The Relationship between Student Engagement with Feedback and Lecturer and Student views of Teaching, Learning and Assessment

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Abstract

Feedback is widely acknowledged to be a key component of quality teaching and important for effective learning and yet the extent to which it meets its potential in improving learning outcomes for students has been questioned in the literature. Whilst many explanations for this failing have been proffered, one area that would seem to have been neglected is the relationship between feedback and perspectives of teaching and learning. A case study approach was adopted to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer's and students' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment. The case consisted of: a lecturer at a large, urban Institute of Technology in New Zealand; students enrolled in two of his courses; and some of the interactions between them, particularly in relation to specific assignment. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of feedback on an early assignment in each course.

Findings indicated that there were disparities between lecturer's and students' views about the nature of knowledge and learning and that when views are misaligned, students can struggle to interpret assessment requirements. Tensions exist between requirements for a quick marking turnaround and provision of detailed feedback and the resulting tendency to provide only brief feedback comments. Student engagement with feedback was not always aligned with their perceptions of learning and assessment, suggesting that other factors influence engagement. This finding supports previous research in acknowledging feedback as a complex process.

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Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

> *“Without feedback, the learner is like someone learning to play chess blindfolded, wearing ear muffs and beyond any helpful tactile content." (Knight & Yorke, 2003, p. 126)*

This research study explores the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer and student views of teaching, learning and assessment. This opening chapter provides the background to the research before presenting the research questions and an overview of the study.

1.1 Background

Assessment is increasingly being considered as an integral part of learning, rather than separate from it (Carless, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and so the distinction between summative and formative assessment is becoming somewhat blurred (Ussher & Earl, 2010). Thus, assessment can serve both summative and formative purposes, by providing a summative grade as well as feedback designed to help students with the next stage of learning. Feedback thus forms an essential part of effective formative assessment (Taras, 2002) and is widely acknowledged to be a key component of quality teaching and important for effective learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carless, Joughin, Liu, & Associates, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramsden, 2003). Students also value feedback and recognise its importance for learning (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005; Weaver, 2006). Much has been written about what constitutes good feedback (Evans, 2013; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and furthermore, students’ perceptions of good quality written feedback align well with what is

described in the literature as being good feedback practice (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008).

Given the apparent widespread acceptance of feedback as important for learning, it is interesting to note that students often report dissatisfaction with the feedback that they receive (Glover & Brown, 2006; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; MacLellan, 2001). Moreover, the benefit of feedback for learning does not appear to match up to expectations (Crisp, 2007; McMahon, 2006).

Many theories have been proposed to explain why feedback seems not to be fulfilling its potential as part of learning. However, there is a paucity of research into the relationship between feedback and perspectives on teaching and learning. There have been fundamental changes in perceptions of teaching and learning in recent years, moving towards a constructivist approach. However, practice around feedback provision seems to lag behind, entrenched within a transmission model with the lecturer 'telling' and the student in the role of passive recipient (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Walker, 2009). In a recent review of the feedback literature, Evans (2013) found that there is limited research focusing on how students make sense of and use feedback, whilst Walker (2009) identified a need to investigate lecturer conceptions of learning and feedback. This exploratory study therefore seeks to offer some insight into the impact that lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment have on how students engage with feedback.

1.2 Context

My interest in this subject stems from my own experience over many years of teaching in vocational tertiary education. My own views are that feedback is central to student learning and that we owe it to our students to make feedback as useful as possible. However, in spite of efforts on my part to make feedback effective for my students, there is often a mismatch between the efforts that I put into providing feedback and students' perceptions and utilisation of that feedback. A realisation that student dissatisfaction with the feedback that they receive is a common finding that has been reported in the literature (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Sadler, 2010) led me to become interested in exploring why there is a discrepancy between lecturer and student perceptions of feedback. This thesis provided an opportunity to investigate further in an attempt to better understand how the utility of feedback might be enhanced.

The research takes place in a large, urban Institute of Technology in New Zealand, which offers a range of vocational programmes from Certificate to Postgraduate level. Students are drawn from a wide range of ages and cultural backgrounds. Specifically, this research focuses on some of the interactions between one lecturer and a group of students enrolled in his courses within a science-based programme.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and student and lecturer perspectives on teaching, learning and assessment.

The following research questions were generated from the overarching aim of the study:

- What are the participants' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment?
- What do the participants perceive as the purpose of feedback?
- How do the participants use feedback?
- How do lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment impact on student engagement with feedback?

1.4 Outline of the Methodology

The study is exploratory in nature in that the researcher is seeking to delve deeper into a previously-described phenomenon (Donley, 2012). A qualitative approach is adopted in seeking to *understand* the relationship between student engagement with feedback and views about teaching, learning and assessment. Moreover, the study takes place within a natural context, with no attempt by the researcher to manipulate the situation. As such, an exploratory case study approach is appropriate (Stake, 1995).

The case consists of: a senior lecturer in a science-based programme; some of the students enrolled in two of his classes; and some of the interactions between them, with particular focus on the feedback provided on a specific assignment. The study employed two methods of data collection: document analysis of written feedback provided by the lecturer to the students on a specific assignment; and semi-structured interviews with the lecturer and student participants. Analysis of the feedback comments informed the

discussion with student participants about their use of feedback. A thematic approach was used in the analysis of interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.5 Contribution to Knowledge about Feedback

Lecturers' and students' beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning are likely to influence student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998) and how feedback is used (Evans, 2013). Indeed, Evans (2013) suggests that in order for more effective formative assessment practice to be implemented, there is likely to be a need for "deep changes in lecturers' and students' perceptions of their own roles within the assessment feedback process" (p. 100). It is anticipated that this study will contribute to knowledge of assessment feedback by helping to develop a better understanding of how different perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment might influence how lecturers and students use feedback.

1.6 Overview of the Thesis

The following overview of the thesis reflects the process undertaken in implementing this research study.

This first chapter has introduced the study, providing a background rationale for conducting the research and an overview of the methodology adopted, as well as explaining the researcher's motivation for conducting the research.

Chapter Two contextualises the research by means of a review of the relevant literature that informs this study.

Chapter Three outlines the research paradigm underpinning this study, explores ethical considerations associated with the study and describes the methodology and methods of data collection employed.

Chapter Four provides a detailed description of the case and presents the findings compiled from the analysis of interview transcripts and written feedback comments.

Chapter Five discusses the key findings and offers a series of propositions related to the research questions. These propositions are discussed with reference to relevant literature.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by drawing recommendations from the findings, relating these back to the research questions, as well as highlighting limitations of the study and making suggestions for future research.

1.7 Summary

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer and student views of teaching, learning and assessment. This opening chapter has set the foundations for a detailed account of the research by describing the background rationale for the study, presenting the research questions and outlining the methodology. The chapter concluded with a summary of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief review of the literature pertinent to the research question, namely the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer and student perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment. The chapter is organised into three main sections:

- Some theoretical considerations of teaching and learning, including the nature of learning and approaches to teaching and learning
- The role of assessment in learning
- The role of feedback in learning, including consideration of how feedback relates to teaching and learning theory.

2.2 Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Considerations

This section begins with a consideration of the nature of knowledge in relation to learning, followed by a brief review of some of the major theories of learning. This is followed by a discussion about different approaches to teaching and learning, and how these might be impacted by the different perspectives of learning.

2.2.1 Epistemology and Learning

Perry (1970, cited in Hofer & Pintrich, 1997) suggests that students' epistemological beliefs develop from an initial dualist, right-or-wrong view of knowledge, through a multiplicity view which recognises a degree of uncertainty, to a relativist view in which they recognise that knowledge is

relative and contextual. How a learner approaches studying is likely to be influenced by their views about the nature of knowledge and learning (Entwistle, 2000; Schommer, 1990). Thus, a belief that knowledge is simple might lead students to believe that memorisation is the only strategy that they need to use for learning (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997), whilst Phan, Maebuta, and Dorovolomo (2010) suggest that more 'multifaceted beliefs of knowledge' (p. 466) are positively correlated with more complex learning such as reflective and higher order thinking, problem solving and interpretation of information.

2.2.2 Theories of Learning

Theories of learning abound: some theories are primarily influenced by the field of psychology, whilst others recognise the influence of sociology and culture in the learning process. There is a significant overlap and blurring of the boundaries between different categories (Leonard, 2002). The first two theories discussed in this section, behaviourism and cognitivism, were selected because they have been, and indeed continue to be influential in teaching and learning practices (Leonard, 2002). The third theory discussed here, constructivism (and in particular social constructivism) was selected because of its growing influence on teaching practice (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and because, unlike behaviourism and cognitivism, constructivism can be associated with a relativist epistemology (Leonard, 2002). Social constructivism situates the learner within their social context, emphasising "cultural ways of understanding" (Mory, 2004, p. 292). The final theory discussed here is discipline-specific learning, which contextualises learning within the culture of the discipline and is particularly relevant to the current study, which is situated within the context of a vocational education programme.

Behaviourist Theories of Learning

Behaviourist, or conditioning theories of learning are based on the premise that learning involves a change in behaviour, and behaviour is shaped by the environment rather than by the individual learner (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). One example of behavioural theory is operant conditioning, in which an environmental cue elicits a response, which is followed by reinforcement. Positive reinforcement strengthens the response and increases the chance that the response will be repeated when the learner is presented with the same stimulus again (Schunk, 2012). Although this theory was popular in the early twentieth century and had a widespread influence on education (Merriam et al., 2007), it fails to recognise the influence of the learner themselves in the process, and so has lost ground to other theories of learning. However, behaviourist theories do remain influential in education, for example through the widespread use of behavioural objectives: clear, measurable descriptions of what students need to do to demonstrate their achievement (Schunk, 2012). James (2008) suggests that behaviourist theories also continue to dominate many assessment practices, with a focus on performance under test conditions.

Cognitive Theories of Learning

Cognitive theories of learning acknowledge the role of environmental factors in learning, but emphasise the importance of what the learner does with the information (Schunk, 2012). Learning is viewed as an active process in which the learner organises and processes the information, making links with what is already known (Merriam et al., 2007). The way in which the learner processes the information is the central focus of cognitive theories. Social cognitive theory

is a particular example of cognitivism which emphasises the social element of learning and proposes that people learn by observing others (Merriam et al., 2007). Cognitive theories have also proved influential in education: for example, the concept of 'learning to learn', that is helping students to develop skills to enable them to learn effectively stems from cognitive theory (Merriam et al., 2007). Assessments aligned with a cognitivist view of learning focus more on understanding than on memory, for example using open book examinations and essay style questions (James, 2008).

Behaviourist and cognitivist theories might both be considered to be learning as acquisition (Sfard, 1998). Learning in the acquisition framework is seen as the accumulation of knowledge or skills, in which knowledge is viewed as an entity that belongs to an individual (Paavola & Hakkarainene, 2005).

Social Constructivist Theory of Learning

Although some authorities consider constructivist theory to be a subset of cognitivism, Pritchard (2009) suggests that constructivist theories might be considered to be on a spectrum from a purely cognitivist focus on individual construction of meaning to a more socially situated focus which emphasises learning as a social activity. Leonard (2002) argues that the differences are sufficient to justify constructivism being considered as a distinct category: in particular, Entwistle (2000) argues that constructivism is based on a relativist epistemology, where knowledge is seen as being open to personal interpretation.

According to constructivist learning theory, learners construct their own understanding based on their previous knowledge and experience (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). As such, learning can be considered to be socially situated,

inasmuch as the social context of the learner influences the learning that takes place (Laurillard, 2002). Whilst social constructivism is a sub-category of constructivism, Pritchard and Woollard (2010) argue that the distinctions are significant enough that it should be considered in its own right. Specifically, social constructivist theory emphasises that the wider social context and culture influence the learning that takes place. Thus, learning is considered to be an active and social process, a view supported by Hodkinson (2005). Hodkinson makes the point that this does not mean that learning *necessarily* involves working with others, but more fundamentally it is an acknowledgement that a learner cannot be separated from their social context: “To be human is to be socially positioned, with socially derived and constructed dispositions, and socially derived and constructed identities” (2005, p112). James (2008) suggests that assessment that is aligned with a constructivist view needs to be embedded alongside learning, for example through extended projects and portfolios.

Discipline-Specific Learning

The social positioning that is key to the social constructivist theory of learning can be developed further with the concept of learning being discipline specific. Although a sub-set of social constructivism, this theory is presented separately because of the strong emphasis on learning being situated within the culture of the discipline. As such, it is especially relevant for vocational education and so pertinent to the current case study. Based on their investigation of teaching and learning in three university-level Bioscience courses, McCune and Hounsell (2005) have identified what could be considered another perspective on learning. Dubbed “ways of thinking and practicing in the discipline (WTP)” (p.

257), this perspective focuses on students engaging with the literature and seeking “to master the requirements and conventions of the subject” (p. 255). This idea of contextualising learning within the specific discipline is supported by early literature, for example Becher (1994) suggested that disciplinary differences in epistemology, concepts, methods and aims influence the nature of learning. Lave and Wenger (1999) support this, describing learners as active participants who “gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community” (p 23). Interestingly, Dall’Alba (1991, cited in Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) identified the development of students’ capacity to be expert as being one concept of teaching. Although this concept seems to have been largely overlooked by Prosser and Trigwell, it could be considered an early precursor of McCune and Hounsell’s (2005) perspective of learning as mastery of the requirements of the discipline.

Social constructivist and discipline-specific learning might both be considered as participatory learning: the focus of learning is social participation (Wenger, 2009) and the learner is seen as someone “interested in participation in certain kinds of activities rather than in accumulating private possessions” (Sfard, 1998, p.6).

2.2.3 Approaches to Teaching

The teacher’s role within a behaviourist theory of learning is to create an environment that will elicit the desired response from learners (Merriam et al., 2007). The teacher presents material in small steps, provides opportunities for students to practice and offers immediate feedback (Schunk, 2012). In a cognitivist framework, the teacher’s role is to structure the content of the learning activity (Merriam et al., 2007), presenting material in ways that allow

the students to organise it and relate it to prior knowledge (Schunk, 2012). In both cases, power resides with the teacher: they are considered the ‘expert’ and it is they who control the learning activities.

The role of the teacher changes dramatically when learning is regarded from a constructivist perspective. At the most basic level, the teacher’s role is to explain the underlying principles (Biggs & Tang, 2007), but a more sophisticated conception is that of supporting learning. The teacher’s role now becomes that of facilitator, helping students to construct their own meaning, develop their own ideas and challenge pre-existing beliefs (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Power might no longer be considered to be held entirely by the teacher, but rather is shared between teacher and learners (Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2001).

In the case of discipline-specific learning, the teacher is considered to be the ‘expert’, but their role remains that of facilitator, helping the student to develop the skills and discourses of the discipline (McCune & Hounsell, 2005). The students are active participants within a community of practice, gradually building their own identities within that community (Wenger, 2009).

2.2.4 Approaches to Learning

Marton and Saljo (1997) describe two approaches to learning: a deep and surface approach. Although the original definitions described a surface approach as memorising information, Webb (1997) is critical of this concept, pointing out that memorising can be part of deep learning. According to Biggs and Tang (2007), the key distinction between the two approaches is the student’s intention: with a surface approach, the intention is to complete the task with minimum effort and little attempt to understand the subject, whereas with deep learning the focus is on understanding. Entwistle (1997) proposes an

alternative explanation for adopting a deep or surface approach: students' conceptions of the nature of knowledge. Thus, if students consider learning to be "the acquisition of discrete packages of information" (Entwistle, 1997, p.11) then they might be more likely to adopt a surface approach to learning because it seems the most appropriate.

More recently, a third approach has been described: a strategic approach to learning in which the intention is to achieve the highest grade possible (Entwistle, 2000). It involves a structured approach to study, reflective skills in which the learner monitors the effectiveness of their study techniques and an awareness of and engagement with the assessment process.

The strategic approach includes elements of what Zimmerman (1990) describes as the self-regulatory approach to learning. Self-regulation involves students being proactive in seeking out learning opportunities and initiating activities that will enable them to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning strategies that they employ. According to Zimmerman (1990), self-regulated learners "plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate" (p.5). As such, the strategic approach can be considered as requiring metacognitive activities, which Schunk (2012) defines as "the deliberate conscious control of cognitive activity" (p. 286).

It is important at this point to note the distinction between a strategic approach and performance orientation. Dweck (1999) describes performance-orientated learners as being focused on looking smart, or proving their learning. She suggests that challenging activities are likely to be a threat to their self-esteem and the primary concern of performance-orientated learners will be the grade achieved. Furthermore, she suggests that performance-orientated students are likely to view effort as a negative: if they need to put time and effort into learning

something, that is considered evidence that they are not smart. In contrast, learning-orientated students are more focused on improving their competence: they relish opportunities that stretch them and they see effort as being a good thing as they seek to improve their learning.

Given their differing perceptions of effort, it seems likely that a performance-orientated student might adopt a surface approach, whilst a learning-orientated student might be more likely to adopt a deep approach. Although it is not immediately apparent how the three psychological theories of learning discussed earlier might align with approaches to learning, Merriam et al (2007) argue that in constructivism, learners construct their understanding by making connections with previous knowledge. This concept of making connections with prior learning is reminiscent of a deep approach to learning.

According to McCune and Hounsell (2005), high quality learning can be defined as learning which combines a focus on understanding with a systematic, structured and self-regulated approach. As such, it could be considered as a combination of deep and strategic approaches.

2.3 The Role of Assessment in Learning

In his seminal work on assessment, Crooks (1988) identifies multiple purposes of assessment, although these can be categorised into two broad groups: assessment *of* learning (for example certification and selection) or assessment *for* learning (for example consolidation of learning and guiding learning). Assessment of learning, or summative assessment, is defined by Taras (2005) as “a judgement which encapsulates all the evidence up to a given point” (p 468). The judgement of student achievement is used for determining readiness

to progress and for maintaining standards within a profession or discipline (Carless, Joughin, Liu, & Associates, 2006). By contrast, assessment for learning, or formative assessment, can be defined as assessment that contributes to student learning by providing information about performance (Yorke, 2003). Formative assessment can be considered as helping both students and teachers: it can guide learning, familiarising students with the expectations of the course and the assessment process, as well as highlighting areas of difficulty for teachers to focus on in their teaching (Carless et al., 2006). Although it has been argued that formative and summative assessment serve different purposes and should be kept separate, Black and Wiliam (2004) dispute this: “it is unrealistic to expect teachers and students to practice such separation”, going on to suggest that “the challenge is to achieve a more positive relationship between the two” (pp. 41 – 42). Indeed, the distinction between summative and formative assessment is contentious: Taras (2005) suggests that, since ‘summative’ implies judgement, then all assessment is summative to some extent. In contrast, Carless et al. (2006) contend that any assessment that is designed to support learning, regardless of other functions, could be considered as formative. Ussher and Earl (2010) agree, suggesting that assessment can serve multiple purposes, making the point that “it is the *information* that is used for summative or formative purposes, rather than the assessment task” (p. 60, my emphasis). Even assessment at the end of a module, which Black and Wiliam (1998) suggest offers no opportunity for feedback to improve learning, could guide future learning if the feedback provided could be related to future modules.

In summary, assessment can be viewed as providing information that might be used for formative purposes to assist learning, for summative purposes to measure learning, or both. Whilst this would remove the dichotomy between assessment for learning and assessment of learning, it is important that students are made aware when assessment tasks are being used for summative purposes.

2.4 The Role of Feedback in Learning

Feedback is widely acknowledged to be a key element of quality teaching and important for effective learning (Carless et al., 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramsden, 2003). The widespread contention that feedback assists learning has led to the inclusion of feedback provision as a factor in educational policies around quality assurance (NZQA, 2010; QAA, 2006).

This section begins by considering a definition of feedback, which is followed by a discussion about the purposes of feedback and in particular the role of feedback for future learning. This is followed by a consideration of how feedback relates to theories of teaching and learning. The section concludes with a discussion of the effectiveness of feedback as a tool for learning.

2.4.1 Feedback Defined

There is a growing body of literature exploring the role of feedback in learning, yet there remains disagreement in terms of defining just what feedback means (Evans, 2013). In its widest sense, feedback can be considered as any information provided on performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, this definition could be criticised for its lack of

explicit reference to future learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe four levels of feedback, defined by the focus of the feedback: task, process, regulatory and self. Task level feedback focuses on the specific task, for example correcting erroneous information or indicating where more information is required. Process level feedback is directed at the processes used in generating the work, for example comments about engaging with the marking criteria or about the clarity of the argument. Regulatory level feedback encourages the student to develop self-regulatory skills such as self-evaluation and self-monitoring. The fourth level of feedback is focused on the person and is also known as ego orientated feedback. This type of feedback is generally considered unhelpful (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and will be discussed further later in this chapter.

In an attempt to capture the broader conceptualisation of feedback for future learning, the following definition has been adopted in this study:

Feedback is defined as information which provides students with an indication of their current performance, suggestions to help them improve future performance and helps equip them with the self-regulatory skills to become lifelong learners.

Whilst it is acknowledged that potential sources of feedback can be considered as including “teacher, peer, book, parent, self [and] experience” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p81), for the purpose of the current study, the source of feedback is limited to the lecturer.

2.4.2 Purpose of Feedback

Sadler (2010) describes the purpose of feedback as being to provide students with information about their current learning through an indication of their performance; to provide a rationale for the grade awarded; and to provide suggestions to improve their subsequent performance. Black and Wiliam (2004) suggest that feedback helps to improve learning when it leads to greater effort, when it motivates students to make that greater effort, and when it encourages students to view assessment as part of learning: “By active involvement in the test process, students can see that they can be beneficiaries rather than victims of testing because tests can help them improve their learning” (p42). Although Black and Wiliam’s work is primarily focused on children as learners, the motivational and encouraging role of feedback for adult learners is echoed by Hyland (2001). Students value feedback and recognise its importance for learning (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005; Weaver, 2006) and their views on the purpose of feedback broadly align with those identified above (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002). Interestingly, a recent study in Australia indicates that students not only value feedback for its learning potential, but also for personal and emotional support (Rowe, 2011).

If feedback is to play a key role in learning, it needs to offer guidance for future work, rather than simply commenting on the current task, which students also recognise as an important function of feedback (Higgins et al., 2002; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Such guidance could be in the form of specific suggestions for the next steps in learning (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002) or it could address general principles that could be applied to future work (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). This concept of feedback directed at future learning has been

variably described as a prospective orientation (Sadler, 2010), longitudinal development (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010) and feed forward (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008).

MacLellan (2001) argues that if feedback is to be effective in improving learning, the students need to be applying self-regulatory skills. Indeed, helping students to develop the self-regulatory skills that will enable them to become independent, lifelong learners is increasingly recognised as an essential function of feedback (Black & McCormick, 2010; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) go as far as to suggest that enhancing self-regulatory capacity is what defines good feedback practice: “Good quality external feedback is information that helps students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct” (p. 208).

2.4.3 Feedback Related to Teaching and Learning Theory

Whilst feedback might be considered to be an important part of learning, regardless of the theory of learning adopted, Mory (2004) suggests that the purpose of feedback might differ between different theories. A teacher operating within a behaviourist theory might provide feedback that is designed as positive reinforcement; or in order to encourage application of learning to new situations, the teacher might highlight similarities between the situations (Schunk, 2012). However, there is rarely any indication of how the student might improve in future work (Rawlins & Poskitt, 2008). In contrast, a teacher operating within a cognitivist theory of learning might provide feedback that focuses on processes, for example offering suggestions about how skills and strategies might help the learner in different ways. Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) process level of

feedback aligns with a cognitivist perspective. Feedback provided within a constructivist perspective might involve the teacher encouraging the learner to revisit the material from a different perspective and avoiding providing 'answers', in keeping with a relativist epistemology (Mory, 2004).

