen and Prinsloo 2003) and it provides feedback on student's progress. It thus gives students an opportunity to understand what they got right and what they got wrong so as to improve on their performance (Morgan, Dunn, Parry and O'Reilly 2004). Formative feedback thus, once effectively done, can provide immediate educational value to the learner (Clynes and Raftery 2008). Black and William (1998) contend that formative feedback, once effectively done, could develop students' learning abilities and produce active learners.

Giving feedback ought to be a well-planned exercise (Race 1999). A study on formative feedback conducted by Pereira, et al., (2008) at Malaysia Medical University, established that the majority of the students preferred a justification for marks to a mark only. Similarly, research findings on assessment by Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon (2011) at Edge Hill University indicate that students expressed a strong desire to receive grades/marks together with comments. While students need comments in addition to a mark, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) warn that comments should be appropriate and presented in a useful manner to improve students' learning.

A study by Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon's (2011) further found that 95% of students wanted immediate feedback; as such time is crucial to providing meaningful feedback.

PARADIGM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research paradigm positions the fundamental beliefs or the ‘world view’ of the researcher in a given research project. Lichtman (2013) mentions that a paradigm is a way of seeing the world while Babbie and Mouton (2008, p. 645) refer to it as a “model or framework for observation and understanding, which shapes both what we see and how we understand it”. In real sense then, a paradigm dictates how research is to be conducted.

According to (Bailey, 2007), it is important for researchers to be conscious of the way in which their underlying beliefs (values, assumptions, and so on) influence how they frame the research, how they do the research and how they interpret the findings. Neuman (2006) contends that researchers’ understanding of their world views is vital because it affects their knowledge production. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) different world views result into different understandings of ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of the research.

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm, which is based on the belief that people construct reality and researchers ought to understand the context in which reality is constructed (Check and Schutt 2012). In other words, the interpretive paradigm is concerned with the understanding of the world through people’s meanings of it. Interpretivists argue that reality and knowledge production or meaning making depend on people’s interpretation, hence there is no objective knowledge out there (Geppert 2003). Interpretivists then reject the positivist belief that there is a concrete objective reality that could only be captured by scientific methods (Lynch and Boyen 1997). Their understanding is useful to the phenomenological orientation propounded in this paper and discussed next.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study drew on the phenomenological research orientation, which describes lived experiences of phenomena without researchers’ preconceptions (Waters 2013). The principle of removing researchers’ preconceptions is called bracketing (McLeod 2011). Phenomenologists thus believe that experience is best narrated by the one who experiences it (Patton 1990). This approach is suitable for research types that involve descriptions of contexts as opposed to generalisations (Groenewald 2004) and was thus useful in assessing students’ experiences of assessment feedback at MUT.

Finlay (1999) contends that the following six principles explain all the variants of phenomenology generally:

- *thelifeworld or lebenswelt*: this explains experience as it is lived in which people as individuals draw meaning. The task of a phenomenological research is drawing on everyday experiences of individuals in the world. Using the understanding of the lifeworld, the study aimed to enter into the world of experience of selected MUT students and understand their experience of assessment feedback as told by them.
- *description over explanation*: Phenomenologists are interested in describing people's experiences. She further argues that the idea of description is revealed in three ways: respondents' description of the original data, researchers' description of the structures of experiences and presenting descriptive findings. Interview data in this study provided good descriptions of the experiences of assessment feedback by the selected MUT students.
- *Phenomenological reduction*: this explains the idea of bracketing, which provides an opportunity to try to see the world from another's point of view without dwelling on assumptions.
- *non-judgemental attitude*: the principle of non-judgement entails accepting and recording what the participants say about their experiences rather than standing in judgement.
- *An acceptance of a role for interpretation*: the historical or socio-cultural influence on the interpretation of an experience.
- *Intentionality*: the principle of intentionality means that the lifeworld is as it is perceived and experienced. Groenewald (2004) argues that in fact to arrive at certainty in Phenomenology it is only the personal engagement with reality that is pertinent.

All in all the phenomenology approach allowed the study to engage with students' experiences of assessment feedback without judging them using prior assumptions and/or prejudices.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA METHODS

The study addressed the following questions:

- Is there any disjuncture between feedback as given by lecturers and the students' conception of such feedback at MUT?
- Do students at MUT engage with their feedback and take lessons from it, which can be used in new situations?
- Does assessment feedback come in time and in a manner that helps students to learn from it at MUT?