The language used in describing the role of feedback can be quite revealing: for example, in a report on effective assessment practices for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee, James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) use such phrases as '*provide* students with feedback' and 'students *receive* … feedback' (p. 9, my emphasis). Students are thus placed in the role of passive recipients of feedback. This concept of feedback is akin to the transmission model of teaching: a one-way message or monologue on the part of the lecturer in which the focus of feedback is primarily corrective (Evans, 2013; Sadler, 2010) and power resides entirely with the lecturer (Leach et al., 2001).

Archer (2010) advocates for a more facilitative approach to feedback, with the lecturer (or others) providing suggestions to help the student revise their ideas or understanding. Askew and Lodge (2000) support this, suggesting that feedback should become more of a two-way process "in which 'expert' enables others to gain new understandings, make sense of experience and make connections by the use of open questions and shared insight" (p4). This concept of feedback as a dialogic process is in keeping with a more participationist theory of learning: a key difference being that the learner is now actively involved in the feedback process.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest that feedback at the level of self-regulation is important for helping students to develop as independent learners. Again, the way in which teachers might address self-regulatory skills will differ depending

on the underpinning theory: with a behaviourist theory, the teacher might encourage students to develop self-reinforcement behaviour, or with a cognitivist theory, the teacher might emphasise attention to different learning strategies. In the case of a social constructivist theory, whilst students might initially pattern their self-regulatory processes on those of others, feedback at the self-regulatory level would encourage the student to adapt those processes to suit their own individual preferences (Schunk, 2012).

2.4.4 Effectiveness of Feedback as a Learning Tool

Brookhart (2001), cited in Gibbs and Simpson (2004), found that successful students use feedback to help both current and future learning. The key word here is 'successful': those students who already possess self-regulatory skills arguably know how to utilise feedback effectively, but what of students who are not yet successful? In spite of the widespread acceptance that feedback improves learning, the reality is perhaps less clear (McMahon, 2006). In a meta-analysis of the effect of feedback on performance, Kluger and DeNisi (1996, cited in Black & Wiliam, 1998) found a moderate effect, but there was wide variation, with around 40% of studies showing a negative effect, which Kluger and DeNisi attributed largely to the feedback being ego-orientated rather than performance-orientated. Crisp (2007), in a small-scale study with undergraduate students, found that feedback on one assignment did not lead to improved performance on a second assignment. Whilst she did not specifically explore the reasons for this finding, Crisp speculates that it might be due to either party (lecturers or students) failing to make effective use of feedback.

Numerous studies have offered possible insights into the apparent failure of feedback to live up to the expectations for its role in learning. One possibility is

that students simply do not read the feedback. According to Duncan (2007) “some students will only read the qualitative comments if the quantitative mark is outside their expectations—perhaps to complain if it is surprisingly low, or to bask in the praise of an unexpected A grade” (p 272). This view is ostensibly supported by a recent study which found that less than half of undergraduate students picked up their feedback comments (Sinclair and Cleland, 2007, cited in Ferguson, 2011). However, other researchers contest this view, arguing that students do value and read the feedback that they receive (Higgins et al., 2002; Hyland, 2001) and that they try to use that feedback to improve future work (Rawlins, 2010).

Ferguson (2011) notes that the view that students do not read the feedback tends to lay blame squarely with the student, but he offers an alternative perspective: that students simply do not find the feedback helpful. Certainly student dissatisfaction with the feedback that they receive is well documented (Glover & Brown, 2006; Halcomb & Peters, 2009; Higgins et al., 2002; Huxham, 2007; Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008). The extent of the issue is highlighted by MacLellan (2001), who found that only 15% of students participating in her study frequently found feedback to be helpful for learning whilst 9% *never* found feedback to be helpful.

Ferguson’s (2011) contention that the quality of the feedback could be a significant factor is supported by other studies: for example, both Hyland (2001) and Duncan (2007) found that the feedback provided on assignments tended towards positive comments, regardless of grade, with a minimal amount of constructive criticism or specific suggestions for improvements in future work. Furthermore, Glover and Brown (2006) found that feedback tended to focus on

the task and justifying the grade, rather than offering suggestions for how student might improve their work.

Another consideration in the effectiveness of feedback for learning is the orientation of the feedback comments. If feedback is directed at the person (self level or ego orientation) rather than the task, Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest that it is unlikely to contain information that students can utilise to improve learning: “the effects at the self level are too diluted, too often uninformative about performing the task, and too influenced by students’ self-concept to be effective” (p. 96). Others state the case for avoiding feedback directed at the person more strongly, suggesting that it can have a negative impact on learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

An alternative explanation for feedback being less effective than anticipated in improving learning is that students might lack the tacit knowledge required to understand the feedback (Sadler, 2010). Several studies support this view, suggesting that students may not understand the academic discourses upon which feedback comments are based (Chanock, 2000; Glover & Brown, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002; Weaver, 2006). This is consistent with the discipline-specific nature of learning described earlier: an appreciation of the discipline-specific conventions, expectations and notions of quality might help students to better understand and utilise the feedback that they receive (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

Several commentators note that whilst constructivist views are now widely accepted with regard to teaching and learning, practices around assessment and feedback remain largely entrenched in the transmission model (Juwah et

al., 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Perera et al., 2008; Rust, 2002). Sadler (2010) asserts that “the mere provision of feedback does not necessarily lead to improvement” (p. 536). Numerous suggestions have been put forward to address this, ranging from self- and peer- assessment (Boud, 2000; Carless, 2007; Sadler, 2010) through incorporating activities that encourage students to engage with marking criteria (Carless, 2006; Ellery, 2008; Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005), to encouraging dialogue, either with other students or with the lecturer (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; Juwah et al., 2004; Wald, Davis, Reis, Monroe, & Borkan, 2009).

Whilst there appears to be some agreement in the literature that the impact of feedback on learning is less than expected, there is less consensus around how this might be addressed. However, as noted by Sadler (2010), feedback, like learning, is a complex process and it is unlikely that a single solution will provide the answer to improving the value of feedback to learning.

2.5 Summary

This review has considered theoretical perspectives of teaching and learning, including epistemological beliefs about learning. Two theories have been discussed that are primarily founded on psychological influences, and two which acknowledge sociocultural influences. The roles of assessment and feedback in learning have been explored. In spite of a widespread contention that feedback plays a pivotal role in learning, the actual impact on learning remains equivocal. Numerous hypotheses have been offered in the literature to explain the perceived gap between expected and actual effectiveness of feedback,

although the focus of this review has been on the literature exploring student engagement with and understanding of feedback.

Of particular note is the contention that although teaching and learning practices have moved towards a constructivist approach, feedback remains languishing in the transmission model and there are several suggestions in the literature that a more constructivist approach to feedback will be more effective. However, the extent to which lecturer and student views on learning influence how students use feedback would appear to have been largely neglected in the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and student and lecturer perspectives on teaching, learning and assessment by addressing the following research questions:

- What are the participants' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment?
- What do the participants perceive as the purpose of feedback?
- How do the participants use feedback?
- How do lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment impact on student engagement with feedback?

This chapter starts with a discussion of the research paradigm underpinning this study and explains the link between the researcher's philosophical premises and the methodology employed to answer the research questions. There follows a description of the context in which the research took place and a discussion of the ethical issues that were considered, before the process of data collection and analysis is described. Finally, the credibility and validity of the chosen methods are discussed.

3.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm can be defined as a way of thinking (Neuman, 2006). In the context of research, a paradigm can be described as a theoretical framework which

includes the researcher's philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality. These assumptions determine what questions can be asked, the methods that are appropriate to use and the conclusions that can be drawn from the research (Denscombe, 2010). This could be described as a paradigm-driven approach: the paradigm is the starting point and research questions are developed from it (Punch, 2009). In this study, however, the researcher has adopted what Punch (2009) describes as a pragmatic approach: the research questions were the starting point, derived from the researcher's own practice, and appropriate methods were then selected for answering those questions.

This is not to say that the research paradigm is not important: it is through articulation of the underlying assumptions that researchers are able to ensure that the methodology and methods are aligned and that the data collected and conclusions drawn are valid (Denscombe, 2010). The research paradigm thus contributes to the credibility of the study by ensuring a good fit between the research question and the chosen methods.

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between engagement with feedback and views about teaching, learning and assessment. The underlying implication is that teaching, learning, assessment and feedback as concepts can have different meanings for different people and that an individual's knowledge of these concepts is constructed from previous experience and from social interaction. The goal of the research is to better understand the phenomenon of feedback in order to improve practice. A constructivist-interpretive paradigm was therefore considered to be appropriate for this study.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the underpinning assumptions of a constructivist-interpretive paradigm are a relativist ontology, a subjectivist

epistemology and a naturalistic methodology. Ontology refers to the views that the researcher holds about the nature of reality (Denscombe, 2010). Relativism is the belief that there is no single reality, but that individuals construct reality based on their social and historical context (O'Leary, 2010). A relativist ontology is consistent with this study because the basic premise of the research question is that an individual's perception of feedback is influenced by their previous experiences of teaching and learning: there is no single, universal meaning for the concept of feedback. In terms of the research process, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) argue that it is incumbent on the researcher to "participate in the research process with our subjects to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of their reality" (p. 103).

Crotty (1998) describes epistemology as "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (p3). A subjectivist epistemology assumes that personal experiences are inextricably linked to knowledge: "we cannot separate ourselves from what we know" (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p104). The significance of this assumption in the research process is that it suggests that the researcher cannot take an objective view: the researcher's observations and explanations "are inevitably coloured by *expectations and predispositions* that are brought to the research" (Denscombe, 2010, p.123, original emphasis). Given this subjectivity, it is important to explicitly address the strategies employed to ensure robustness in the research process: the strategies used in this study will be discussed later in this chapter.

3.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, case study methodology. Cresswell (2012) defines a case study as "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system" (p. 465). The system might be an individual or community, an event or a process. Case studies are appropriate when the aim of the research is to develop a depth of understanding around a complex phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003):

> "Case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context." (p1)

A case study approach is therefore appropriate for this study for the following reasons:

- The study is exploratory in nature as it seeks to *understand* the relationship between student engagement with feedback and views about teaching, learning and assessment. Stake (1995) asserts that a key purpose of case study research is to facilitate understanding.
- The subject of this research study, engagement with feedback, can be considered to be a complex and contemporary phenomenon (Sadler, 2010).
- Case study is consistent with a constructivist-interpretive paradigm which calls for a naturalistic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This means that no attempt is made by the researcher to manipulate the situation, but rather seeks to place the study within its natural context (Stake, 1995).
- By using a qualitative case study approach, it is possible to achieve a depth of understanding about the particular interactions between a specific lecturer and his students.

- A case study approach does not require (and is not constrained by) predetermined theories or categories (Patton, 2002). A case study approach therefore allows for unanticipated concepts to be identified.

Case studies can be classified as intrinsic, in which the aim is to understand that particular case; or instrumental, in which the aim is to understand something outside of the case itself (Stake, 1995). This study is an instrumental case study as the aim is to increase understanding of student engagement with feedback. Although by definition, case study research is focused on a specific, defined case, case studies generally use multiple sources of data and multiple methods of data collection (Punch, 2009). It is possible to include more than one unit of analysis, or a series of mini case studies, as is the case with the current study. Such cases are variably termed embedded case study design (Yin, 2003) or layered and nested case studies (Patton, 2002).

It is important in case study research that the case is carefully defined or bounded (Punch, 2009). In this study, the case consists of the lecturer, student participants who are enrolled in two of his courses, and some of the interactions between them, particularly in relation to a specific assignment. The case is summarised in Figure 3.1, with the areas of overlap representing the interactions between the lecturer and students. Data was collected via interviews with the participants and via documentary analysis of the feedback provided on the student's assignments.

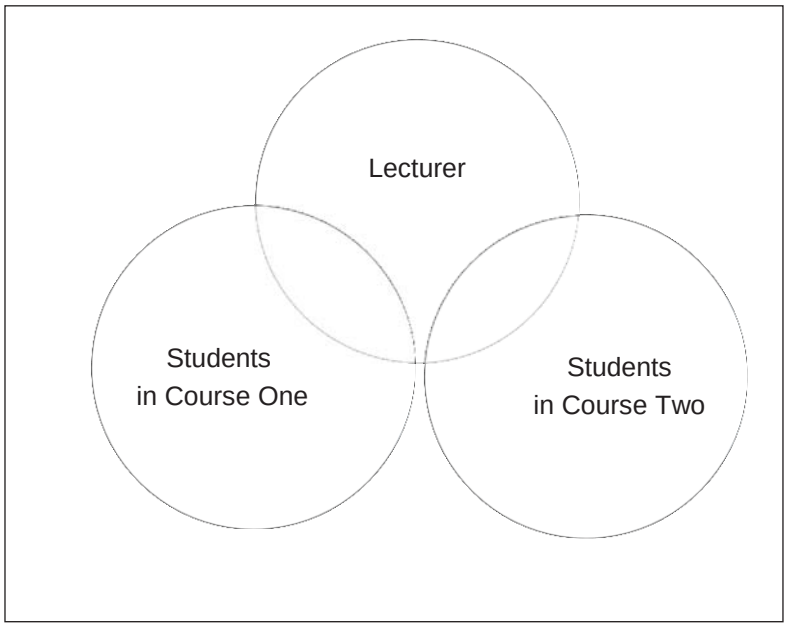


Fig 3.1: Overview of the Case

3.3.1 Case selection

Case study research requires careful selection of the case to be studied. Yin (2003) describes five types of case: a critical case; a revelatory case; a longitudinal case; an extreme or unique case; and a typical or representative case. Bryman (2008) defines a typical case as one which "exemplifies a broader category of which it is a member" (p.56). The researcher therefore sought to identify a case which might be considered to exemplify the use of feedback within a course to enhance learning. The following criteria were developed for identifying an appropriate case:

- An experienced and confident lecturer who is recognised within their field as a good teacher and with a known interest in providing feedback to students. The reason for this selection criterion is that confidence in one's own

teaching abilities has been found to influence the extent to which teachers use formative assessment (Allinder (1995), cited in Black & Wiliam, 1998).

- A course in which students are required to complete an assessment early in the semester, for which they receive written feedback and which scaffolds to later assessment items. This aligns with the definition of feedback adopted for this study: information which provides students with an indication of their current performance, suggestions to help them improve future performance, and which helps equip them with the self-regulatory skills to become lifelong learners.

Advice was sought from academic advisors and from heads of department to identify possible lecturers and courses that fit these criteria.

3.4 Context

This study was conducted at a large, urban Institute of Technology in New Zealand, which offers academic and vocational programmes of study up to post-doctoral level. There is a diverse student demographic in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and prior educational experience.

3.4.1 The Courses

The course initially selected for this case is an NZQA level 6 (second year university level) and so students were already experienced with tertiary level education. The cohort was a mixed group, including students studying in the final year of a two-year, level 6 diploma course and students who were part-way through a bachelor's degree. Both are vocational qualifications. The study included analysis of the written feedback provided on the first assignment,

which was worth 25% of the total course mark. The assignment required students to apply three different observational methods in a scientific study and then to compare and contrast the different methods based on their own results. Difficulties in recruiting sufficient student participants subsequently led to the case being widened to include a second course taught by the same lecturer. This second course is an NZQA level 7 course: all students were studying towards a bachelor's degree. The study included analysis of the feedback on an assignment which required students to explore the scientific basis of a high-profile campaign of their choice. Student participants were self-selecting and no attempt was made to balance for gender, ethnicity, educational experience or achievement.

3.4.2 The Lecturer

The lecturer ("James") is a senior lecturer in a science-based programme, teaching at undergraduate level as well as supervising at postgraduate level. He is an experienced and confident lecturer with more than thirteen years' experience in academia and ten years' teaching experience. He has participated in workshops around teaching and learning which have increased his own awareness of student engagement and his own teaching practices. He was recommended as meeting the criteria for this study by colleagues and academic advisors who had worked with him.

3.4.3 The Researcher

In qualitative research the researcher is acknowledged as socially situated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and as using their own interpretations to explain what has been observed (Stake, 1995). It is therefore important that the researcher is

critically self-reflective, recognising the influence of her own perspective, based on experience, culture and beliefs, on her analysis.

My interest in feedback stems from three personal perspectives. Firstly, as a new university student in the 1980s, reading tutor feedback on my very first essay which asserted that I was writing at high school level: the crushing sense of fear that I was somehow not ‘up to standard’. Secondly, as a lecturer, noting a frequent mismatch between the efforts that I put into providing feedback and students’ perceptions and utilisation of that feedback. In particular, my interest was stirred on discovering that this mismatch between lecturer and student views about feedback is widely recognised in the literature (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2008; Carless, 2006; Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, & Ward, 2009). Finally, as a mentor for new lecturers and as a programme leader, I am interested in exploring ways to make feedback more effective both for lecturers and students. My interest in feedback could be summarised as a concern regarding the use of feedback for learning not only from the perspectives of the student and the lecturer, but also from the perspective of mentoring new lecturers in developing good practice around feedback and assessment.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study underwent a full ethics committee review and was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) (application number 13/01).

Approval to recruit participants for the study was sought and obtained from the Head of Department in which the lecturer is employed.

Informed and voluntary consent was sought and obtained from participants. The lecturer was approached via email and potential student participants were initially approached by way of a brief presentation to the class, from which the lecturer absented himself to avoid any sense of coercion. The class presentation was followed up, with the permission of the lecturer, via electronic communication through the course learning management system. All potential participants were provided with an information sheet which outlined the purpose of the study, the commitment involved for participants, data handling processes and participants' rights (see Appendix One). Respondents who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to complete a written consent form (Appendix Two) and the completed forms were securely stored by one of the Research Supervisors.

Data security was ensured through the use of password-protected electronic files and secure storage of hard copy data. Student assignments were anonymised before copying and a code assigned to each script. The code key was stored separately from the scripts.

Confidentiality of the department, course and participants was maintained in the dissemination of research findings through the use of pseudonyms. Although the lecturer was not aware of which students were participating in the study, it was noted that a student might be identifiable to the lecturer if they had given a particular piece of feedback to just one student. This was reflected in the information sheet provided to students, which stated that whilst best efforts would be made to ensure that students are not identified, confidentiality could not be guaranteed (see Appendix One). Student comments have not been

linked to specific feedback analysis in a way that could breach confidentiality during dissemination of the research findings.

3.6 Methods

3.6.1 Data Collection

Yin (2003) describes a case study approach as “an all-encompassing design” which “relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (p14). Consistent with this methodology, this study gathered data from multiple sources: written feedback on a specific assignment, interview with the lecturer and interviews with students. Table 3.1 shows how the data collected relates to the research questions.

Table 3.1: Mapping the research questions against the data sources

Source of evidence	**Research questions addressed**
Document analysis	What does the lecturer perceive as the role of feedback & how does he use feedback?
Lecturer interview	What approaches to teaching and learning does the lecturer use? What does the lecturer perceive as the role of assessment in learning? What does the lecturer perceive as the role of feedback & how does he use feedback?
Student interviews	What approaches to teaching and learning do the students use? What do the students perceive as the role of assessment in learning? What do students perceive as the role of feedback & what do they do with the feedback that they receive?

The first stage involved content analysis of written tutor feedback provided on a specific assignment that was completed by students participating in the study as part of the requirement for their course. The second stage involved semi-structured interviews with the lecturer and with individual students. The use of interviews allowed rich data to be gathered about lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment and about the role of feedback as a tool for learning. A semi-structured interview design allowed for a degree of pre-planning and standardisation between interviews whilst also providing an opportunity for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions (Punch, 2009). In each case, interviews began with a general exploration of views about teaching, learning and assessment and the role of feedback in learning, before moving on to consider the specific assignment. Participants were provided with a schedule of questions (Appendix Three) several days prior to the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. A copy of the transcript was e-mailed to each participant, inviting them to clarify or amend anything that they had discussed.

3.6.2 Data Analysis: Written Feedback

Students participating in the study completed an assignment early in the semester as part of the requirement for their course and received written feedback from the lecturer. Copies were made of the participant's marked assignments, and the feedback provided was analysed in terms of amount, depth, type and style. For the purposes of this study, all written feedback was included, regardless of whether that feedback appeared on a formal marking sheet or as margin comments on the script itself.

The classification system devised for analysing feedback in this study draws on similar analyses reported in the literature (Brown & Glover, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mutch, 2003; Randall & Mirador, 2003) and summarised in Table 3.2.

Amount of Feedback

An indication of the amount of feedback provided on each assignment could be estimated by counting the number of feedback interventions (Brown & Glover, 2006). However, this does not take into account the variability in such interventions, which might range from a single word or symbol to several sentences: for example, Mutch (2003) reported variations in the scale of comments on one sample assignment ranging from 7 – 129 words.

In the current study, the amount of feedback was therefore determined by considering both number and size of feedback interventions. Any mark or comment provided by the tutor was counted as a feedback intervention, including: a single symbol (such as a tick or question mark); underlined or otherwise highlighted text; single words; and more extensive comments.

Depth of Feedback

Depth of feedback was coded numerically using the system devised by Brown and Glover (2006):

1: feedback identifies a weakness

2: feedback provides a correction

3: feedback explains why the correction is preferred

Table 3.2: Comparison of feedback analysis in literature

	Hattie & Timperley (2007)	Randall & Mirador (2003)	Mutch (2003)	Brown & Glover (2006)
Feedback Type				
Content	Task focus	Knowledge; theory	Concepts	Errors/ misconceptions
		Justify	Knowledge	Omissions
		Reasons		Irrelevant material included
		Substantiated		Tutor clarification
				Student clarification
Skills	Process focus	Critical reflection	Understanding of question	
		Synthesise; summarise	Argument	
		Relevance		
		Explaining; understanding; clarify		
		Analyse; examine; interpret		
		Precision in research design		
		Data handling		
Format (equates to skills category according to Brown & Glover, 2006)	Process focus	Structure	Communicatio n	Communication
		Appropriate literature	Presentation	English usage
		Coherence; argument		Diagrams/graphs
		Mechanical conventions inc use of English		Presentation
		Referencing		
		Conclusion; reflection on outcomes		
Develop-mental	Self-regulatory focus		Direct v implied	Dialogue encouraged
				Refers to future studies
				Refers to resource materials
Feedback Style				
Tone			Conversational	
			Categorical	
			Mitigated	
Orientation	Self focus			Praise; encouragement; comments about the person; judgemental comments
	Performa nce focus			
Feedback Depth				
				Identifies weakness
				Provides correction
				Explains why correction is preferred

Type of Feedback

The boundaries between different classifications described in the literature are indistinct, potentially leading to confusion. For example, there is disagreement in the literature as to whether feedback regarding presentation and quality of writing should be classified as formatting (Randall & Mirador, 2003) or skills (Brown & Glover, 2006). Similarly, there appears to be disagreement in the literature about the classification of feedback about referencing. Both Randall and Mirador (2003) and Mutch (2003) classified comments about referencing as part of format or presentation, although Mutch does acknowledge that many academics might disagree with referencing being viewed as a purely technical issue. It is interesting to note that whilst Randall and Mirador (2003) did distinguish between 'evidenced writing' and 'referencing', both were still categorised under 'format' (p. 520-521). In the current study, evidenced writing was categorised as a skill, in acknowledgement of the skills required to identify and critique appropriate literature, whilst the more technical issues of referencing style remained in the 'format' category.

Another discrepancy in the literature is the consideration of feedback relating to critical reflection and analytical skills, which is noted by Randall and Mirador (2003) but appears to be overlooked by Brown and Glover (2006). Given the emphasis placed on critical thinking and analytical abilities in undergraduate education (NZQA, 2011), the current study adopts the convention described by Randall and Mirador (2003) and categorises feedback relating to these attributes as being feedback about skills.

Given the blurred boundaries between different categories of feedback type described in the literature, it is essential for meaningful and reproducible

analysis that the classification system is made as explicit as possible and applied consistently. In this study, feedback type was therefore categorised into four broad categories which are consistent with the definition of feedback as being information about current performance, suggestions for future performance and suggestions for developing self-regulatory skills. The four categories are: content; skills; format; and developmental feedback (Table 3.3). Content feedback refers to comments about the specific assignment and so provides the student with information about their current performance. Skills feedback refers to the processes used in generating the assignment, whilst format feedback refers to comments about the use of English and presentation. As such, both skills and format feedback could be considered to be related to information about the current performance or to be providing suggestions for improving future performance. Developmental feedback refers to feedback that encourages further learning (Brown & Glover, 2006). Developmental feedback includes comments that specifically refer to future study, that direct the student to further reading or other learning activities, that offer suggestions that help students to develop their self-regulatory skills and comments that encourage the student to engage in discussion with the lecturer or their peers.

Table 3.3: Coding system for classifying type and style of feedback (adapted from Glover & Brown (2006) and Randall & Mirador (2003))

Code		Examples/Key words
Type of feedback		
Comments relating to content knowledge (C)		
C_{KE}	Knowledge error/misconception	Error, theory, misconception, knowledge, information
C_{KO}	Knowledge omission	Missed, omitted, include
C_I	Irrelevant material included	Relevance
C_C	Student clarification of content requested	Meaning, clarify, explain
C_J	Justification requested	Support, defend, substantiate, reasons
C_P	Positive comment about the content	
Comments relating to skills (S)		
$S_{U+/-}$	Reference to student's understanding of the question	Explain, clarify, understanding, interpret
$S_{A+/-}$	Reference to clarity of Argument	Analysis, discuss, explain, synthesis
$S_{R+/-}$	Reference to the amount of critical reflection	Reflect, critique, evaluate,
$S_{L+/-}$	Comment on the use of the literature	Resources, literature, academic, source, reliable
Comments relating to format (F)		
$F_{S+/-}$	Structure	Coherent, fluent, concise, organise, plan
$F_{P+/-}$	Presentation	Format, proofread
$F_{E+/-}$	Use of English	Spelling, grammar, fluent, coherent, communication
$F_{R+/-}$	Referencing	Reference style, convention
Developmental feedback (D)		
D_D	Encourages dialogue	Actively encourages student to discuss the feedback further
D_{EF}	Explicitly refers to future studies	Makes links between current performance and future work
D_{IF}	Implicitly refers to future studies	
D_R	Refers to resources	Directs student to relevant resources
D_{SR}	Encourages self-regulation	Encourages self-evaluation, thinking about own work
Style of feedback		
Tone of feedback (T)		
T_{Cat}	Categorical	Uses imperatives and assertions; power resides with the tutor
T_{Mit}	Mitigated	Qualified, moderated or softened
T_{Con}	Conversational	Addresses student directly; seeks to reduce the power imbalance
Orientation of feedback (O)		
O_E	Feedback directed at self (ego)	
O_P	Feedback directed at performance	

Style of Feedback

The style of feedback was classified by tone and orientation (Table 3.3). The tone of feedback was divided into three categories: categorical, mitigated or conversational. Categorical feedback includes uncompromising statements and assertions and might be seen as emphasising the power imbalance between lecturer and student, whereas mitigated feedback softens the message and so works to reduce the perceived power imbalance (Lea & Street, 2000). Feedback adopting a conversational tone is described by Mutch (2003) as that which addresses the student by name or invites further discussion with the student.

The orientation of the feedback refers to whether the feedback is directed at the person (ego orientation) or at the task. When feedback is directed at the self rather than the task, it can have a negative effect on student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

3.6.3 Data Analysis: Interviews

Interview data was analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The framework used to analyse the data was (a) familiarisation with the data; (b) data reduction; (c) identification of themes; and (d) reviewing and refining themes. Although described here as a linear series of stages, in reality the data analysis was a more iterative process, moving backwards and forwards between the stages. Thus, the process of reviewing and refining continued throughout the analysis as codes and patterns were continuously checked against the original data.

Familiarisation: The first stage in analysing the data involved immersion, in which the researcher familiarised herself with the breadth and depth of the

material through repeated and active reading of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data reduction: A two-stage coding process was adopted, with an *a priori* approach using a pre-determined code list derived from the research questions and from the codes used for the document analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A second round of coding used an inductive approach, in which codes were derived from the data itself, for example through identifying repeated phrases or recurring experiences (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Although Miles and Huberman (1994) describe coding as a process of data reduction, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that coding can also involve 'data complication' (p 29) as it opens up the data and leads to more questions. The concept of data complication is supported by Punch (2009) who stresses the importance of 'analytic coding' (p 178) which involves interpretation rather than simply description of the data. This more interpretive coding might be considered part of the process of identifying themes.

Identifying themes: At this stage, focus shifted to the codes more than the original data and involved asking questions to help organise the codes. Techniques used in this process, drawn from Miles and Huberman (1994) and Keeves and Sowden (1997), included:

- Noting patterns through counting instances and recurring words/phrases.
- Clustering similar experiences together and exploring outliers.
- Splitting and combining categories in different ways.
- Presenting data in different ways to explore the relationships within and between different themes.

Reviewing and refining themes: Themes were reviewed and refined by returning to the coded data extracts and to the original transcripts to check that the themes were coherent, and that they captured all of the data.

3.7 Criteria for Evaluating the Research

When evaluating qualitative research, some researchers adopt the same criteria as those used in quantitative research, in particular validity and reliability, whilst others advocate for alternative criteria, most notably the concept of trustworthiness. The criteria adopted in this study to evaluate research were generalizability, credibility and internal validity. Together, these criteria aim to ensure a degree of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln,1994, cited in Bryman, 2008).

3.7.1 Generalizability

Perhaps the most significant criticism of case study research is that it provides little basis for generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Punch, 2009). However, one response to this criticism is the concept of naturalistic generalisation, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as a process in which the reader draws their own meaning from the research findings. To enable naturalistic generalisation, it is essential that the salient features of the case are described in sufficient detail to allow the reader to determine to what extent the findings might apply in their own context (Sturman, 1997). The goal in reporting this research study is to include sufficiently detailed information and rich description of the data and of the context in which the research took place to allow the reader to determine the wider relevance of the findings.

3.7.2 Credibility

Credibility refers to the plausibility of the findings. Two strategies are employed in the current study to ensure credibility: respondent validation and triangulation. The former involves checking with participants and can happen at various stages of the study (Bryman, 2008). In this study, participants are invited to review and amend the transcript of their interviews. Although this strategy is not without its problems, for example leading to censorship, it can lead to useful discussion and suggested improvements (Stake, 1995).

Triangulation is defined by Cresswell (2012) as “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals…types of data...or methods of data collection" (p. 259). The purpose of triangulation is to check the credibility of the findings and to check for alternative interpretations by a process of cross-referencing.

Strategies for triangulation adopted in this study include:

- Data source triangulation: the use of multiple sources of information (written feedback; lecturer; students).
- Methodological triangulation: the use of different methods (interviews; document analysis).
- Investigator triangulation: review and discussion with supervisors provides an opportunity for multiple interpretations to be considered. Investigator triangulation was also used as means to ensure internal validity, which refers to the match between the findings and the conclusions drawn from the study (Bryman, 2008).

Constant checking and re-checking or verification of findings throughout the process of data collection and analysis is also an inherent part of triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.8 Conclusion

This study is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. It adopts a qualitative, case study methodology, using a nested case design to explore the relationship between lecturer's and students' views about teaching, learning and assessment, and student engagement with feedback, through an in-depth study of two classes. Consistent with the case study approach, it uses multiple sources and different methods to collect data. This chapter has described the rationale underpinning the chosen methodology, the context in which the study takes place, including ethical considerations, the methods for data collection and analysis and the strategies employed to ensure that the findings are trustworthy.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

The main focus of this research was to explore the extent to which student engagement with feedback is influenced by lecturer and student views of teaching, learning and assessment.

This chapter presents the findings compiled from the analysis of interview transcripts and written feedback provided on a specific assessment item. The chapter begins with a brief description of the case. Findings are then presented in three broad categories: approach to teaching, learning and assessment; perceived purpose of feedback; and use of feedback. In each category, findings are presented first from the lecturer's perspective and then from the students' perspective. The final section summarises the key findings for each participant.

4.2 Description of the Case

The context in which the study takes place is a large urban Institute of Technology in New Zealand. The case can be considered as the lecturer, students enrolled in two of his courses, and some of the interactions between them, with particular focus on the feedback provided on a specific assignment. Four students enrolled in course one (designated S1 – S4) participated in the study. Feedback on their first assignment consisted of margin comments on the returned assignment, and this feedback was analysed as part of the study. This assignment linked directly to a subsequent assignment, which was submitted six weeks later, and so feedback on this first assignment might be considered as especially pertinent:

> "This feedback for this assignment was really important because this was the bridging for the second assignment" (S3).

Six students enrolled in course two (designated S5 – S10) participated in the study. In course two, the assignment included in this study focused on the development of academic skills:

> "That whole course is structured around core principles of being a good communicator, around engaging with scientific information, around assimilation of that. All the assessments are actually about underlying principles of investigation which are supported by the content that the students are interested in" (L).

Written feedback to students was provided on a marking schedule separate from the assignment itself.

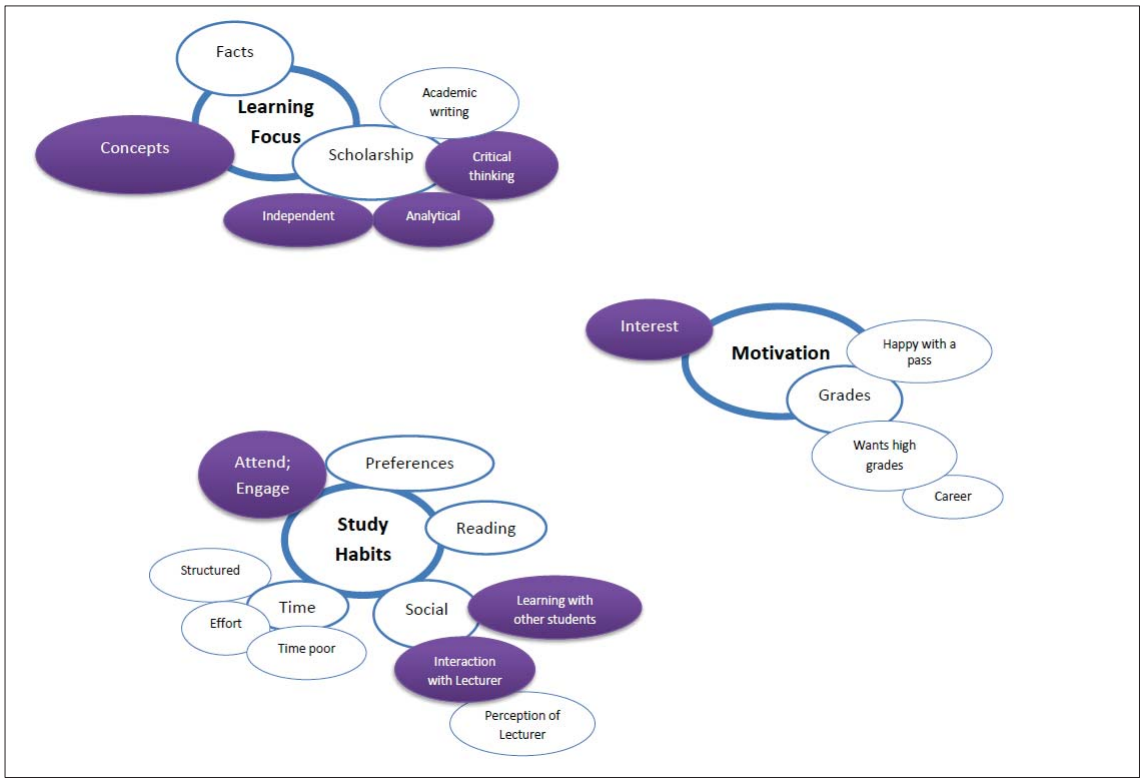
4.3 Approaches to Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The first category, approach to teaching, learning and assessment, included three common themes, identified on the basis of analysis of the lecturer and student interviews. The three themes are summarised below:

- **Learning focus**: facts focus; concepts/understanding focus; scholarship focus.
- **Motivation**: interest; grades; both.
- **Study habits**: engagement/attendance; learning preferences; social (subthemes: interaction with other students, interaction with lecturer); reading; time.

Figure 4.1 shows a graphical representation of the three themes for James. This diagram was used to depict the approaches adopted by each participant, helping to identify similarities and differences between lecturer and student

perspectives. Appendix Four shows the diagrams for each of the student participants.



Key: Strongly indicated Weakly indicated

Figure 4.1: Perceptions of Learning: James

4.3.1 Lecturer's Perspective

Learning focus: James' approach to teaching and learning clearly focuses on concepts and understanding:

> "[Students] need to know *some* facts, but more they need to understand the underlying principles of *how* you arrive at the information."

His repudiation of facts-focused teaching stems in part from his own experience as a learner but is driven primarily by his belief that his role as a lecturer is to equip students with skills that will help them to become independent, life-long

learners and to develop the flexibility and problem-solving ability that will help them succeed in their chosen careers:

> "I know that nearly everything that I was ever required to factually remember … I don't know any of those things anymore and fundamentally what makes me an adaptable lecturer and a good researcher has nothing to do with the *facts* that I learned."

> "What I'm actually trying to do is create skilled people who are able to rationalise an argument, create a discussion around a topic, guide their own learning."

> "I think there's a real struggle in education to some extent where it's expected, now expected by the students that they will simply be asked questions which they can answer based on the information you've given them that will allow them to pass the course."

James considers scholarship, in particular critical thinking and the ability to formulate an argument, as a fundamental part of learning. The central role of critical thinking in his approach is especially apparent when talking about assessment, as he encourages students to analyse the question and engage with the assessment briefing and marking schedule when preparing assignments:

> "Learning is about critical evaluation of what you're hearing in class. It's also about critical evaluation of what you're being asked to do."

James also seems to adopt a relativist view of knowledge and emphasises the importance of using evidence to support one's own perspective:

> "You have to be able to put aside what you expect to show and look at what is being shown. It's the old beautiful woman or old hag, the picture, and if you can look at it and see both then that's the best answer, is that it is two things simultaneously and they're based on the evidence presented. You can argue for either of those things." (L)

Motivation: The importance of intrinsic motivation in James' teaching is apparent and he works on the assumption that students choose to study his courses through personal interest. His intention is to tap into that interest through his teaching:

> "I'm here to tell you about the, just how amazing [the subject] is, how applicable the most basic fact is to the wider context of what we do and why we're here and all those kinds of things."

Study habits: James emphasises the importance of engagement with the material by encouraging students to attend class and take notes, to ask questions and to discuss topics amongst themselves. James freely admits to having been what he describes as a 'poor student' himself, often disengaged and coasting through his undergraduate degree:

> "My personal life took precedence over my learning. I didn't attend one semester. I was absentee for an entire semester. I only attended exams, I didn't, I barely did my assessments."

He harnesses this experience in providing his students with learning opportunities that encourage them to avoid the mistakes he made:

> "It's not a secret that I wasn't a good learner. It's not a secret that I try to give them the opportunities that I didn't seek."

James' approach to assessment is consistent with his espoused views on teaching and learning. He describes the purpose of assessment as being to allow students to demonstrate their understanding of core principles. He designs assessments that allow students to apply those principles to a topic of personal interest, thus tapping into their intrinsic motivation, as well as fostering student autonomy through negotiating elements such as assessment length:

> "This was actually a erm, kind of a student-input assignment, as in we got to decide quite a few things on it." (S5)

4.3.2 Student Perspectives

Learning focus: When discussing their approach to learning, students typically emphasised study habits and their learning focus was not explicit. Analysis of discussions regarding the purpose of assessment tended to shed more light on their learning focus. Students identified both summative and formative purposes, suggesting that assessment serves both to measure learning and to

aid learning. Six students identified summative purposes of assessment, with all but one also suggesting formative purposes:

> "[To] see how you understand what the lecturer's saying" (S10)
>
> "To make sure we understand the content" (S9)
>
> "To measure your learning" (S8)

Further analysis revealed three categories from students' descriptions of how they perceived the purpose of assessment (Figure 4.2): a facts focus, a concepts focus and a scholarship focus. In each case, assessment might be perceived as providing a judgement of students' work, measuring facts knowledge, concepts knowledge or quality of writing respectively. Formative functions of assessment were also apparent for each category:

> "It does force me to learn what we're been learning in class" (facts focus, S3)
>
> "To help you know what to study, basically" (facts focus, S2)
>
> "So for something that might not be so clear, as you research it for your assignment, then it becomes clearer" (concepts focus, S8)
>
> "Part of it is getting you into a process of how to discern what's good, what's bad, what conflicts and what doesn't" (scholarship focus, S7)
>
> "[Assignments] are like a self-study, self-learning process" (scholarship focus, S6)
>
> "To get me thinking like how am I writing my assignments" (scholarship focus, S1)

Facts focus: In addition to a perception that the purpose of assessment is to measure content knowledge or to force students to learn the material, further suggestions of a facts focus were evident from how students used the opportunity to discuss draft assignments or from their description of the teaching:

> "[I want to] make sure I haven't missed anything out…if they drop any hints or say 'Oh, I see you haven't got that that in there.'" (S2)
>
> "You don't get given the information really. It's not in the lecture notes. They [lecturers] give an introduction to the topic and then it's for you to go off." (S6)

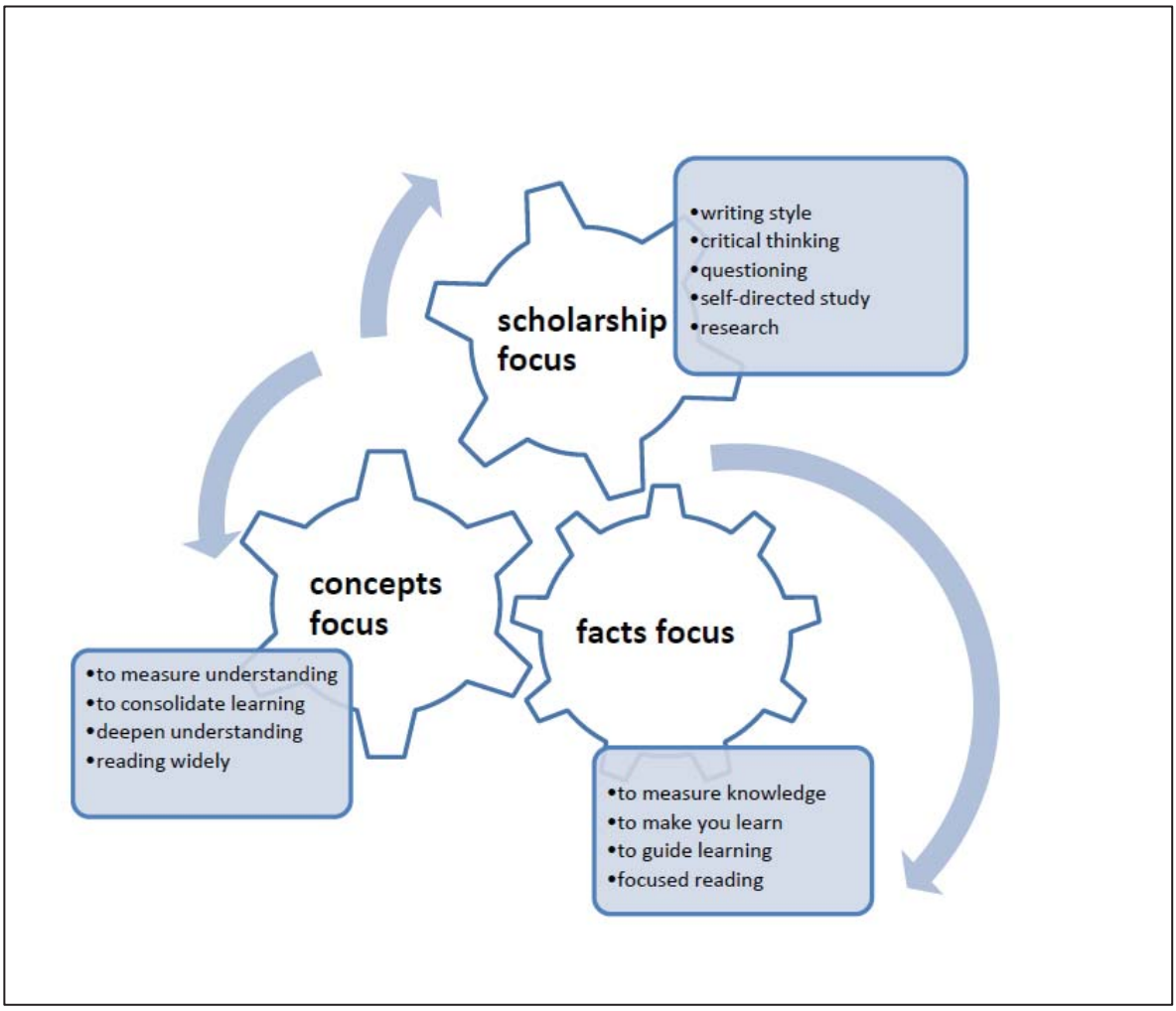


Fig. 4.2: Purpose of Assessment

Concepts focus: A concepts-based learning focus was illustrated through an emphasis on understanding, either in the specific context of assignments or more generally:

> "I'm a real 'why?' person…I can get quite dragged in to understanding it in detail." (S7)

> "[Exams are] there to show you've got an understanding of a topic and that you have a grasp of the actual fundamental themes." (S9)

Scholarship focus: Students demonstrated a scholarship focus through an emphasis on writing style, through an analytical approach to the question or through explicit reference to the importance of critical thinking:

> "[Feedback helps] to get me thinking like how I'm writing my assignments and what he's looking for in terms of my writing." (S1)

> "I take advantage of making appointments with the lecturer…to meet and talk about assignments or talk about course work" (S1)

> "Look at the assignment question fifty million times throughout the whole assignment… not even just the question... I always go for the marking schedule." (S6)

> "I spend a lot of time analysing the question and trying to break it down into components…I look at the marking schedule and I look at where the most detail is required." (S7)

> "The percentage allocations certainly do also play a role in deciding how much gets written." (S5)

> "I do read a lot of journals and things…my problem is that I read a lot and then get off on these tangents and I go 'wow, this is good', which is awesome, but it's not very useful for that particular assignment…but it does give me lots to think about later." (S9).