Sample size and sampling techniques

MUT has three faculties: Management Sciences, Engineering and Natural Sciences. This study was purposively conducted in the Faculty of Management Sciences, which had about four thousand five hundred (4 500) registered students. A sample of two hundred second and third year students from the Faculty of Management Sciences at MUT was selected to answer to the questionnaire. From this sample, ten students were selected for in-depth interviews as follows: four from the department of Office Technology and two each from the departments of Accounting, Marketing and Public Management. In purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of typicality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007).

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

While the study was framed within the qualitative orientation, data collection started with quantitative data. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, which provided descriptive answers to “what” and “when” questions. Since the questions in a questionnaire could not go in-depth, the answers were only used as pointers to the problem. The questionnaire was administered during the second semester after having been piloted using five students from the department of Public Administration. The following issues came from questionnaire analysis and needed probing: *use of assessment feedback, timing of feedback* and the *students’ understanding of feedback*.

In-depth interviews then were conducted to engage with the “why” and “how” questions. Questions were semi-structured, which made it easy for the interviewer to take notes. Tape recording of interviews was not used to avoid students to be suspicious and also to allow them to answer questions freely. The dual use of a questionnaire and interviews allowed the study to benefit from the strengths of both data collection instruments and thereby ensuring that rich data were generated. The timing of data collection was good as by the second semester students had written enough assessments during the year to make well-informed responses to both the questionnaire and the interviews.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports on the findings grouped as follows: forms of assessment tasks, feedback forms, acting on feedback, and feedback turnaround time.

Forms of Assessment Tasks

Students were asked in the questionnaire to use two of their subjects and choose the dominant forms of assessment tasks in those subjects. In table 1, subjects that formed their first choice are labelled Subject A and second choice, Subject B. Table 1 illustrates the frequencies of their choices of forms of assessment tasks.

Table. 1. Frequencies of assessment types as indicated by MUT students

Written tests, assignments and examinations are the most used forms of assessment as indicated by students' responses. These findings are in line with contentions of Suskie (2003) and Freeman and Lewis (1998) who argue that written tests are the most common forms of assessment at undergraduate level in higher education. The challenge then is how these written tests are assessed at MUT given that they are time-consuming and, may encourage reproduction of recall information if not well framed (Brown, Race and Smith 1996).

Feedback forms

Through the administered questionnaire, the study found that a mark only was the dominant form of feedback. For written tests, a mark only is disadvantageous as students do not learn how to improve on their tasks. It was also in sharp contrast to what most students preferred. Most students preferred a mark accompanied by comments as well as individual discussion of performance.

As noted earlier Rowntree (2000) mentions that a mark only is the least useful form of feedback to students. Given that the dominant form of assessment feedback are written tests, providing a mark only greatly disadvantages the learning process of students at MUT.

Acting on feedback

Findings show that students at MUT appreciate the value or the importance of feedback in their learning. Some students reported the following:

A I use feedback to correct my mistakes in the test, so that I do not repeat the same mistakes...

B I use feedback to prepare for the next test and more importantly for the purposes of developing my own knowledge which I can use in future...

C Feedback helps me to assess myself and my performance. I normally check what I had written in the test, check what feedback says and compare what was written in my notes and this helps me to see if perhaps I did not read instructions properly and I correct that next time.

D Feedback helps me to see my mistakes if the lecturer shows me, what I was supposed to do or what I was supposed to have done so that I will not repeat the same mistakes...

The challenge is that most of the times, they received feedback in the form of a mark only. However, where comments were made, students questioned their quality arguing that the comments by some lecturers did not satisfy them. For example some students reported the following:

A Some lecturers use cruel words when they write on our test papers. They write things that do not go down well with us. We do not like that because we are students and we are here to learn...

B Like a lecturer who says what I have written does not make sense, that discourages me...

C Sometimes the way feedback is written may be embarrassing...Words like “you will not make it if you do not study” are discouraging because sometimes you have studied hard and the lecturer thinks you did not study because you have done badly...

D Sometimes the handwriting of the lecturer is not clear and you can’t see what the lecturer wanted to say...

These findings are in line with the findings of other researchers in South Africa (see Sing 2008; Vooght 2006; Meyer, 2009; Luckett and Sutherland, 2000).