> "It [assignment writing] helps with forming your own opinion on something." (S8)

Those students who talked about critical thinking and who demonstrated an analytical approach to the assignment task were exclusively students from course two. It was notable that writing style was the only indication of a scholarship focus for students from course one. Of particular note, whilst one student in this group was highly focused on writing style, for others stylistic issues were seen as an irrelevance or as more of an issue for the marker:

> "I guess that's the problem is that people just assume, like they should know what I'm talking about, but I guess when they read 80 papers it's hard." (S3)

> "I'm not the greatest writer and I am a terrible person for 'oh this is the easy word, Shift F7, let's just chuck that word in there'….I've tried to take on board [feedback on style] but I guess it's hard to change how you write." (S4)

Figure 4.3 summarises the learning focus of the ten student participants.

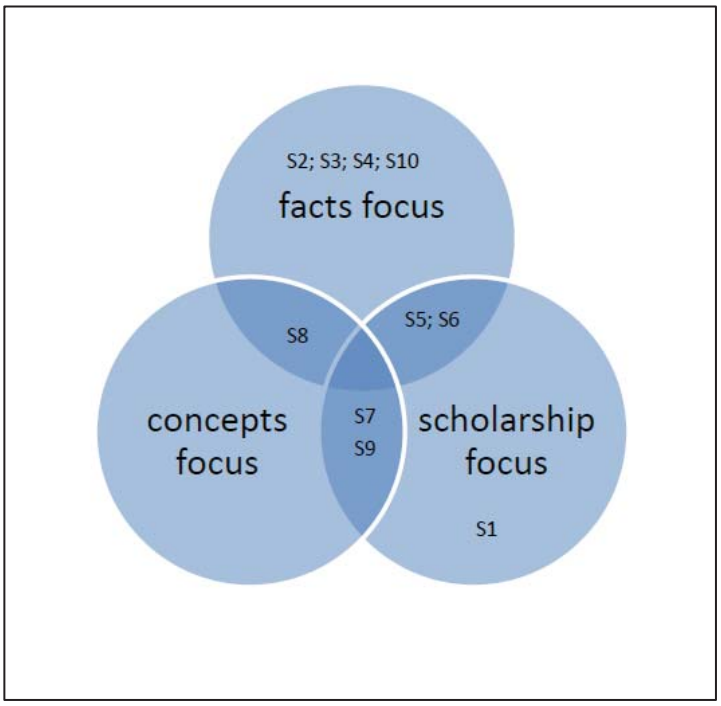


Fig. 4.3: Learning Focus

Motivation: Two motivating factors were identified in discussion with students: personal interest and grades, with some students being motivated by both (Figure 4.4).

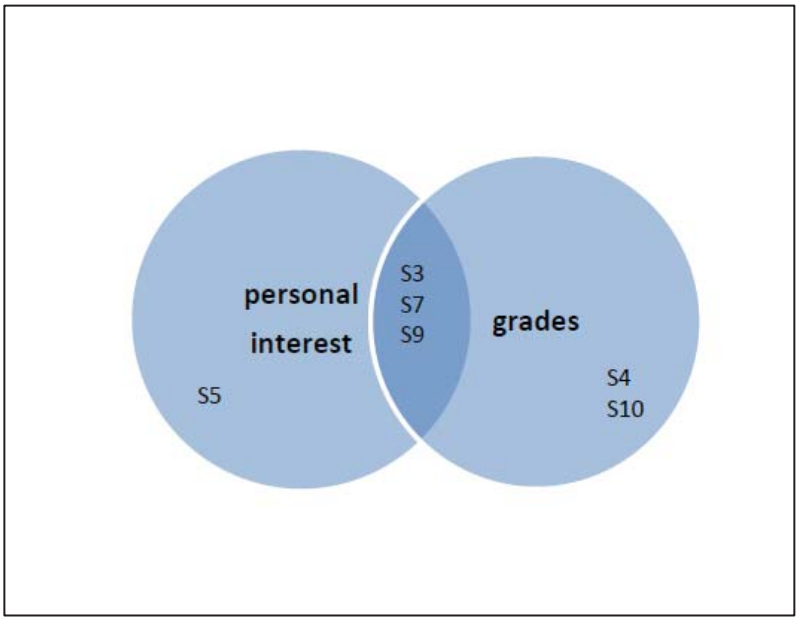


Fig. 4.4: Motivation

Those students who identified grades as being important could be split into two sub-groups: students who were motivated to achieve the highest grade that they could and those that were happy to pass. Three students were motivated to get the highest grades possible:

> "I am always aiming to get the best mark I can." (S7)

> "It's not just like 'hey, I just want to get a C. This is how I used to be [in previous degree studies] like 'Cs get degrees!' but now it's more important to me 'cause I want to have good grades." (S3)

> "That's why my grades are important to me. That's why I get very upset if the grade isn't [good], 'cause I want that to be the difference. When you got to a job interview you've got a GPA [grade point average] higher than the others." (S9)

These three students were also motivated by personal interest in the subject:

> "I do go off on tangents and find new things, which I find really fascinating." (S9)

> "Maybe it's a topic of more personal interest [than my previous degree], so again, I tend to delve into things a bit more." (S7)

> "Some of the stuff we learn is interesting. So, the more interest you have in it the more effort you put in I guess." (S3)

In contrast, two students, who also described themselves as struggling with at least some aspects of learning, were motivated by grades inasmuch as they were happy with passing grades:

> "Hopefully I'll pass assignment two." (S4)

> "It's now a pass, I'm more happy about it. So 'C' is like 'lucky me'." (S10)

One student only identified personal interest as a motivating factor:

> "Obviously I would have read up a lot more on erm, well stuff I find interesting compared to, say, to others"." (S5)

Interestingly, he appears to equate interest with success:

> "I will say to any would-be student: study what you're interested in, and you will naturally be good at it." (S5)

Study habits: Five sub-themes were identified within the category of study habits: learning preferences; engagement; reading; social; and time.

Learning Preferences: With regard to learning preferences, some students expressed a clear preference for how information is presented to them:

> "[I'm] a very visual learner…audio as well. If I hear something it's better than me reading it." (S4)

Others focused more on what they are doing themselves when they are learning:

> "I'm definitely a hands-on learner….I find taking notes is probably my most effective tool. That or something like field trips or lab work where we're actually getting to do the practical work." (S1)

> "I take a lot of notes in class." (S9)

> "I take my iPad with me so I don't have to write on paper." (S8)

Attendance at Class: Some students described attendance at class as an approach to learning:

> "I believe in going to class…I have to be there and listen to what the lecturer says." (S3)

> "I always like [to] sit in the front and listen [to] what they say." (S10)

In some cases it was clear that the student linked attendance with the level of engagement, and one student developed this idea further, suggesting that participation ought to be recognised through an allocation of a proportion of the marks:

> "[I] try to be as attentive and participative as possible, although it's quite hard because I'm one of those shy people." (S8)

> "Sometimes I sort of think why, it would be nice if there was just a 5% or something in your paper where it would be…she really contributed or she did that little bit extra. I feel like that doesn't show in your degree sometimes." (S9)

For other students, attendance was perceived as important for picking up on 'hints', suggesting a more passive role:

> "He is pretty good at giving feedback, yeah, and suggesting. So long as you pay attention in class." (S2)

Reading: Some students emphasised reading when discussing their approach to study. Opinions varied widely, with some students embracing reading and

research, reading widely around the subject, whilst others struggled with the reading requirements:

> "I'm an avid reader so I do read a lot of journals and things around when I'm doing an assignment." (S9)

> "I can get quite dragged in to understanding it in detail and my research becomes quite broad." (S7)

> "I do look up scientific articles and read them but I find it, I don't retain that stuff very well. Just reading it doesn't help me." (S1)

> "Journal article, it's more complicated. That's too complicated so I don't actually read a lot." (S10)

Social Interaction: The 'social' subtheme included learning in collaboration with other students, interaction with the lecturer and learning alone. Some students were happy to interact with the lecturer, either through asking questions in class or through taking opportunities to meet with him outside class:

> "I take advantage of making appointments with the lecturers." (S1)

> "I'd probably go to the lecturer if I really didn't understand it. I'd go to the lecturer and ask them." (S2)

> "I'm not afraid to ask questions [in class]." (S3)

Other students preferred not to interact with the lecturer. Reasons cited for not interacting included being shy or simply preferring to work things out independently:

> "If I don't feel comfortable [to ask] during the lecture, then either look it up myself or ask someone else." (S8)

> "I do tend to be relatively solitary in the way that, I don't do a lot of interaction with the lecturers, I just tend to study on my own." (S7)

Although some students said that they would sometimes check with a classmate if they did not understand something, only one student discussed working with other students as a preferred strategy for learning:

> "Most helpful stuff I found is the study groups we've done together where we've actually done study groups for students … we did one where it was each one of us would do like a mini class, okay I'm going to talk to you about this particular topic and … it was just really useful to, you know … when you say it, it sticks in your brain a bit more." (S9)

Time: Time featured in almost all students' discussion about learning and assessment. For some students, time management was an important part of their approach to learning, although others adopted a more unstructured approach:

> "I always have a study plan." (S3)

> "I'll take a good week to probably write it [an assignment] up. I like to get that done two weeks before it's due, and then I don't look at it for a week, so that I can just get it totally out of my mind. And then I come back and read it and see if there's any glaring omissions that I've made. So then I've got time to fix them." (S6)

> "I'm not that great at saying OK I'm going to do this today, that tomorrow. It's just a case of sitting down and doing what you can when you can." (S2)

> "I'm very much a last minute person when it comes to, especially assignments. Yeah, it just flows better for me if I sit down and do it all in one go." (S4)

Some students perceived a definite link between effort (time spent on a task) and achievement:

> "I mean I'd really like all A's. Realistically if I don't put in the work I know I'm not going to get that." (S1)

> "I want to have good grades because I feel that it's a reflection of the effort I put in." (S3)

Several students expressed a sense of being time-poor:

> "This semester I got five papers so [I've] been really busy." (S10)

> "I don't do enough revision [of class notes] because I get too busy." (S9)

> "At the beginning of the semester I have a lot of time because you don't have assignments." (S8)

> "It's difficult when you're working and home stuff as well, but I try to make as much time as I can." (S2)

In contrast, one student seemed to have the opposite experience, valuing the time that she had for her studies as a full time student, since she had previously completed a degree part time whilst working:

> "It's nice to be able to focus on it without squeezing it in [around other commitments]." (S7)

Epistemological Views: One student (S4) was notable as having a dualist view of knowledge, expecting there to be one correct answer or one way of completing a task:

> "If I'm really not sure I will just say to them [the lecturers] 'look, what should I, what did you want me to do there to make that correct? … But if they said to me 'oh this was, you got this wrong' and I kind of got it I would go and have a look and what the answer should have been." (S4)

This perception of knowledge led to the student struggling with the assignment, which required students to apply core principles to a particular example and allowed for a degree of personal interpretation:

> "I think with this assignment it was very difficult because it's very subjective from person to person. You've not all got the same information." (S4)

Approach to Learning: Seven students demonstrated a surface approach to learning (Entwistle, 2000), based on an approach to assessments concentrated on memorising and rote learning or on 'question spotting', in which students focus only on course material required for assessments:

> "Bullet points… I have to try to remember as many as possible… then tell them what I know." (S10)

> "I write. Writing works for me …writing then trying to memorise." (S6)

> "Read it over and over again…reading it and writing it out." (S8)

> "I just drill it over and over again and I always look at past papers to know what angle they usually ask the questions on, so that I don't waste time studying anything I don't need to know." (S3)

> "I'm very much a last minute person... I don't tend to study too much, I find it confuses me a lot with the things I do know, but the one thing that does help me with preparing for exams is mock tests." (S4)

> "The lecturers are pretty good at dropping massive hints about what you should and what you don't need to look at."(S2)

> "I try to confine my reading to sort of using lecture notes as a base, so that I don't end up reading too much." (S5)

A deep approach to learning is one in which the student shows an interest in the subject and seeks to make personal meaning (Entwistle, 2000). Three students clearly identified as adopting a deep approach:

> "[Exams] are there to, again, to show you've got an understanding of a topic and that you have a grasp of the actual fundamental themes." (S9)
>
> "I find that engaging and getting different perspectives on things is really great." (S8)
>
> "[Assignments] help with forming you own opinion about something as well." (S8)
>
> "I'm a real 'why?' person…I can get quite dragged in to understanding it in detail." (S7)

A strategic approach is one in which students seek out learning opportunities and initiate activities that will enable them to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning strategies that they employ, thus allowing them to become independent learners (Entwistle, 2000). Three students were identified as having a strategic approach, based on their structured and analytical approach to study and assignments, their acknowledgement of the importance of becoming independent learners, or their self-reflection:

> "Look at the assignment question fifty million times throughout the whole assignment… not even just the question... I always go for the marking schedule." (S6)
>
> "I spend a lot of time analysing the question and trying to break it down into components…I look at the marking schedule and I look at where the most detail is required." (S7)
>
> "I'll take a good week to probably write it [an assignment] up. I like to get that done two weeks before it's due, and then I don't look at it for a week, so that I can just get it totally out of my mind. And then I come back and read it and see if there's any glaring omissions that I've made. So then I've got time to fix them." (S6)
>
> "[Assignments] are like a self-study, self-learning process." (S6)
>
> "I think it's probably partly to exercise your research ability, that self-directed learning. So I think part of it is getting you into a process of how to do it and how to discern, what's good, what's bad, what conflicts and what doesn't." (S7)
>
> "To get me thinking like how am I writing my assignments." (S1)
>
> "I mean I'd really like all A's. Realistically if I don't put in the work I know I'm not going to get that." (S1)

Figure 4.5 summarises the approach to learning of the ten student participants.

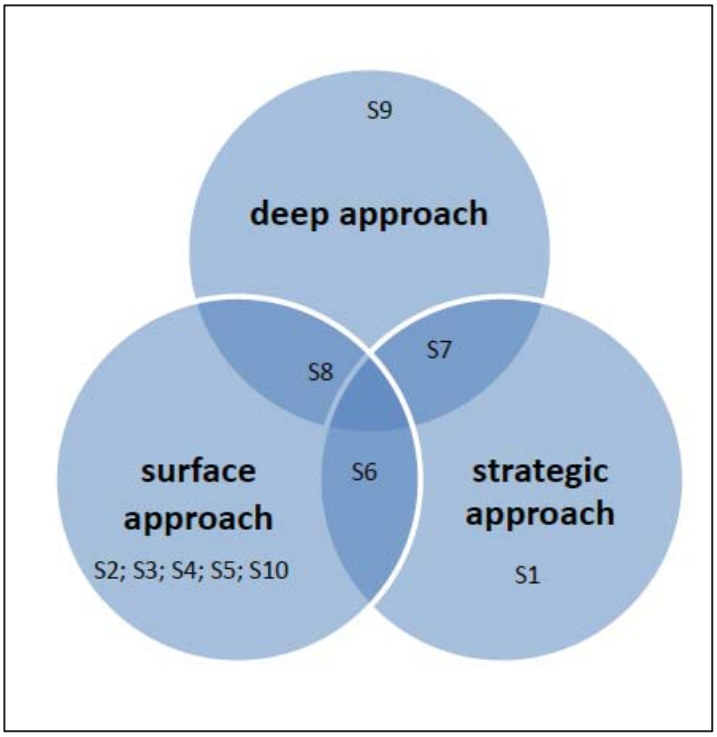


Fig. 4.5: Approach to Learning

4.3.3 Relationship Between Approach to Learning and Learning Focus

Table 4.1 summarises the learning focus and approach to learning for the ten students in this study. It would seem reasonable to expect that students' learning focus would be reflected in their approach to learning. Thus, students who are facts-focused might be expected to display a surface approach to learning: if students perceive learning and assessment to be about acquiring facts, then a logical approach to assessment would be to memorise information. If students are focused on understanding concepts, then they might be expected to adopt a deep approach to learning.

Table 4.1: Relationship between Learning Focus and Approach to Learning

Focus	**Approach**	**Examples**
Exclusively Facts	Surface	S2, S3, S4, S10 "I just drill it over and over again." (S3)
Exclusively Scholarship (writing style)	Strategic	S1 "[Feedback helps] to get me thinking like how I'm writing my assignments and what he's looking for in terms of my writing." (S1)
Concept & Scholarship	Deep & Strategic	S7 "[Assignments are] to exercise your research ability, that self-directed learning… getting you into a process of how to… discern, what's good, what's bad, what conflicts and what doesn't." (S7)
	Deep	S9 "I do read a lot…when I'm doing as assignment…it does give me ideas to think about later." (S8)
Facts & Scholarship	Surface & Strategic	S6 "I write. Writing works for me …writing then trying to memorise." (S6) "Look at the assignment question fifty million times throughout the whole assignment." (S6)
	Surface	S5 "I try to confine my reading to sort of using lecture notes as a base, so that I don't end up reading too much." (S5) "The percentage allocations certainly do also play a role in deciding how much get written." (S5)
Facts & Concept	Surface & Deep	S8 "I find that engaging and getting different perspectives on things is really great." (S8) "Assignments, I get all of my resources…. write out from each paper what I want from that paper… then putting it all together." (S8)

On the whole, the findings of this study confirm this alignment: of the six students who demonstrated a surface approach to learning, four were exclusively facts-focused learners. Although no students in this study demonstrated an exclusively concepts focus, students demonstrating a concepts and scholarship focus tended towards either a deep approach, or a combination of deep and strategic approach to learning.

Two students did not fit the trend and are discussed in more detail here. Firstly, S5 was identified as having both a facts and scholarship focus, although he demonstrated a surface approach to learning. He recognised that engaging with the marking scheme was helpful in determining the relative emphasis he should place on each element of an assignment, suggesting an analytical focus, but in reality his approach to assignments tended to emphasise the areas in which he had greater confidence:

> "I find that no matter how much I try I may not be able to write enough, then in which case I try to write, like heaps more in, say, other sections which I'm more comfortable with." (S5)

The second student (S8) is of particular note because she demonstrated a mixture of deep and surface approaches to learning, and was both facts- and concepts-focused. This student clearly valued the opportunity for increasing understanding and repudiated the value of exams:

> "So for something that might not be so clear, then as you research it for your assignment then it becomes clearer… Exams are a waste of time because you're cramming in all this information that you're going to forget straight after the exam." (S8)

However, her strategy in preparing for both exams and assignments was at times suggestive of a surface approach:

> "Assignments, I get all of my resources…. write out from each paper what I want from that paper… then putting it all together" and for exams: "Read it over and over again." (S8)

4.4 Purpose of Feedback

4.4.1 Lecturer's Perspective

James appears to use assessment for formative purposes. This is particularly evident in his assessment design for course one, with the first assignment forming a foundation for the second. This clearly encourages students to engage with the feedback on assignment one:

> "This feedback for this assignment was really important because this was the bridging for the second assignment. So this one I took a lot on board." (S3)

James focuses on getting feedback to students quickly, favouring a quick turnaround over providing lengthy feedback:

> "I've got to balance between getting it back quickly so that they have the opportunity to come and ask me about my feedback and my questions or making them wait and getting nice detailed feedback."

He goes on to explain:

> "[If it's delayed] detailed feedback is irrelevant because the students have already done the next assignment and their opportunity to learn from that feedback has gone."

James compensates for the brevity of his written feedback by expanding on general issues through verbal feedback to the whole class. He also encourages dialogue, allowing students time to discuss feedback further with him if they wish to. This, and his willingness to review draft assignments and provide formative feedback point to a focus on feedback for future learning:

> "I offer all those services, you know, if you want me to look at your draft, if you want me to give you feedback, if you want to come and talk to me about what you're doing or ask a question about the assessment."

4.4.2 Student Perspectives

Direct questioning about students' perceptions regarding the purpose of feedback produced a limited response. Through analysis of the discussions

around student preferences and how they described their use of feedback, a clearer picture emerged. Four perceived purposes of feedback were identified: correction of content; correction of misunderstandings; justification of the grade; and to help make improvements for future work (Figure 4.6). Although some students mentioned positive feedback as making them 'feel good', there was little indication of feedback being used as a motivator:

> "Sometimes it's nice as a sort of encouragement, if there are notes that say 'good'; 'excellent work' or something like that… that's quite nice after you've invested so much time…[but] I do like specific feedback because to me that helps for the next assignment." (S7)

Feedback for Content: One purpose of feedback identified by the students was to provide an indication of where they had included incorrect or insufficient information:

> "It should show you where you've gone wrong." (S6)
>
> "It corrects an error in the learning of that particular assignment." (S7)
>
> "It's interesting to see where you've maybe not expanded upon something sufficiently." (S2)
>
> [in relation to specific feedback on the assignment] "Probably the fact that I didn't put in as much evidence content." (S5)
>
> "I want to know what I've missed out." (S9)

Feedback for Understanding: A second purpose of feedback described by students was to identify or correct misunderstandings:

> "It shows [where] you got the wrong end of the stick." (S6)
>
> "It really helps… to get to know my own work so that I can see the mistakes that I'm making." (S1)

Feedback as Justification: Some students considered feedback as justifying the grade awarded for their work or as evidence that the marker had actually read the assignment:

> "I like to hear why I've got a specific grade, why I dropped from where I am." (S3)
>
> "To see if my mark can be improved." (S8)

"You think oh yeah, the person has actually read it." (S7)

Feedback for Future Learning (feed-forward): Several students saw feedback as being to help them to improve their writing style or to correct misconceptions and factual errors that would help them with future assignments:

"If you don't know where you're going wrong you can't fix it." (S4)

“Feedback is what you need to improve really or else you wouldn’t know where you’re going.” (S3)

"To help me improve my academic writing for the future." (S8)

Feedback related to writing style was seen as an important element of feed-forward by some students:

“I think if I’m not making myself clear enough that a lecturer can understand, then it’s probably not unique to this assignment… it’s a nice reminder next time I write something for any lecturer just make sure I’m being clear and concise.” (S1)

“I think it [feedback] is to help improve your academic writing for the future.” (S8)

For some students, the value of feedback was in helping them to determine the individual lecturer’s expectations and preferences:

"I start to understand how that individual thinks and that really helps for future assignments." (S1)

“To me a lot of the feedback is figuring out the lecturer. They’re all different. So you figure them out and figure out what they… what their style is like and what they like in their assignments.” (S6)

When discussing feedback in the context of future learning, students tended to agree that specific comments were most helpful whilst more general comments were less so:

“The benefit of the feedback is when it is specific, when you can apply it to your future learning” (S7)

“That’s what I like, sort of the constructive criticism seems that OK I am on the right track but this is what I need to improve on.” (S1)

“’Nice examples’. Which examples?... I used quite a few examples.” (S8)

“It’s not really [specific], it doesn’t help me.” (S7)

In contrast, one student focused primarily on feedback addressing the current assignment, although she did acknowledge that she might review feedback on an assignment when writing something for the same lecturer another time:

> "What I don't like about it is it's a done deal by then anyway, so it's not useful for me as far as fixing a mark if I'd missed something out." (S9)

> "If I was doing another assignment for that lecturer, I probably would go back and refer maybe… especially if it was anything to do with like formatting or style." (S9)

4.5 Use of Feedback

4.5.1 Lecturer's Perspective

Documentary analysis of the written feedback provided to students on a specific assignment allowed for exploration of how the lecturer actually used feedback. Feedback was analysed for amount, orientation, depth, tone and type.

The mode of delivery of feedback differed for the two courses: for course one (NZQA level 6), students received margin notes on their assignment, whereas with course two (NZQA level 7), the students received a single sheet marking scheme. Findings are therefore presented separately for participants from each course.

Amount: In general students in course one received more feedback interventions (range 9 – 22, average 13.5) compared to those in course two (range 5 – 8, average 4.0) but the feedback for course two was generally longer (Figure 4.6). The difference in amount of feedback between the two courses was probably due to the difference in mode of delivery: the marking sheet seems to encourage the use of full sentences to provide a degree of context.

Where symbols or highlighting were used, these were included in the tally of feedback interventions as they could be considered as providing information about the assignment. Sometimes the feedback was clear (for example an

arrow indicating that an item had been placed in the wrong place), but at other times the meaning behind the feedback was unclear (for example a question mark in the margin).

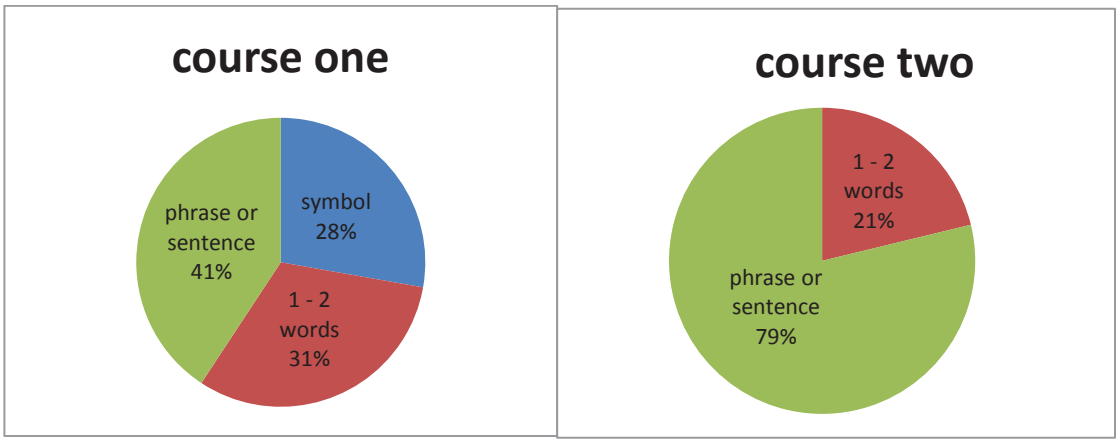


Fig. 4.6: Amount of feedback

Orientation: Orientation refers to whether the feedback is directed at the individual (ego orientation) or at the performance. There were a few examples of ego-orientated feedback (described by Hattie and Timperley (2007) as feedback at the level of self) in the current study, but more than 90% of the feedback was directed at the task.

Depth: The depth of feedback was analysed using the system devised by Brown and Glover (2006): feedback that identifies a weakness; feedback that provides a correction; and feedback that explains why the suggested alternative would be preferable (Figure 4.7). For course one, the majority of the feedback was corrective:

> "Try to integrate your critique of method with your results."
>
> "Indicative of less detailed data."

In contrast, for course two, most was simply identifying issues:

> "Précis of findings?"

"Global change in attitudes?"

There was no explanatory feedback provided in either course.

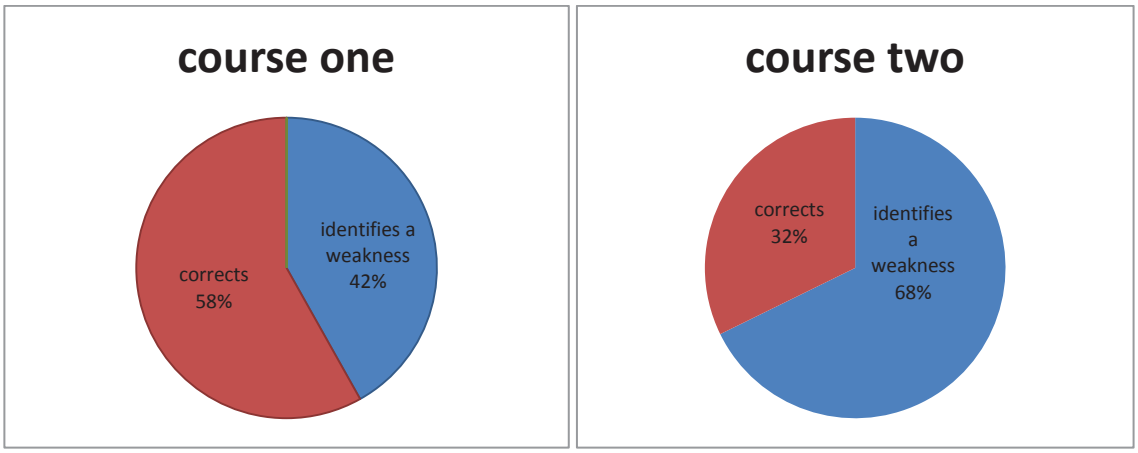


Fig. 4.7: Depth of feedback

Tone: The tone of the feedback was categorised as categorical, mitigated or conversational (Lea & Street, 2000; Mutch, 2003) and findings summarised in Figure 4.8. The proportions of each were broadly similar in the two courses, suggesting that the tone was not influenced by the mode of delivery or by the difference in educational level.

"Which? Use the results explicitly." [Categorical feedback]

"Avoid over-use of single references." [Categorical feedback]

"Some more examples from your results would be good." [Mitigated feedback]

"A little more 'where to form here' needed" [Mitigated feedback]

"Did you see any?" [Conversational feedback]

"But how does this relate to your results?" [Conversational feedback]

Lea and Street (2000) define mitigated feedback as comments that are softened by being presented in a more provisional way. It is interesting to note that there seemed to be a tendency for the lecturer to use a mitigated tone when the assignment was at the lower end of the grade range: for example, one student

(S4) received a low pass grade and 71% of the comments were classified as a mitigated tone, compared to an average of 25%.

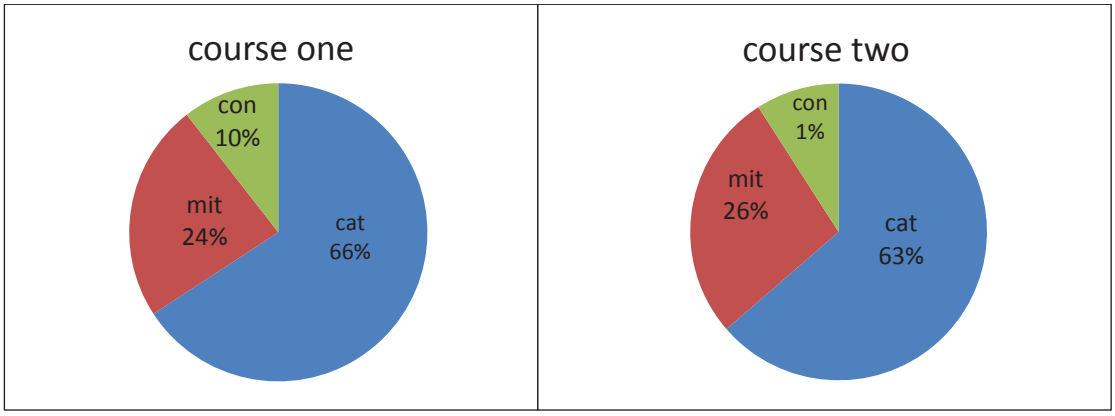


Fig. 4.8: Tone of feedback [Key: cat = categorical; mit = mitigated; con = conversational]

Type: Feedback was then analysed by type, with four categories: comments relating to content; comments relating to skills; comments relating to formatting; and feedback that is specifically developmental or feed-forward (Figure 4.9). Content focus generally equates to Hattie and Timperley's (2007) task level of feedback, whilst skills and formatting focus align with the process level. Developmental feedback can be considered to include Hattie and Timperley's third level of feedback, that of self-regulation.

Feedback Related to Content: For both courses, the majority of the feedback related to content, most commonly pointing out omissions. In course one knowledge errors were also highlighted, for example correcting definitions:

> "You could include examples from other species."
>
> "[jumping] = all feet leave the ground."

Other content-related feedback included indications that more clarification or justification was needed:

"These look almost the same – is C [continuous] better than 10sec?"

"What is the use of this re the results discussed?"

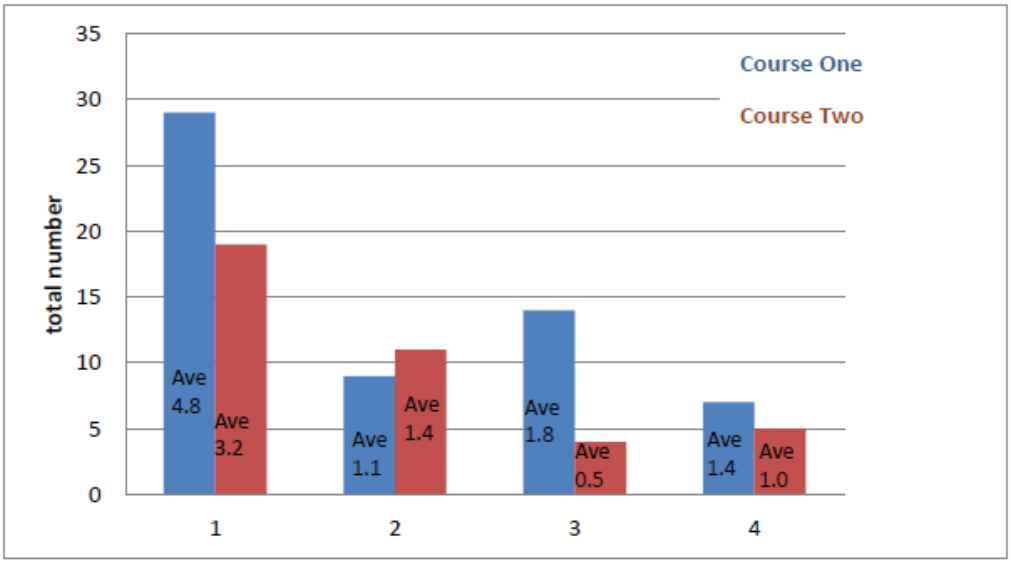


Fig 4.9: Type of Feedback (Key: 1 = content; 2 = skills; 3 = format; 4 = developmental)

Feedback Related to Skills: Skills-related feedback generally focused on the clarity of the student's argument (both courses) and on use of the literature (course two):

"Discuss your findings a little more."

"How does this relate to your findings?"

"Great use of literature and arguments to support claims."

Other skills-related feedback focused on students having misinterpreted the question:

"Try to conclude more about the welfare, this is not about the campaign."

Feedback Related to Format: For course one, there was a relatively high number of comments relating to format, most likely reflecting the nature of the

assessment itself, since presentation of data from the student's own observational study was a key component of that assignment:

> "% labels?"
>
> "Add data label"

Developmental Feedback: There were a few examples of development feedback, but mostly these were comments encouraging dialogue or inviting students to think about their work a little more closely:

> "Did you see any?"
>
> "How does this relate to your results?"

Some comments could be interpreted as providing suggestions for future work, not just for the current assignment and were categorised as 'developmental: implied reference to future work':

> "Try to integrate your critique of method with your results"
>
> "Try not to rely too heavily on single sources."

There were no examples of comments that explicitly referred to future work or that encouraged self-regulatory capacity.

4.5.2 Students' Perspective

Preferences for Individual or Class Feedback: Several students acknowledged that James supplemented written feedback with verbal comments to the whole class and reported finding class feedback to be useful:

> "I actually think the generalisation actually helps, because it's not just about yours, it's about everyone else's and it helps you to sort of put yours into context." (S8)

However, she goes on to indicate a preference for individual feedback, a view that is supported by several of the students:

> "The most useful would be the individual feedback on the actual assignment." (S8)
>
> "I like specific stuff." (S9)
>
> "They do do a general feedback… but for me that kind of like washes over my head, like I prefer direct talking." (S3)

One student expressed concern that class feedback could be demotivating when the comments were focused on the negative:

> "When it's a situation where 'I was really surprised so many of you did poorly' and you're saying that to the whole class… I'm not sure that saying that that many people didn't do well is encouraging." (S1)

Importance of Grade: Almost all students looked at the grade first before reading feedback. One student was an exception to this pattern, explaining that she reads the comments first as a means of preparing herself for the grade:

> "I started at the front [with the comments] and then, 'cause if I had done quite poorly just seeing… 50 out of 100 would be a huge shock. This way I can sort of go through... 'okay he had a lot of corrections that's why I got a 50'. In this case I'm like 'okay I had a few corrections, oh I got a 79, that's being fair'." (S1)

Clarity of Feedback: The extent to which students understood the feedback comments did not appear to be related to the amount, tone, or depth of the feedback, with examples of each classification that students understood and conversely examples of each that were unclear to the students.

One student was notable in the extent to which she struggled to understand the feedback and her frustration was apparent in the discussions:

> "A lot of it is extremely vague... I still don't understand what I've missed out." (S4)

She goes on later to expand on her frustration:

> "I sometime don't think [James] knows how to just explain things straightforward. Everything sort of seems to be in a roundabout way instead of just saying 'look this is wrong, this is how you fix it, this is how you get to the end result.'" (S4)

Engagement with Feedback: Students' engagement with feedback was analysed for amount (number of times students reported reading the comments), how they used the feedback and whether or not they discussed the feedback with the lecturer. In each case, student engagement with the feedback was summarised in diagrammatic form: Figure 4.10 provides an example of this

diagrammatic representation and results for each student are shown in Appendix Five.

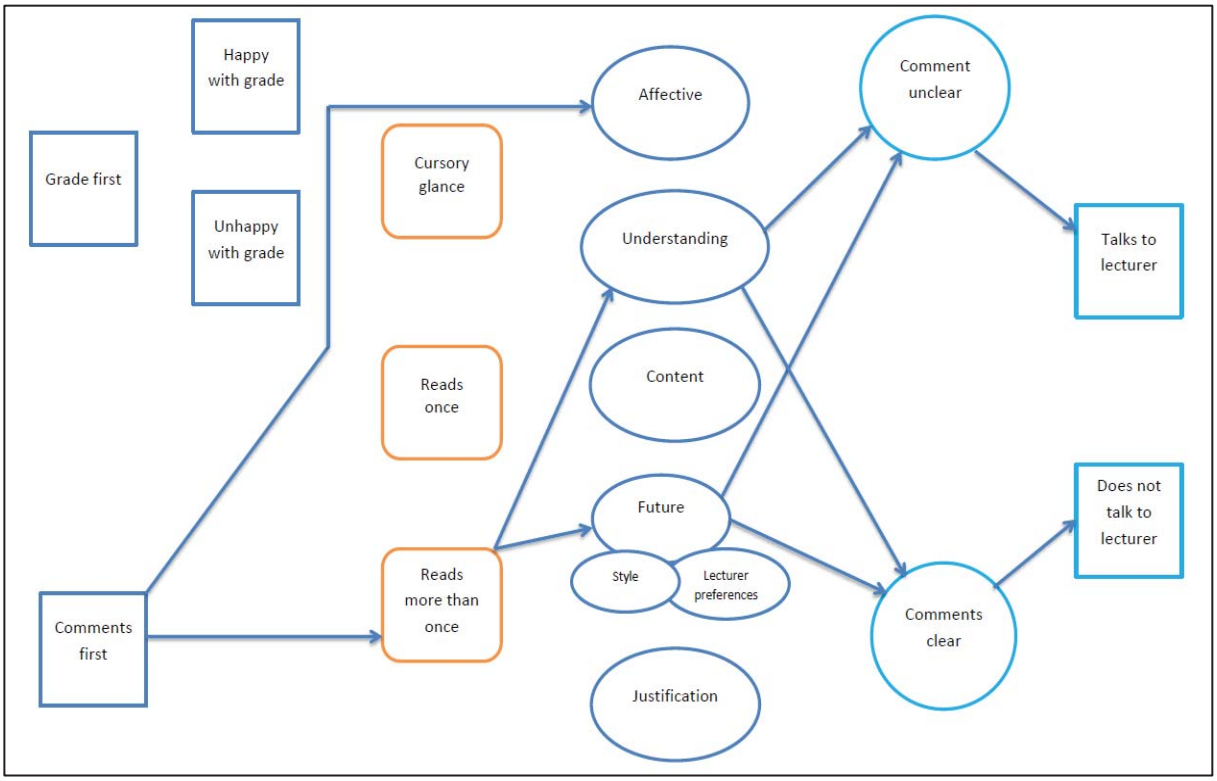


Fig. 4.10: Analysis of Student Engagement with Feedback: S1

The results were analysed by comparing the patterns obtained in this process, grouping and re-grouping similar patterns. Four categories were identified for student engagement with feedback: students in the first two groups engaged differently with feedback depending on the grades; the third group engaged with feedback regardless of the grade, whilst the final group showed minimal engagement with feedback regardless of the grade.

Grade-Dependent Engagement: Feedback as Justification

For some students, how they engaged with feedback depended on whether or not they were happy with the grade: if they were unhappy with the mark or felt that they might be able to get the mark increased, they would read the feedback

carefully and might speak to the lecturer. Their primary motivation for talking to the lecturer was to challenge the grade:

> "I'm trying to work out where I've lost the marks or when I've had to check them to go 'hang on a minute, there's just no way – I don't think this looks right' and then I'll go back and add up… and then I'll break it down, especially if they've given me it on a schedule, count the ticks and stuff." (S9)

> "If I think that they've done something wrong then I'll bring that up with them." (S8)

> "I argued with him about that as well." (S3)

All three students in this group suggested that feedback was helpful for future assignments in terms of helping them to improve their writing style, but this was not carried through to their actual use of feedback:

> "Never even ask for them back half the time, got a copy at home." (S9)

Even when a student was unsure about the meaning of specific comments, she did not seek clarification, commenting:

> "I figured that my tick meant 'good.'" (S3)

Grade-Dependent: Minimal Engagement

One student indicated that how she engages with feedback is dependent on the grade: since she is generally happy with her grades, she only briefly reads through the comments. This was borne out by her engagement with the feedback on the assignment included in this study: even when she did not understand some of the comments, she did not seek clarification:

> "I didn't need it. I got a good mark anyway." (S6)

She did theorise that if she was unhappy with a grade she would engage with the feedback more closely and possibly seek clarification from the lecturer if she could not understand the comments.

Grade-Independent Engagement

Four students indicated that they read the feedback carefully, regardless of the grade. Of these, one student reported only reading through the feedback once, but spent time discussing the feedback with classmates:

> "It has helped me especially being able to bounce [ideas] off a few people, being able to improve my initial results." (S4)

The other three students read the comments more than once.

> "I go racing upstairs and sit there looking at it… I don't usually look at it again until I do the next assignment." (S2)

> "I immediately look through it… then usually when I get home later on that day or whatever I'll go through it more quietly with a cup of tea and just have a look and review the assignment and the flow and look at the feedback." (S7)

In all cases, students were mindful of comments relating both to the current assignment (whether content- or understanding-focused) and to future work.

> "[If] I can understand where I went wrong or where I went right [it] helps me with other assignments even with different subjects." (S4)

> "It helps you for the next one even if it's totally different." (S2)

> "I know what I need to do to be careful about doing that in future, not that it comes up that often." (S7)

> "To me that's the benefit of the feedback is when it is specific, when you can apply it to your future learning or it corrects an error in the learning of that particular assignments." (S7)

Similarly, all students in this group would talk to the lecturer if they were unclear about any of the comments:

> "If I can't read it, which is often, or I don't understand it, I go talk to the lecturer." (S1)

> "[I] probably spend about 15 minutes like looking at the [the comments], reading them, and then trying to see if I understand what he is actually trying to tell me and if I can't then I'd go and see him." (S2)

> "I did go back to [James] 'cause he asked a question in the marking sheet… So I sort of spent a bit of time looking at that trying to figure it out and I did ask him in the end." (S7)

> "Once I'd spoken to him about that, that did make sense but at the time when I read it it didn't." (S4)

Whilst one student in this group did talk about feedback as justification, this was specifically in terms of feedback showing that the assignment had been read, rather than strictly being about justifying the grade:

> "It's also about confidence I think with your lecturer that they're looking at your work and taking the time to give you that feedback." (S7)

One student in this group stands out in terms of the level of engagement with feedback:

> "So I definitely took advantage to read everything, think to myself okay, does this make sense, why do I think that I did or didn't do well and how can I improve, what questions do I have to ask him, and I did go talk to him 'cause I wanted to make sure, there were a few things I didn't understand and I wanted to make sure I knew for the next assignment that I had a clear idea of what he wanted… Before I went to see him I just read through again to make sure that I knew what I wanted to ask and that I wasn't inadvertently asking something that he had already answered in the feedback. So I reviewed it initially and then before I spoke to him and then afterwards again to make sure I had all my questions answered and then again for when I was writing my second assignment. So I like having it close at hand." (S1)

Minimal Engagement: Affective Impact of Feedback

Two students showed minimal engagement with feedback, regardless of their grade. In each case, the affective impact of feedback seemed a dominant reason for not engaging.

One student (S5) described minimal interaction with the lecturer in all aspects of his learning, and this carried through to assignments: even if he did not understand feedback he would not seek clarification. He also eschewed verbal feedback, concerned about the emotional impact:

> "If it comes to verbal feedback it can be a bit of a… well, emotional experience, like erm, the truth can be a bitter pill for those not prepared to hear it".

Further clues to his preference for working independently come from his comments about getting feedback on draft assignments. He recognises the value of submitting draft assignments for formative feedback:

> Sometimes we students may write it half way, not ready for submission stage and we email that to a lecturer for some feedback on areas of improvement and things like that. That I feel is also just as important as the "end result" feedback.

However, he does not take up the opportunity to submit drafts, as he perceived this as showing a lack of confidence:

> "It could be that I feel a bit more at ease with what I erm, with what I present at the end. With the other instances I've seen it tends to be mostly a confidence issue".

The second student in this group (S10) identified as a student who struggles with learning, to the point where he finds feedback overwhelming and often avoids picking up assignments in case it distracts him from preparing for exams:

> "Sometimes I don't want to know the results … I want to focus on exams."

He goes on to explain this further:

> "If it's [a] fail it's going to be like make me stress[ed] and disappoint[ed]."

Although re-sits are offered when students fail papers in this course, there is obviously a cost to the student in terms of time and effort, plus a financial penalty in the way of re-sit fees, as well as the emotional impact. For this student, his on-going struggles possibly exacerbate this stress:

> "I either just pass or just fail. I never get really good marks."

The extent to which affective influences impact on this student's engagement with feedback are apparent when discussing specific feedback items: he tends to focus exclusively on negative comments, not even registering a positive comment:

> "Every time I read a feedback … is so good thing, good one, it mean, it surprise me really. I always see 'question mark' or 'not make sense'."
> "Actually it [a specific feedback comment] is better but every time on other assignment feedback, most of the word[s] they say 'confused' or 'don't understand' or… I see it all the time."

Interestingly if a comment has been phrased as a question, even if the comment itself is fairly positive, this student interprets it as being negative because of the question mark:

> "I read, always see the question mark, I always see that all the time so there's no surprise for me and I don't read what it was about…. It's bad. They mean like don't understand. I knew this… every time I read lecturer's feedback, they always say, they always like write question mark. I don't read what is question mark, like I don't really understand what's question mark?"

Possible implications of this interpretation will be discussed further in the next chapter.

4.6 Summary

This chapter presented a broad overview of the perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment of the lecturer and students participating in this case study research, as well as an analysis of how the participants use feedback. Table 4.2 highlights the key findings with regard to learning focus, perceived purpose of feedback and use of feedback.