Feedback Turnaround Time

At MUT, students generally indicated that they preferred to receive feedback within a week to two weeks after assessment. To the contrary, in some instances feedback came back four weeks after assessment or, worse, just before the next assessment. This is how respondents expressed their frustration with overdue feedback:

A Sometimes we get feedback when we are about to write an examinations and that is when some lecturers start giving us information about our test. If I were to receive such information on time I would do better in the examination..

B Sometimes we even get feedback and our marks when we knock at their (lecturers’) doors...In some cases we even write examination without getting our test scripts...

C I prefer to receive feedback within two weeks because once the feedback is late you get lazy to check your mistakes and you do not give it much attention and you start losing interest in it”

D ... I prefer to receive feedback within two weeks. If it is late it should not be more than three weeks. As a student you have other work to focus on you can't be waiting for feedback for very long"

This practice is not only unfair to students but it also erodes the formative value of feedback. Feedback should be received by learners while it matters to them; otherwise, its formative value is lost (Gibbs 2010).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges associated with assessment feedback at MUT, the following recommendations might be helpful.

- Lecturers should attempt at all times to give more in the form of feedback instead of giving a mark only. For example, lecturers can identify common mistakes made by students in their written work and give group feedback on those identified aspects. More so, lecturers could dedicate some days for giving individual feedback to students. A dedicated feedback period is as important as teaching time.
- It is further recommended that lecturers should devise some ways of making a follow up on students regarding the feedback they have given. It is no use giving feedback without making a follow up to find out if students actually understood it and/or used it. A dedicated feedback period can also be used for this purpose.
- Lecturers should consider alternate modes of assessment like article reviews, projects, portfolios, case studies and role-plays, particularly for third year students. This would hopefully help in laying the foundation for postgraduate studies, which is one of the strategic priorities of MUT.
- Lecturers should tone down their feedback comments so as to encourage and support the learning process.
- Lecturers could try the use of oral assessment such as presentations as a compulsory component for all modules or subjects at every level in order to enhance students' communication skills, which are a major challenge presently across the institution.
- Lecturers could consider adopting alternative and more creative ways of giving feedback such as peer assessment, self-assessment, on-line assessment and others. Implementing these feedback forms may require training for some staff members, which could be done by the newly established Teaching and Learning Development Centre (TLDC).

- MUT could introduce a policy that stipulates time required for feedback for specific forms of assessments. In the same vein, it would be useful for the university to strengthen the use of tutors in giving tutorials and helping in marking students work.
- While the study did not assess the nature of tests and assignment questions given to students, it is recommended that lecturers need to set assignment and test questions which stimulate creative thinking on the part of learners instead of recall of facts.

CONCLUSION

The paper has reported findings of a study that explored students' experiences of assessment feedback at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. Utilising the phenomenological approach meant that the study was interested in assessment feedback as experienced by the students themselves. The paper has presented the four major findings: (1) that written tests were the dominant form of assessment tasks, (2) that a mark only without comments was the dominant form of feedback, (3) that while students appreciated the value of feedback the quality of comments, where given, were poor and (4) that feedback was not promptly given to students reveal that there is a need to improve the assessment practices at MUT. Given these findings, the paper has suggested recommendations to help improve assessment feedback at MUT. These recommendations hinge on paying more attention to giving more than just a marks, writing appropriate comments, following up on students feedback, considering alternative ways of assessment tasks, providing oral assessments, considering alternative ways of feedback, improving on time of providing giving feedback and considering thought provoking tests to stimulate creative thinking.

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Form of assessment test	Subject A	Subject B
Written tests, examination	1. 179	1. 178
	2. 6	2. 10
	3. 10	3. 6
	4. 2	4. 3
	5. 3	5. 3
Written Assignments	1. 127	1. 120
	2. 34	2. 38
	3. 15	3. 19

	4. 10 5. 14	4. 5 5. 18
Assignment Presentations	1. 96 2. 37 3. 23 4. 11 5. 30	1. 99 2. 37 3. 20 4. 12 5. 32
Oral Assessment	1. 20 2. 05 3. 05 4. 19 5. 151	1. 21 2. 09 3. 00 4. 19 5. 151
Demonstrations	1. 08 2. 02 3. 05 4. 01 5. 184	1. 06 2. 06 3. 01 4. 01 5. 186

Table. 1. Frequencies of assessment types as indicated by MUT students