Table 4.2: Summary of Findings

Participant	Learning focus:	Motivation	Interaction with lecturer	Interaction with other students	Perceived purpose of assessment	Perceived purpose of feedback	Use of feedback
L	understanding scholarship	Assumes personal interest	Encouraged	Encouraged	understanding	future	Depth: identifies or corrects Type: mainly content-focused
S1	scholarship		√			future understanding	Engaged Reads >1 Discusses (L)
S2	facts/knowledge		√	Difficult	facts/knowledge		Engaged Reads >1 Discusses (L)
S3	facts/knowledge	Interest; Grades	√		facts/knowledge understanding	future	Challenge
S4	facts/knowledge	Pass	√		facts/knowledge understanding	facts/knowledge	Engaged Discusses (L and S)
S5	facts/knowledge scholarship	Interest	X	X			Minimal engagement - affective
S6	facts/knowledge scholarship				facts/knowledge understanding scholarship	future understanding facts/knowledge	Minimal engagement - happy with grade
S7	understanding scholarship	Interest; Grades	X	X	understanding scholarship	future understanding facts/knowledge	Engaged Reads >1 Discusses (L)
S8	understanding facts/knowledge		√		facts/knowledge understanding	future justification	Challenge
S9	understanding scholarship	Interest; Grades		√	facts/knowledge scholarship		Challenge
S10	facts/knowledge	Interest; Pass	√		facts/knowledge understanding		Minimal engagement - affective

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This case study is concerned with the relationship between engagement with feedback and student and lecturer perspectives on teaching, learning and assessment. Chapter Four presented the findings in three sections: approaches to teaching, learning and assessment; purpose of feedback, and use of feedback. In each case, lecturer and student perspectives were considered separately. In this chapter the key findings, together with relevant literature on learning, assessment and feedback, will be used to discuss the research questions of this study. Finally, two brief vignettes are presented, which illustrate two contrasting situations: one in which lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment are misaligned and a second in which they are aligned. These two vignettes are discussed in terms of the impact on student engagement with feedback.

5.2 There are Disparities between Lecturer and Student Perceptions of Teaching, Learning and Assessment

This section considers the first research question: what are the lecturer's and students' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment?

5.2.1 Students at the Higher Level Exhibit a Stronger Focus on Concepts and Scholarship

James views his role as a teacher to be facilitating students in their development of an understanding of the fundamental concepts of the subject. In

contrast, only three students demonstrated a concepts focus to their learning, with most students focusing on facts*:*

> "You don't get given the information." (S6)

The facts focus might be a reflection of students' conceptions of the nature of knowledge: Ryan (1984, cited in Schommer, 1990) suggested that students who perceive knowledge as being absolute were more likely to focus on facts, whereas students who perceived knowledge as being more tentative generally focused on concepts. A higher proportion of students studying course one (NZQA level six) demonstrated a facts focus compared to those studying course two (NZQA level seven), which would seem to support Schommer's (1990) argument that students with greater experience of study at tertiary level are more likely to view knowledge as tentative.

There was a notable difference between students in each course with regard to scholarship. Most students studying course two (NZQA level seven) demonstrated a scholarship focus: this was evident through explicit reference to critical thinking, engaging with the literature, exploring different perspectives and an analytical approach to assignment tasks. This is consistent with a study by MacLellan (2001), who found that whilst third year undergraduate students emphasised analytical skills and critical thinking less than lecturers, they still tended to recognise its importance in assessments.

In contrast, with the exception of one student whose focus was primarily on writing style, scholarship was largely overlooked by students in course one:

> "I guess it's hard to change how you write." (S4)

This may be a function of the students in course one being at a less advanced stage of study, which is consistent with the findings of Boulton-Lewis, Marton,

and Wilss (2001), who found that students developed greater criticality as their university studies progressed.

5.2.2 Students Hold Different Views of Learning as an Active or a Passive Process

When discussing their approach to learning, most students in the study clearly identified preferences in the way they learn. However, whilst some students focused on how information is presented to them, others focused more on what they are doing themselves (most notably note taking), suggesting a perception of learning as an active process. The perception of learning as a passive process is indicative of a behaviourist theory of learning, whereas learning as an active process is a key concept in cognitivist and constructivist theories of learning (Schunk, 2012).

The passive-active dichotomy was also apparent in relation to attendance and participation in class, with some students seeing attendance itself being important:

> "I have to be there and listen to what the lecturer says." (S3)

Others recognised the importance of a more active role, such as participating in class discussions.

Tension arises if contribution to class discussions is perceived as a prerequisite of active learning. One student in particular exemplifies this: whilst she considered learning to be an active process, participating in class discussion was something of an ordeal:

> "It's quite hard because I'm one of those shy people." (S8)

5.2.3 Students Perceive Multiple Purposes of Assessment

The most common purpose of assessment, as perceived by students, was to measure learning:

> "To make sure we understand the content." (S9).

However, most students in the study considered assessment as having both formative and summative purposes, with just one student considering assessment to be purely summative. This is in contrast with the findings of MacLellan (2001), who reported that students infrequently recognised the formative value of assessment. Students recognised a range of ways in which assessment formed part of learning: to guide or consolidate learning; to deepen understanding; and to develop scholarship through encouraging critical thinking, research abilities and writing skills.

Interestingly, James designed assessments that encouraged many of these learning activities and skills and yet he only described one purpose of assessment: to measure understanding. Although he did not talk about a formative role of assessment, his practice would suggest that he does recognise a formative role, particularly given the scaffolding between two assignments in course one.

5.2.4 Perceptions of Teaching and Learning do not Always Align with Approach to Learning

James designs assessment activities that require students to engage with and apply core principles, and to develop their scholarship through a critical review of scientific literature. His assessments would therefore seem to align well with his intended learning outcomes, namely that students engage with the concepts and develop an ability to formulate an argument informed by evidence:

> "What I'm actually trying to do is create skilled people who are able to rationalise an argument." (L)

Such alignment is thought to encourage a deep approach to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007) and so at first sight it may be surprising that the majority of the students seemed to adopt a surface approach to learning. The preponderance of a facts focus in the current study might explain why the students were more likely to adopt a surface approach. However, there were examples in this study of a mismatch between the student's perception of teaching and learning and their approach to learning, suggesting other factors are influencing the approach adopted. This finding would seem to support Joughin's (2010) contention that there is little evidence that good assessment design alone can serve to induce a deep approach to learning.

Reasons for Adopting a Surface Approach to Learning: One of the criticisms of the theory of deep and surface approaches to learning is the tendency to blame the student for adopting a surface approach (Case & Gunstone, 2003). This could certainly be seen to be the case with the description of a surface approach as being one in which a student's intention is to complete the task with minimal effort (Biggs & Tang, 2007). It seems pertinent therefore to explore possible reasons why the students in this study might have adopted a surface approach.

One explanation for students adopting a surface approach could be that they possess a narrow conception of learning and limited strategies for approaching assessments, so do not know how else to tackle their studies (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001). This seemed to be the case with one student in this study (S8): whilst her learning focus was a combination of concepts and facts, she described limited learning strategies:

"Read it over and over again…reading it and writing it out." (S8)

For some students in this study, a surface approach seemed to be a survival strategy, either because of time constraints or because the student was struggling with the course material:

"I try to make as much time as I can." (S2)

"That's too complicated so I don't actually read a lot." (S10)

The notion of the surface approach being a survival strategy is supported by Entwistle (2000), who suggests that students might adopt a surface approach in order to cope with the task, and by Case and Gunstone (2003), who suggest that even when students recognise the limitations of a surface approach, their perception of time constraints might prevent them from feeling able to adopt a different approach.

5.3 Students Perceive Different Purposes of Feedback

This section considers the second research question: what do participants perceive as the purpose of feedback? For the purpose of this study, feedback has been defined as "information which provides students with an indication of their current performance, suggestions to help them improve future performance and helps equip them with the self-regulatory skills to become lifelong learners." Students' perceptions of the purpose of feedback only partly supported this definition: students agreed that feedback can provide information about the current task or suggestions for future improvements, but also considered feedback as being a justification of the grade.

Some students considered the sole purpose of feedback as being to provide correction for factual errors or misconceptions. Whilst clearly relating feedback to learning, the focus was purely on that particular assignment:

> “It shows [where] you got the wrong end of the stick." (S6)

Several students considered the purpose of feedback was at least partly to help them improve their work in the future: again this could be through correcting misconceptions, but also through offering suggestions to improve writing style:

> “It’s a nice reminder next time I write something for any lecturer just make sure I’m being clear and concise.” (S1)

This is in contrast to the findings of Storch and Tapper (2000), who reported few students perceiving guidance for future learning as a purpose of feedback.

Relatedly, some students saw feedback as an opportunity to better understand the lecturer’s preferences, which they perceived as helping with future assignments for the same lecturer:

> “To me a lot of the feedback is figuring out the lecturer.”(S6)

Although expressed in very narrow terms related to individual lecturer preferences, this perceived purpose of feedback could be widened to feedback providing an opportunity to help assimilate students into ways of thinking in the discipline (McCune & Hounsell, 2005).

Some students in this study perceived the purpose of feedback as being to justify the grade awarded:

> “I like to hear why I've got a specific grade.” (S3)

Whilst feedback comments sometimes can be considered as offering a rationale for the grade (Sadler, 2010), the usefulness of such feedback for learning is minimal (Orrell, 2006).

5.4 There are Multiple Tensions in the Use of Feedback

This section explores the third research question: how do participants use feedback?

Multiple tensions were apparent in the way in which feedback was used, both by the lecturer and by the students. Student engagement with feedback varies from minimal engagement beyond looking at the grade, through using the feedback as a means to check the marking, to extensive engagement suggestive of full integration of the feedback into the student's learning.

Whilst it might be expected that a surface approach would manifest as minimal engagement with feedback and a deep approach with greater engagement, this was not always the case in this study. For example, students who demonstrated a surface approach to learning demonstrated the full range of engagement with feedback, from minimal engagement, engaging purely as justification of their grade, to a greater engagement, for example discussing the comments with classmates or with the lecturer. Of particular interest, even students demonstrating a strategic approach to learning did not necessarily engage deeply with feedback. This is perhaps a surprise, given that a strategic approach to learning involves reflective skills in which the learner monitors the effectiveness of their study techniques and an awareness of and engagement with the assessment process (Entwistle, 2000). This finding would suggest that other factors influence student engagement with feedback.

5.4.1 Grade can Impact on Student Engagement with Feedback

In some cases, the main determinant of how students engaged with the feedback was the grade: if students were happy with the grade, further engagement might be minimal, even when their espoused use of feedback was to help improve future work

> "Never even ask for them back half the time, got a copy at home." (S9)

Draper (2009) suggests that when students are happy with the result, or feel that it aligns with their own assessment of their work, they might conclude that no further action is required and so there is little need for careful consideration of the feedback comments.

For some students, if they were unhappy with the grade, they would read the feedback comments carefully with a view to challenging the grade:

> "I argued with him about that as well." (S3)

This reaction could be indicative of an assumption that the low grade indicated an error in the judgement rather than a problem with the assignment (Draper, 2009) or a more general distrust of the assessor (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010).

5.4.2 Affective Influences can Impact on Student Engagement with Feedback

The impact of feedback as a motivator for learning was minimal: some students in the study did acknowledge 'feeling good' when they received positive feedback comments:

> "It's nice as a sort of encouragement." (S7)

However, such observations seemed incidental and the students were more interested in specific comments to help them improve:

> "I do like specific feedback because to me that helps for the next assignment." (S7)

This finding is consistent with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) suggestion that feedback directed at the self, such as the examples cited by the student above, tend not to contain sufficient information about the task and so are "rarely converted into more engagement, commitment to the learning goals, enhanced self-efficacy, or understanding about the task." (p. 96).

For one student in the study, confidence appeared to be a significant factor in his engagement with feedback. Thus, whilst he recognised the value of getting feedback on draft assignments, he did not take up such opportunities himself, apparently perceiving such action as suggestive of a lack of confidence:

> "It tends to be mostly a confidence issue." (S5)

He also expressed a strong preference for written feedback rather than verbal, concerned about the emotional impact:

> "Verbal feedback… can be a bit of a… well, emotional experience." (S5)

For another student in this study, affective influences seemed to present a significant barrier to his engagement with feedback:

> "I don't read what it was about…. It's bad." (S10)

He expects the comments to be bad, to the extent that even when there is a positive comment, he either dismisses it or interprets it as being negative:

> "Actually it is better but every time on other assignment feedback, most of the word[s] they say 'confused.'" (S10)

Värlander (2008) acknowledges the potential impact of emotions on students' ability to engage with feedback, whilst Wingate (2010) suggests that when students have low expectation of success they struggle to engage with feedback.

5.4.3 Perceived Utility of Feedback on Summative Work Varies

Whilst most of the students in this study considered feedback to be useful in terms of helping them to improve their future work, one student only considered feedback as providing information on the current task. Her engagement with feedback purely consisted of checking the marking: she perceived any further consideration to be pointless:

> "It's a done deal by then anyway." (S9)

This view would suggest that the student does not consider that the feedback might be helpful for future assignments. Similar findings have been reported in the literature, suggesting that some students do not see feedback on summative work as having a formative role (Handley & Williams, 2011; Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005).

5.4.4 There is Tension between Feedback Directed at the Current Task and Feed Forward

Given an espoused view that feedback has a role to play in helping student learning, it might be expected that feedback provided to students would reflect this. However, the feedback analysed as part of the current study was generally limited to commenting on the actual assignment; there was no *explicit* reference to future work and no feedback addressing students' capacity for self-regulation. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere (Brown & Glover, 2006), but is perhaps especially surprising here in the case of course one, given that this assignment fed directly into the second assignment, and so developmental feedback might be expected to be more apparent. Whilst this would appear to be a significant inconsistency between James' assessment design and his practice around feedback, there were examples of comments about the quality of the argument or about skills. Brown and Glover (2006) suggest that skills-focused feedback might be interpreted as feeding forward to future work and it may be that James expected students to interpret such feedback as being developmental.

However, the extent to which students might recognise such implied feed forward is unclear: some students in this study felt that the feedback was not specific enough to help them with future work:

> "It's not really [specific], it doesn't help me." (S7)

Furthermore, when asked about how the comments might help with their future learning, answers tended to be either narrowly focused on one aspect of their work or extremely vague:

> "It does definitely for making sure that I'll get the abstract including part B." (S6)

> "Not negatively. I think it will help." (S8)

These findings would suggest that the students were not readily able to interpret feedback in a way that would help them in future assignments.

5.4.5 Time Creates Tensions in the Use of Feedback

For James, there is clearly a tension between a quick marking turnaround and the provision of extensive feedback*:*

> "Detailed feedback is irrelevant because the students have already done the next assignment and their opportunity to learn from that feedback has gone." (L)

Students were also mindful of the turnaround and seemed to be well aware of the institutional policy on results being released within three weeks. The importance of feedback being provided in a timely manner is well documented in the literature (McMahon, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane‐Dick, 2006; Weaver, 2006) but the tension between timely and detailed feedback has been acknowledged elsewhere (Mutch, 2003) and is discussed further in the next section.

5.4.6 There are Tensions Regarding the Tone of Feedback

The majority of the feedback in this study was classified as categorical in tone. According to Lea and Street (2000), categorical feedback serves to sustain a power imbalance between tutor and student, which would seem inconsistent with James' espoused approach to teaching and learning:

"I don't want to say you must." (L)

The discrepancy may be that James' strategy of providing brief written comments leads to a categorical tone. Mutch (2003) also reported a preponderance of categorical feedback and makes the link between marking turnaround and the resulting need to make comments brief. Furthermore, Mutch warns against an automatic assumption that categorical feedback is undesirable, arguing instead that mitigated feedback might be less clear and so more open to misinterpretation by students. However, this is not borne out in the current study, which found that the tone of the feedback did not seem to be a factor in students' ability to understand the comments.

The use of questions in feedback could be considered as a way of mitigating the comments (Lea & Street, 2000) or of encouraging a more conversational approach (Mutch, 2003). It could also be used as a means of moving away from feedback as a transmission process and encouraging dialogue (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In this study, there were two contrasting responses to the use of questions in feedback: for one student (S7), the use of a question certainly seemed to encourage the student to engage in a discussion with the lecturer:

"I did go back to [James] 'cause he asked a question in the marking sheet." (S7)

whereas normally she preferred not to engage with lecturers:

"I don't do a lot of interaction with the lecturers." (S7)

This finding would seem to support the notion that couching feedback as questions encourages dialogue and so might promote greater student engagement with feedback.

However, in contrast, another student automatically interpreted a comment that was couched as a question as being negative:

"I read, always see the question mark…. it's bad." (S10)

In this case, the use of questions seems counterproductive, a finding that is supported by Mutch (2003): "Such a [conversational] style might be adopted in the sincere belief that it will enhance the reception of feedback; it could be that, for some students it does just the opposite" (p. 36).

5.4.7 There are Tensions Regarding the Depth of Feedback

There are tensions regarding the depth of feedback that is provided to students. The feedback in this study primarily identified issues (level one) or provided corrections (level two). The absence of explanatory (level three) feedback is consistent with James' espoused views: he suggests that it is better to encourage students to work out for themselves what is wrong.

There was a greater tendency towards corrective feedback in course one and towards simply identifying issues in course two. It might be argued that the higher educational level of course two means that students might be expected to be able to work out for themselves how to correct issues, whereas with course one, students need more guidance. However, there are other possible explanations for the difference, for example it might simply reflect the different nature of the assignments or the different ways in which the feedback was presented.

From the students' perspective, the main issue was around providing clear feedback which they could readily apply to their own learning, but some students wanted the lecturer to furnish them with the 'right' answer and in some cases were frustrated when a straightforward answer was not forthcoming. Price et al. (2010) report similar frustrations amongst students and suggest that it is indicative of a dependency on the lecturer.

There is disagreement in the literature with regard to good practice around depth of feedback. Some authors argue that feedback should include an explanation of *why* what students have written is incorrect or *why* an alternative might be preferred (Brown & Glover, 2006; James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002). However, if students are to develop self-regulatory skills they need to be encouraged to think the issues through for themselves. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) support this notion, suggesting that good quality feedback "helps students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct" (p. 208). Of course, for such feedback to be effective, students need to be able to understand how to apply it to their own work, a point that is well documented in the literature (Sadler, 2010; Weaver, 2006).

5.4.8 There is a Tension in the Perceived Value of Individual and Class Feedback

One way in which James deals with the tension between marking turnaround and feedback provision is to provide brief written comments, supplemented by verbal feedback to the class. There is a tension regarding the extent to which students found the general feedback helpful: some students recognised a value in hearing general comments, even when not directly related to their own work, whereas others found group feedback was less helpful:

> "They do [give] a general feedback of how the assignments are but…I can go 'oh yeah I think that might be me' where I think I might have done that, but for me that kind of…washes over my head. I prefer direct talking." (S3)

Differing student opinions with regard to the value of class feedback was also noted by Ellery (2008), who describes such feedback as a 'double-edged sword' (p. 427), acknowledging that for some students it is easy to ignore the feedback as not being relevant to their own work.

5.5 The Degree of Alignment between Lecturer and Student Views about Teaching, Learning and Assessment Influences Student Engagement with Feedback

This section addresses the fourth research question: to what extent is student engagement with feedback influenced by lecturer and student perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment. Two contrasting vignettes are presented: the first illustrates a case in which the lecturer's and the student's views about teaching and learning are misaligned and the second illustrates a case of alignment between lecture and student views.

5.5.1 A Case of Misalignment

One case in particular illustrates how a misalignment between lecturer and student perspectives about teaching, learning and assessment can impact on student engagement with feedback. The student (S4) tended towards a facts focus and a surface approach to learning, but what stands out is that she seemed to have a strongly dualist belief about the nature of knowledge. This was evident through her preference for concrete examples and specific, directive feedback, as well as an assumption that there is a single 'right answer':

> "If I'm really not sure I will just say to them 'look, what should I, what did you want me to do there to make that correct…. [but] if I kind of got it [understood the feedback] I would then go and have a look and see what the answer should have been." (S4)

James, in contrast, has a relativist perspective:

> "You have to be able to put aside what you expect to show and look at what is being shown. It's the old beautiful woman or old hag, the picture, and if you can look at it and see both then that's the best answer, is that it is two things simultaneously and they're based on the evidence presented. You can argue for either of those things." (L)

The frustration that arises as a result of this misalignment of epistemological perspectives is evident:

> "I sometimes don't think that [James] knows how to just explain things straightforward. Everything sort of seems to be in a roundabout way instead of just saying 'look this is wrong, this is how you fix it'."

The student clearly struggled with the assignment, which required students to compare and contrast three different methods of observation, based on the results of their own work:

> "I think with this assignment it was very difficult because it's very subjective from person to person. You're not all got the same information. You've all got to make up your own information. So if you think that you've written down everything that you've seen, how can somebody tell you [that] you haven't seen that?"

Her comment about the subjectivity would seem to suggest that her difficulties with the assignment stemmed at least in part from the concept of there not being a single right answer.

Whereas the assignment required students to critique the methods based on their own results, this student had focused more on a summary of the relevant literature. Even after receiving the feedback and discussing it further with classmates and with James, she still seemed unclear about the expectations. Her frustration with the feedback was evident, for example in discussing one specific comment ("*How does this relate to <u>your</u> findings?")*:

> "At the time I didn't [understand it]. I mean when I went to go and see him and spoke to him about it he then further explained to me that he didn't feel that I used my own results enough in this specific assignment, which I think would probably have been a better way to put it because when I spoke to him he thought that the work that I did was really good and it was actually relevant to what I was writing about but he wanted me to write more about what I found rather than somebody else's study. So I basically used someone else's study to back up my information whereas he wanted me to discuss my information more than making it up. So, in that regard the comment wasn't even valid to what he'd put down there, it ended up being something completely different that he was talking about in the end for me to rectify that."

It is clear from this description that the student did not understand the written comment, although she did understand the fuller explanation when she spoke with James about it. Her conclusion that the original comment was invalid is interesting as it suggests that even when she had discussed it further, she still

did not understand the actual written comment. One possible explanation for this is that she did not appreciate that the underlining of the word ‘your’ indicates an emphasis on that word. Mutch (2003) supports this idea, suggesting that the grammatical specificity that occurs as a result of comments being “stripped down statements” (p. 31) can be difficult for students to understand. Thus, James’ strategy of using brief written comments supplemented by class discussion may backfire if students are unable to understand the written comments and are either absent when further explanation is provided or do not recognise how the explanation relates to the original comment.

There is also another possible explanation: the misalignment between their views about the nature of knowledge and learning could have led to the student paying less careful attention to the lecturer’s comments. Her frustration could stem from the fact that she already expected the feedback to be vague and unhelpful because it did not provide the definitive information that would fit her current beliefs about learning. Certainly a student’s perception of the credibility of the feedback appears to be affected by their opinion of the lecturer (Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

5.5.2 A Case of Alignment

One student (S7) seemed to align well with the lecturer in terms of views about teaching, learning and assessment. She was strongly orientated towards a concept and scholarship focus and she demonstrated a deep and strategic approach to learning. Her focus on understanding, her analytical approach to assignments and the breadth of her reading are reminiscent of what McCune and Hounsell (2005) describe as high quality learning. Her motivation for

learning was primarily personal interest, although she was also motivated to achieve the highest grades that she could.

This student expressed strong preferences with regard to feedback and clearly recognised the role of feedback for learning, in particular valuing the feed forward benefit of comments about writing style or about the quality of her argument:

> "I guess the main thing was when I was looking at assignments where I found the feedback particularly useful, it is about that balance between being specific so that you can draw some meaning from it, whether it's correcting a fact or correcting a style of presentation or a way that you've done it."

However, she tended to eschew working with others:

> "I do tend to be relatively solitary in the way that, I don't do a lot of interaction with the lecturers or, I just tend to study on my own and do it." (S7)

This preference for working independently generally carried through to her response to feedback as she tended not to seek clarification by discussion with the lecturer even when she did not understand the feedback comments or could not understand how the comment applied to her work:

> "That was one of the general feedbacks he gave in class, and the thing is that for me, I thought that I had. So again without it being specific, if he'd have scribbled on [in the margin], so here you could have said this link to something, then I would understand what he meant, but he said 'state the links'. When I wrote it and even when I read it again I thought 'oh I thought I had, I don't know what you mean'. So, I don't know. I knew what he meant but I couldn't see the application ..."

Bloxham and Campbell (2010) found a reluctance amongst students to seek help, suggesting that some students have difficulty in framing appropriate questions. However, this does not seem to be the case with S7: she was a confident student who demonstrated a high level of self-regulatory capability, and was able to clearly articulate what was unclear, but who simply seemed to prefer working alone. Interestingly, she did speak to James about one comment on the assignment: as discussed earlier in this chapter, this exception seems to be as a result of the comment being couched as a question. It could be that

seeing a question in the comments, the student interpreted this as the lecturer expecting her to follow it up by speaking to him. Nevertheless, in spite of the alignment between lecturer's and student's views on teaching, learning and assessment, the student still did not seek clarification on all of the comments that she struggled to understand, which is almost certainly limiting the potential for feedback to help her to improve further.

5.6 Summary

The aim of this case study was to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer and student perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment. In this chapter the key findings have been discussed in the context of the research questions:

1. What are the participants' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment?
2. What do the participants perceive as the purpose of feedback?
3. How do the participants use feedback?
4. How do lecturer and student views about teaching, learning and assessment impact on student engagement with feedback?

The key outcomes of the discussion are summarised below.

- Perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment vary in terms of fact or concepts focus and the relative importance of scholarship. When perceptions are misaligned, some students appear to have greater difficulty in interpreting and fulfilling the assessment requirements as well as understanding and acting on the feedback that they receive.

- There is sometimes a mismatch between perceptions of teaching and learning and approach to learning, suggesting that other factors are at play.
- Time constraints for the lecturer led to tensions between a quick turnaround and providing detailed feedback. This can lead to brevity in written comments which are more likely to be categorical in tone.
- Students perceive different purposes of feedback, including helping with future learning, but their use of feedback does not always match their espoused views.
- There is a mismatch between approach to learning and engagement with feedback.
- Multiple factors impact on how feedback is used, both from the lecturer's perspective of producing feedback and from the students' perspective of engaging with that feedback.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the relationship between student engagement with feedback and lecturer and student views of teaching, learning and assessment. Participants' perceptions of teaching, learning, assessment and feedback were explored through the analysis of transcripts from semi-structured interviews, whilst participants' use of feedback was explored through a combination of document analysis and discussion with the participants.

The findings were presented and discussed in Chapters Four and Five. The conclusions are presented in the following section and related to the research questions, after which recommendations are offered for practice around assessment and feedback. The limitations of the study are then discussed before suggestions for future research are identified.

6.2 Conclusions

6.2.1 When Perceptions of Knowledge and Learning are Misaligned, Students May Struggle to Interpret Assessment Requirements and Feedback

The findings indicate that lecturer's and students' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment are sometimes misaligned. Furthermore, the findings suggest that such misalignment can create problems for students in interpreting the assessment requirements as well as the feedback that they receive and can result in frustration and lost learning opportunities. Thus, students may not be able to interpret the requirements of their assignments, even when assessment

briefings and marking criteria are provided. Sadler (2010) suggests that students may lack the tacit knowledge to understand the requirements. The findings of this study suggest that sometimes a more fundamental issue might be at play: if there is a disparity between student and lecturer conceptions of knowledge and learning, the student may be ill-equipped to interpret and fulfil the requirements of the assessment or to understand and be able to act on feedback.

6.2.2 Engagement with Feedback can be Problematic even when Perceptions of Knowledge and Learning are Aligned

In some cases there was close alignment between a student's and the lecturer's perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment. However, this did not necessarily lead to greater engagement with feedback and the findings suggest that other factors might sometimes have a greater impact.

6.2.3 Student Engagement with Feedback does not Relate to their Approach to Learning

It might be expected that students adopting a surface approach to learning would demonstrate less engagement with feedback than those adopting a deep approach, whilst those adopting a strategic approach might be expected to demonstrate the greatest engagement with feedback. However, the findings do not match this expectation, suggesting that, for some students, other factors were at play. Some factors have been implicated in this study and are discussed below.

6.2.4 Lack of Time is the Most Significant Influence on Lecturer's Use of Feedback and this can Impact on the Clarity of Feedback Comments

The most significant factor influencing the lecturer's use of feedback was time. In particular, there was a clear tension between a quick marking turnaround and the provision of detailed feedback. Brevity of feedback comments is understandable given the constraints of a quick marking turnaround. However, students in this study sometimes struggled to understand the feedback, suggesting that the price of brevity might sometimes be clarity, a view supported by Mutch (2003). James' strategy for dealing with this tension was to provide brief written comments, supplemented by further verbal feedback to the whole class in which he would address common issues. However, students varied in the extent to which student found the class feedback valuable.

6.2.5 The Tone of Feedback Comments has a Variable Impact on Student Engagement

Perhaps related to the time constraint was the tendency for James to use brief and often categorical comments, although he tended to use a more mitigated tone on assignments at the lower grade range. This is of particular interest because Mutch (2003) argues that mitigated comments may be less clear and more open to misinterpretation by students. In this study, students did struggle to understand some of the comments on their assignments, regardless of the tone of the feedback.

Some authors advocate for feedback being reconceptualised as a dialogue (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; Cramp, 2011). The extent to which dialogue has been evident in this study is variable, with some students readily discussing

their work with the lecture or with classmates, and others reluctant to engage in discussion. Furthermore, the use of a more conversational tone of feedback such as couching comments as questions can be counterproductive.

6.2.6 Implicit Developmental Feedback may not be Recognised by Students as being Helpful for Future Learning

The feedback that James provided on student assignments did not *explicitly* refer to the next step in learning. James' comments tended to focus on skills, which Brown and Glover (2006) suggest can be considered to be developmental. However, students in the current study often seemed unable to interpret such *implicit* developmental feedback in a way that could help them to make improvements. This finding offers one possible explanation for the disparity that was found between some students' espoused views about feedback and their practice.

6.2.7 Overall Conclusion: Multiple Factors Impact on how Students Engage with Feedback

There seems to be a complex interplay between influences, with any one factor impacting on different students in different ways. For example, affective influences appeared to have minimal effect on some students but a profound effect on others; and the use of questions in feedback might prompt one student to discuss the feedback further, but for another might be interpreted as indicating that the work was bad. This finding is in keeping with Sadler's (2010) view of feedback as a complex process: it is unlikely that a single solution will provide the answer to improving the value of feedback to learning.

The next section offers some recommendations for practice around assessment and feedback, based on the findings highlighted above.

6.3 Recommendations

6.3.1 Embedding Discussion about the Nature of Knowledge and Learning

The findings of this study suggest that a misalignment of lecturer's and students' perceptions of learning and epistemological beliefs can impact on how students engage with feedback. By embedding an exploration of the nature of knowledge and learning into courses, lecturers might help students to better navigate the requirements of their courses and better utilise the feedback that they receive. Indeed, suggestions in the literature for improving engagement with feedback, such as explanations about how to use feedback (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Rust, O'Donovan, & Price, 2005) or the introduction of peer assessment activities (Sadler, 2010), might benefit from being prefaced by an exploration of the nature of knowledge and learning.

6.3.2 Awareness of the Impact of Feedback Tone

The effect of feedback tone on student engagement with feedback is variable, but for some students can have a significant and sometimes unintended impact. The findings of this study suggest that it might pay for lecturers to be mindful of the tone of their comments, but at the same time be aware that the impact of tone is variable and a 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to be successful. One approach might be to develop student evaluations that specifically address

students' preferences and experience around feedback early in a course, in order to better understand which approaches might be most effective.

6.3.3 Feedback as Dialogue

It is apparent from this study that some student prefers working alone and do not generally want to engage in dialogue with the lecturer or with classmates. Thus, whilst some authors argue that feedback should provide opportunities for dialogue (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), consideration might be given to those students who prefer working independently. Such consideration might take the form of opportunities for written discussion via e-mail or other online forums, or suggestions for individual engagement with feedback such as encouraging students to develop action plans or SWOT analyses.

6.3.4 Making Feed Forward Explicit

The findings of this study would suggest that some students struggle to recognise feedback that could help them to improve their future work, even when the student recognises in theory that feedback can be developmental. This finding supports the contention that if feedback is to meet its potential as feed forward or as helping students to improve their learning, the comments need to be explicitly developmental (Evans, 2013; Mutch, 2003). Given the time constraints that lecturers face when marking assignments, strategies would need to be adopted that do not require additional time: for example, marking sheets could incorporate an additional box clearly signalling 'ideas for improvement next time'. Another idea is to invite students to specify what

aspect of their assignment they would like feedback on when submitting the assignment (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010).

6.4 Limitations

The main limitation of this study was that initial difficulties in recruiting students meant that the original intention of the case encompassing the lecturer and some of his students in one course had to be expanded to encompass students enrolled in two courses. Whilst this did provide an opportunity to explore differences in student engagement across two educational levels, the style of feedback delivery differed for the two assignments, making documentary analysis of the feedback more difficult. Documentary analysis was further restricted by the brevity of written feedback comments, although the richness of the interview data compensated for this.

A further limitation was that students self-reported their approach to learning and there was a tendency for some students to focus on learning styles, in particular visual and auditory styles, perhaps because these are widely known. Determining students' approach to learning therefore relied on extrapolation from students' perceptions of assessment. The tendency for students to focus on learning preferences is consistent with the findings of other studies, which found that people readily express a preference for how information is presented to them (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2009).

Qualitative case study research emphasises particularisation over generalisation (Stake, 1995) and it is up to the reader to determine the applicability of the findings beyond the particular case (Yin, 2003). Since this study explored the use of feedback by one lecturer and his students within one

programme of study in a single institution, findings may vary in a different context and the extent to which the reader is able to apply the findings to their own context may be limited.

6.5 Future Research

This small scale exploratory case study has indicated that lecturer's and students' perceptions of teaching and learning may affect student engagement with feedback. As a result of the findings and discussion, a number of areas were identified that could form a basis for future research.

- **Epistemological beliefs and feedback:** Lecturer's and students' epistemological beliefs were not directly explored in this study, but the findings suggested that there might be implications for a student's ability to navigate course assessments and to engage with feedback when those beliefs are misaligned. A further study might specifically explore this relationship and the potential impact on student learning.
- **Affective impact of feedback**: Whilst other studies advocate for the use of a mitigated or a conversational tone, suggesting that a categorical tone can be de-motivational (Brown & Glover, 2006), the findings of this study do not fully support this view. Furthermore, whilst couching comments as questions might be seen as a way of promoting dialogue, in this study the strategy produced some unanticipated results in terms of affective impact. The influence of feedback tone on student engagement would appear to be more complex than suggested by Brown and Glover (2006), suggesting a need for further research. Evans (2013) has also noted that the affective impact of feedback is a neglected area of research.

- **Factors affecting students' approaches to learning:** The findings of this study suggest that multiple factors influence the learning approach that students adopt. Further research might help to identify and explore the interaction between different factors.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This exploratory case study has shown that there can be disparities between lecturer's and students' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment, and that when views are misaligned, this can impact on student engagement with feedback. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest even when students recognise the potential for feedback to help improve their learning, this does not always translate into practice. Multiple factors would appear to impact on how both lecturers and students use feedback, providing several possible avenues for future investigation.

In conclusion, the topic of feedback is something that students find important and so perhaps it is fitting that the last word should go to one of the students who gave up her time to take part in this study and share her thoughts and experiences:

> "The benefit of the feedback is when it's specific, when you can apply it either to your future learning or it corrects an error in the learning of that particular assignment… it's also about confidence I think with your lecturer, that they're looking at your work and taking the time to give you that feedback" (S7).

Appendices

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheets

Appendix Two: Participant Consent Form

Appendix Three: Participant Interview Schedules

Appendix Four: Perceptions of Learning: Students

Appendix Five: Analysis of Engagement with Feedback

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheets

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TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

An exploration of the extent to which student engagement with feedback is influenced by lecturer and student views of teaching, learning and assessment.

LECTURER INFORMATION SHEET

Hi, my name is Sue Palfreyman and I am a lecturer and programme leader in the Department of Osteopathy. I have a particular interest in the formative role of assessment and specifically the use of feedback as a tool to help learning. This research project aims to explore the relationship between student and lecturer views on teaching, learning and assessment and how feedback is used as a tool for learning. This research is part of my studies towards a Master of Education (Adult Education) at Massey University. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me by email at spalfreyman@unitec.ac.nz

Project Description and Invitation

Although the importance of formative assessment for improving student learning is widely recognized and feedback is acknowledged as an important element of good teaching practice, there seems to be a mismatch between lecturer and student perceptions of feedback. This research will explore student perceptions of and engagement with feedback and how it relates to student and lecturer views about teaching, learning and assessment.

The study will involve two stages:
1. Analysis of feedback provided on a specific assignment
2. Interviews with you as the lecturer and with students enrolled in one of your courses to explore (a) general views about teaching, learning, assessment and feedback; (b) why you as the lecturer used specific approaches to feedback in a particular assignment; and (c) how students perceived and engaged with that feedback

You are invited to take part in this study by allowing access to marked assignments and by participating in one interview. The interview will take approximately 1.5 hours but will provide valuable information about how your views on teaching, learning and assessment informs your use of feedback and how you intend your students to use the feedback that you give them to aid their learning.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

The research is using a case study approach which will explore feedback on student assignments provided by a single lecturer and how those students perceive and utilize that feedback. As such, I am seeking to recruit an experienced lecturer with an interest in the use of formative assessment and feedback as a tool for teaching and learning. Your name has been put forward as a possible participant by [*insert details here – eg Academic Advisors in Te Puna Ako or HoD*]

I am looking for an experienced lecturer with a teaching qualification (eg Unitec's Certificate in Higher Education) and an interest in formative assessment as a tool for learning. You would need to be teaching an undergraduate course in semester one this year, in which your students complete and receive written feedback on an assignment within the first five weeks of the course. Your students enrolled in this course will also be invited to participate.

Project Procedures

You are invited to take part in this study by participating in one interview which will take approximately 1.5 hours. You will be invited to discuss your ideas about teaching, learning and assessment and the role of formative assessment and feedback in learning. You will also be asked to discuss the feedback that you gave to students on a specific assignment and how you would envisage the students using that feedback for learning.

Data Management

The interview will be audio recorded electronically. A verbatim transcript of the discussion will be produced using a professional transcription service. A copy of the transcript will be e-mailed to you and you will have an opportunity to edit or clarify any of your comments.

All recordings and transcripts will be stored by the researcher in password-protected files or in a locked filing cabinet. Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the data. All data will be destroyed five years after publication of the thesis.

Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The identity of the department and institution will be removed from all discussion and publication of results.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any stage during the interview;*
- *withdraw from the study at any stage;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*

A summary of the project findings will be e-mailed to you at the conclusion of the study

Project Contacts

Researcher:	Supervisors:
Sue Palfreyman Department of Osteopathy Unitec Institute of Technology Private Bag 92025 Victoria St West AUCKLAND 1142	Associate Professor Nick Zepke & Dr Peter Rawlins School of Educational Studies College of Education Massey University Private Bag 11-222 Palmerston North 4442
Tel: 09 815 4321 ext 5196 E-mail: spalfreyman@unitec.ac.nz	E-mail: n.zepke@massey.ac.nz p.rawlins@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 13/01. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact Dr Nathan Matthews, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 80877, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

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STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Hi, my name is Sue Palfreyman and I am a lecturer and programme leader in the Department of Osteopathy. I have a particular interest in feedback as a tool to help learning. This research project aims to explore the relationship between student and lecturer views on teaching, learning and assessment and how feedback is used as a tool for learning. This research is part of my studies towards a Master of Education (Adult Education) at Massey University. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me by email at spalfreyman@unitec.ac.nz

What is this research about?

This research will compare student and lecturer views about teaching, learning and assessment and in particular what students think about and how they use the feedback that they get from their lecturer.

Why have you been invited to take part?

All students who are enrolled in [*insert course code and name*] this semester have been invited to take part.

What's involved?

The study is in two stages: firstly, I would look at the feedback that you received on a particular assignment that you will write as part of the course requirements for [*insert course name/code*]. I'd then invite you to take part in an informal interview where we would talk about your thoughts on teaching, learning and assessment in general and more specifically about the feedback that you'd received on the assignment: what you thought about it and how you think it helps your learning. This would take about one hour and would take place at Unitec, but outside your class times.

I'm also interviewing your lecturer as part of the study, to talk about their thoughts, including the feedback that they gave to students on the specific assignment. Best efforts will be made to ensure that students are not identified, but it is possible that a particular piece of feedback was only provided to one student and so confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Why would you want to be involved?

This study gives you an opportunity to let your lecturers know what you think about teaching and learning and about the feedback that you get on your assessments. It will provide valuable information that can help us to improve the design of our courses and assessments.

Is it anonymous?

Your lecturer will not be told which students take part in the study at any stage, although please be aware that it might be possible for your lecturer to identify you if a particular piece of feedback was only provided to one student in the class. Your name will not be used on any reports or other publications that are produced from this study.

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will send you a copy of the transcript via e-mail so that you can check that it is accurate and you can clarify any points that you made or add anything else that you want to include.

I will store all recordings and transcripts securely in password-protected files or in a locked filing cabinet. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. All data will be destroyed five years after publication of the thesis.

If you would like to receive a summary of the findings of the study, I will e-mail this to you once the study is completed.

Your Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any stage during the interview;*
- *withdraw from the study at any stage;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.*

Project Contacts

Researcher:

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E-mail: spalfreyman@unitec.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Associate Professor Nick Zepke & Dr Peter Rawlins
School of Educational Studies
College of Education
Massey University
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442

E-mail: n.zepke@massey.ac.nz
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Appendix Two: Participant Consent Form

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PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I agree to the assignment and feedback being reviewed by the researcher.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

Appendix Three: Participant Interview Schedules

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INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

I want to hear about your own thoughts about teaching, learning and assessment, and the role of feedback within that. I will use a semi-structured approach in the interview: the following questions are therefore a guide rather than something that we have to strictly adhere to.

General Views:

What approaches do you use in teaching?

What do you see as the role of assessment within teaching and learning?

What do you see as the purpose of feedback?

What kinds of feedback do you give to students?

What do you hope to achieve in providing written feedback?

What do you want your students to do with the feedback that they receive?

Why do you think students sometimes seem to ignore feedback?

With regard to specific feedback on the assignments that were reviewed:

What factors influenced the written feedback that you provided?

What did you intend the student to do with the feedback?

What other feedback did you offer (in addition to written feedback)?

What do you think the students have done with the feedback? What makes you think that?

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INTERVIEW SCHEDULE - STUDENT

I want to hear about your own thoughts about teaching, learning and assessment, and your experience of feedback. The following questions are a guide rather than something that we have to rigidly stick to.

General:

What approaches do you use in learning?

What approaches do you use in preparing for exams and assignments?

What do you think is the purpose of assessment?

Do you generally collect assignments or exam papers? What do you do with them?

What do you think is the purpose of feedback?

What kinds of feedback have you experienced?

What kinds do you find useful? Why?

What kinds are not useful? Why?

With regard to specific feedback on the assignment that was reviewed for this study:

What did you do with your assignment when it was given back to you?

What else does your lecturer do when you've got your assignment back?

What kind of feedback did you receive? (eg was the focus on correcting errors or suggestions for future development?)

How much time did you spend reviewing the feedback?

What have you done with the feedback so far?

How do you think that feedback will affect your future learning?

Appendix Four: Perceptions of Learning: Students

Key: Strongly indicated Weakly indicated

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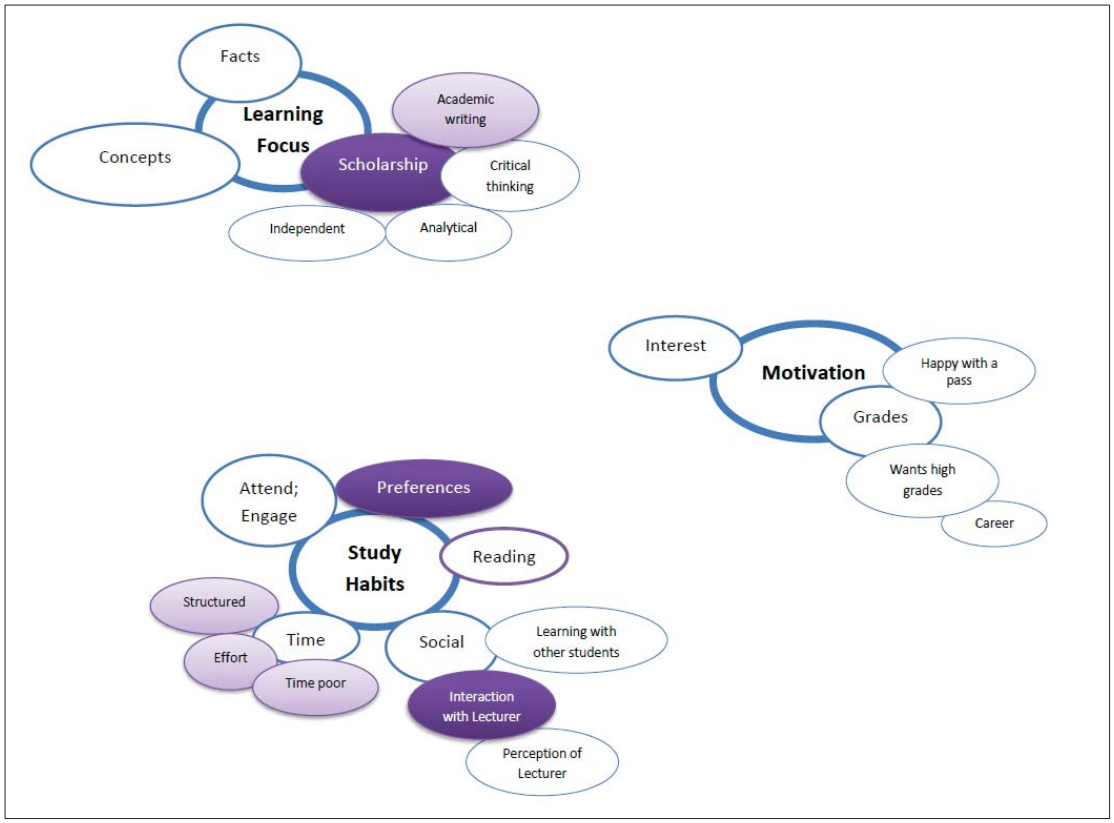

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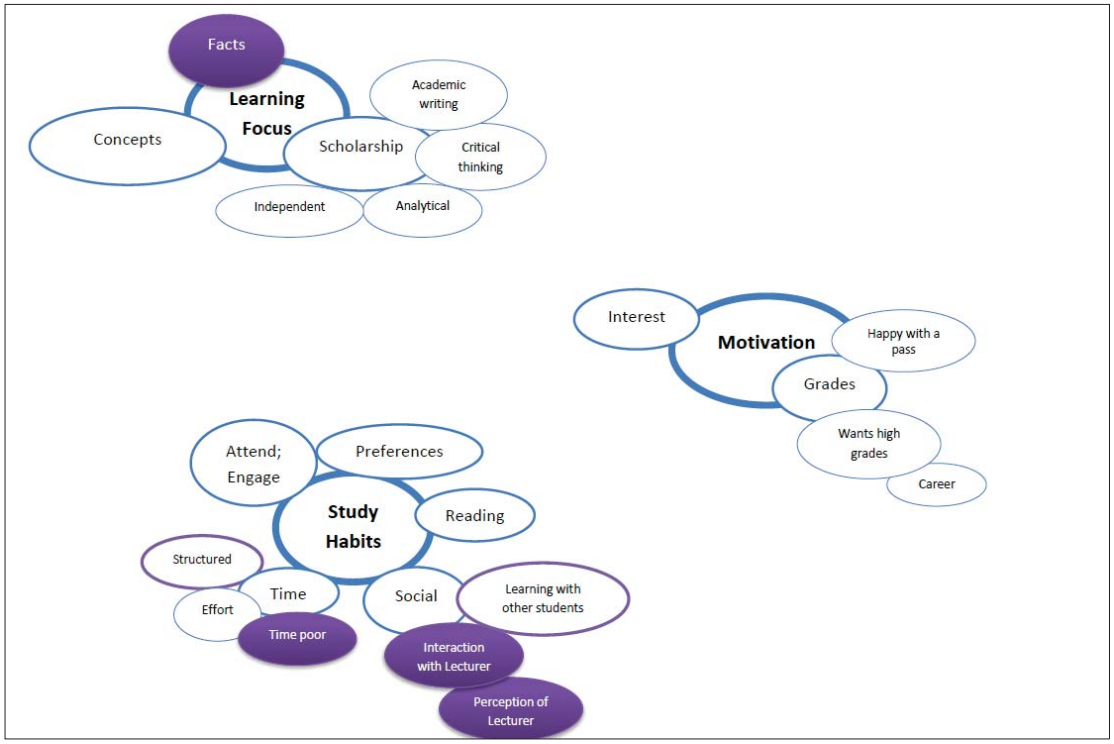

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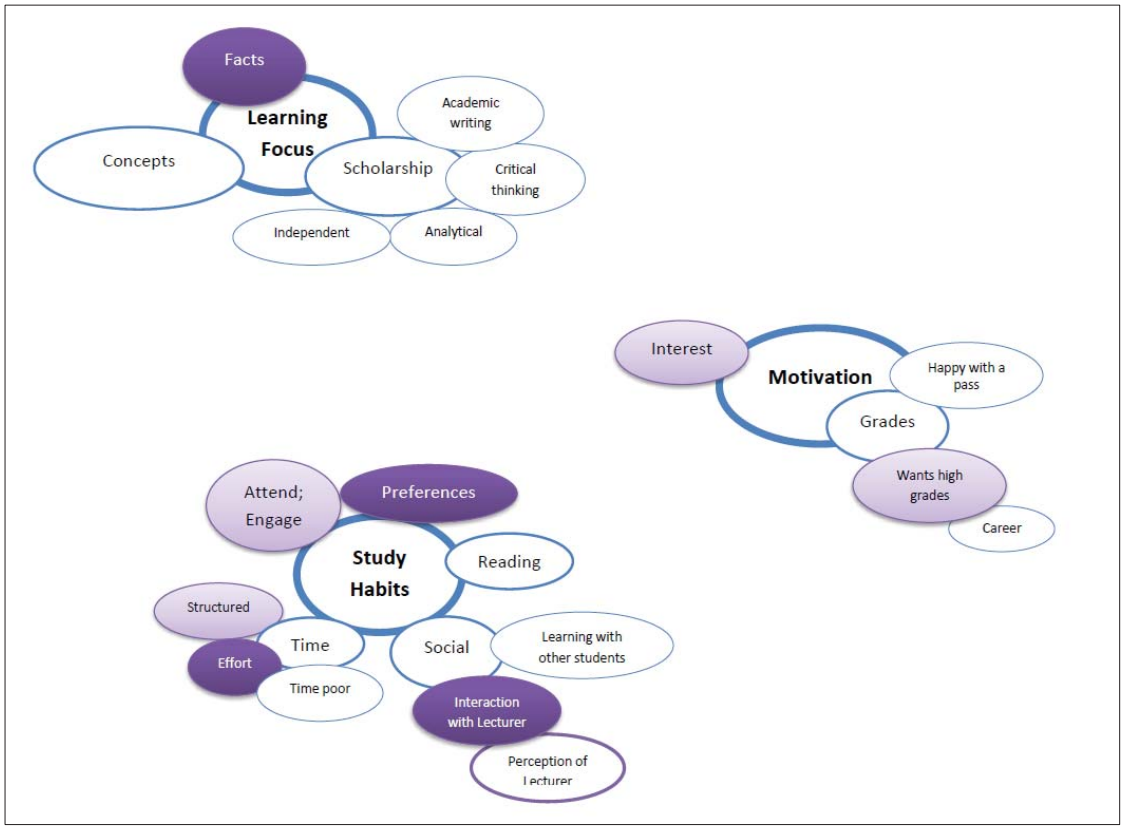
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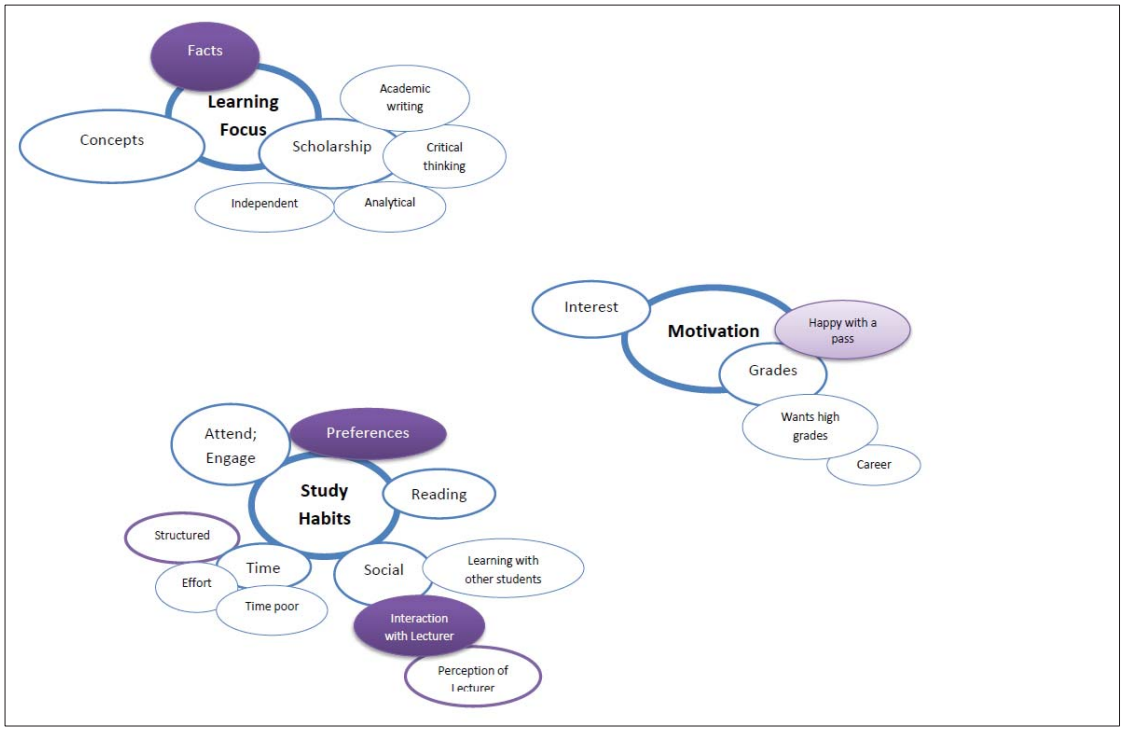
Learning Focus
Academic writing
Concepts
Scholarship
Critical thinking
Independent
Analytical
Interest
Motivation
Happy with a pass
Grades
Wants high grades
Career
Attend; Engage
Preferences
Study Habits
Reading
Structured
Time
Social
Learning with other students
Effort
Time poor
Interaction with Lecturer
Perception of Lecturer

S4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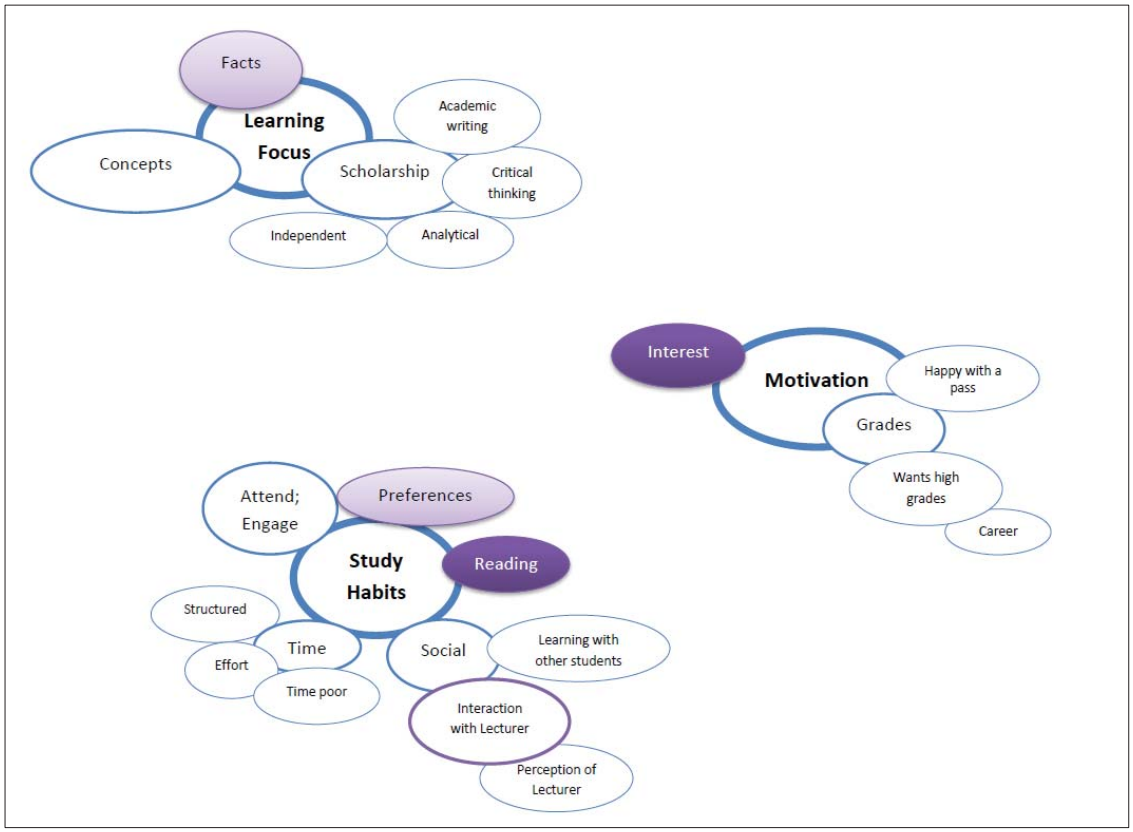
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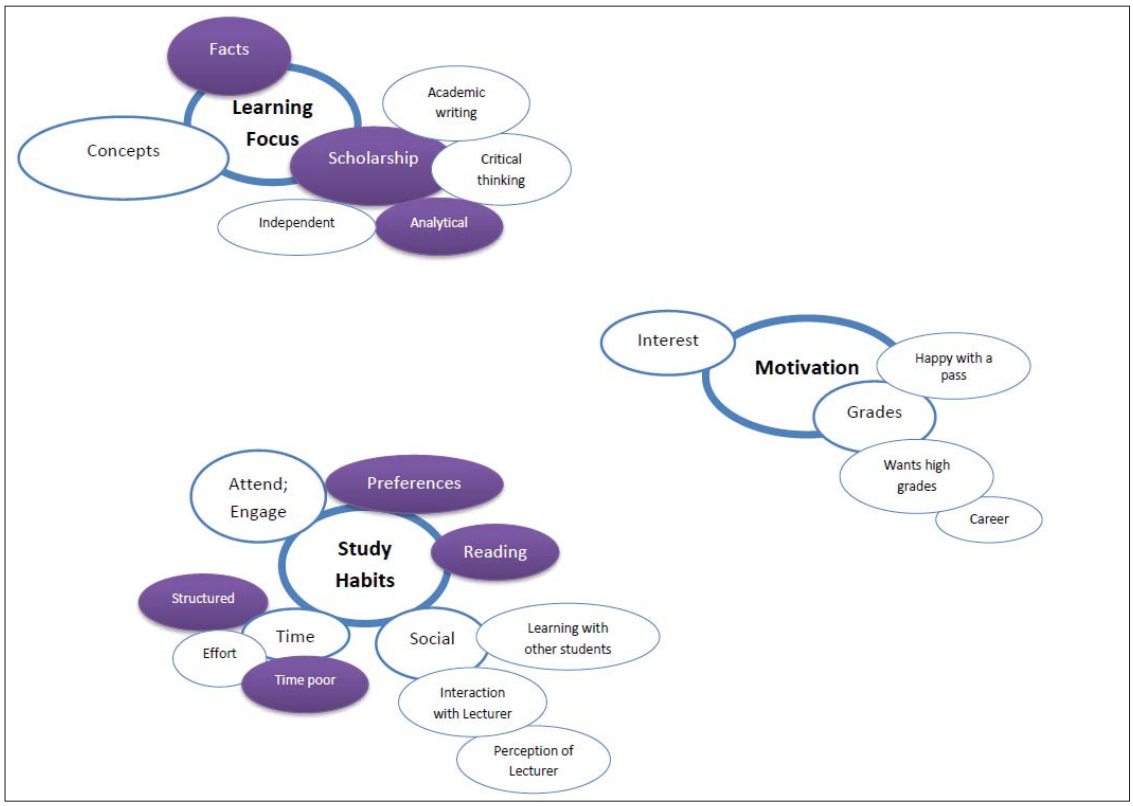
S6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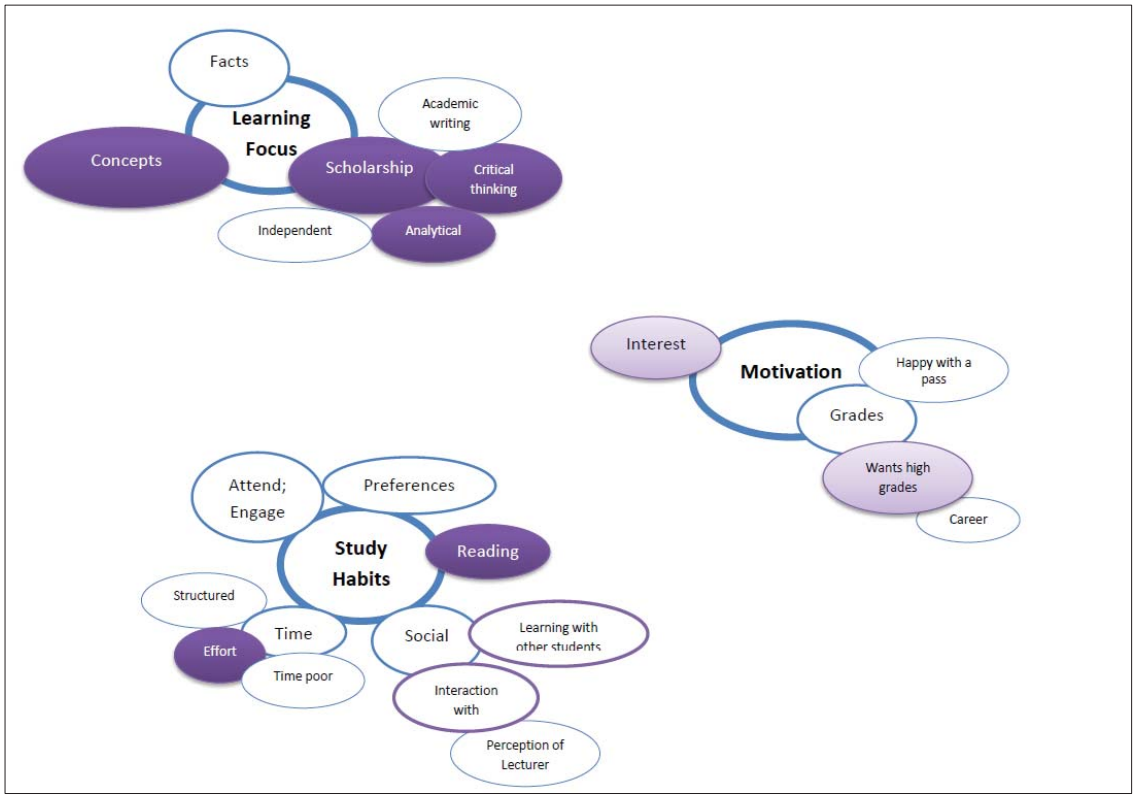
S7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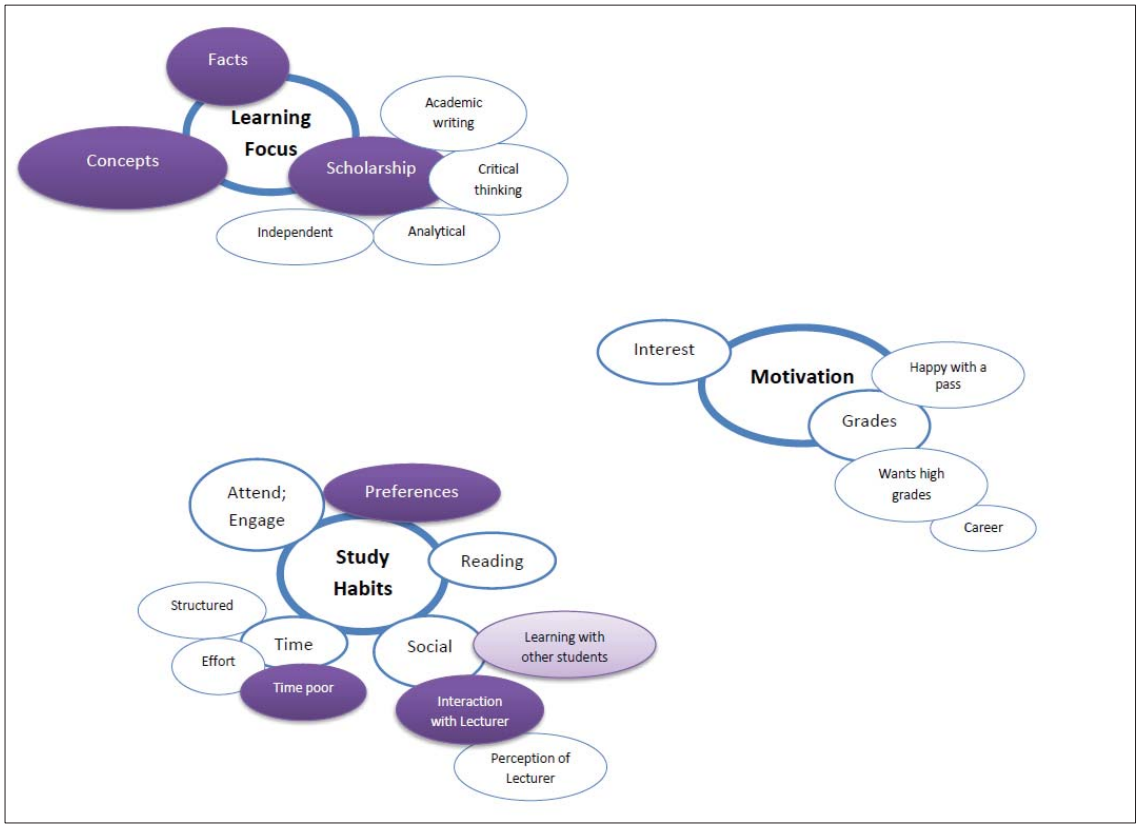
Perception of Lecturer

S8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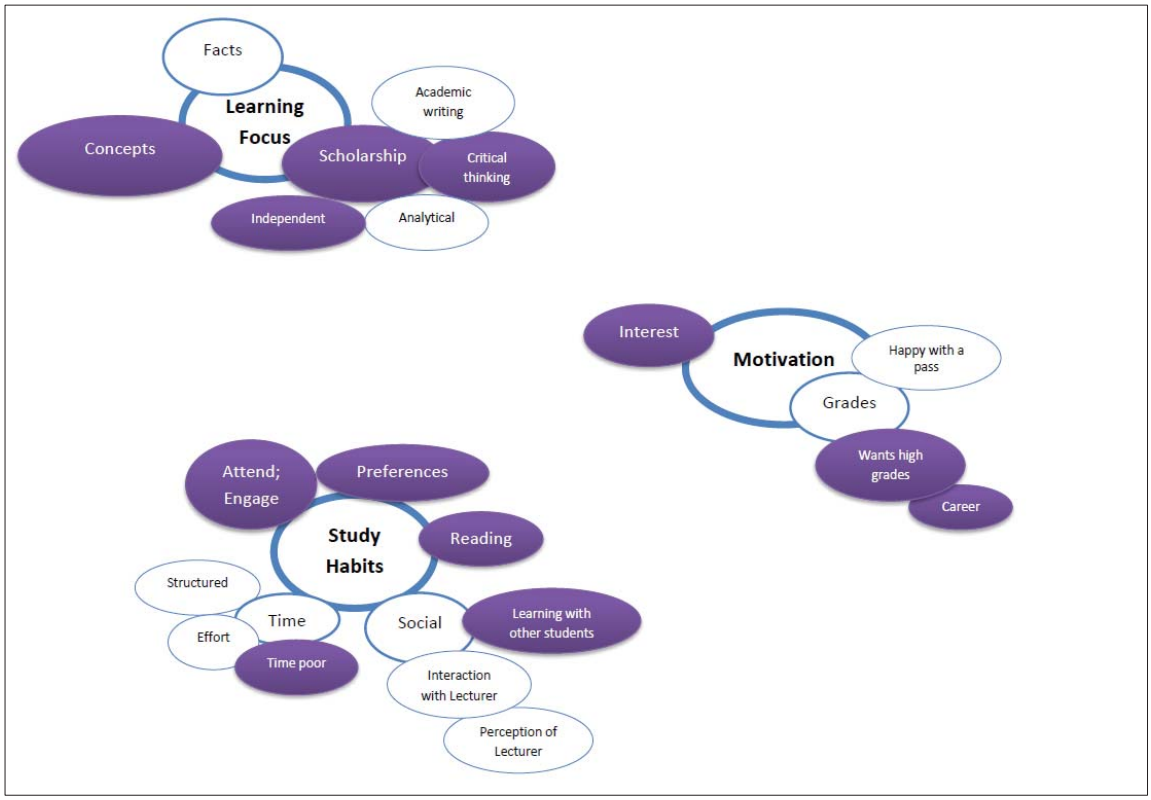
Perception of Lecturer

S9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Perception of Lecturer

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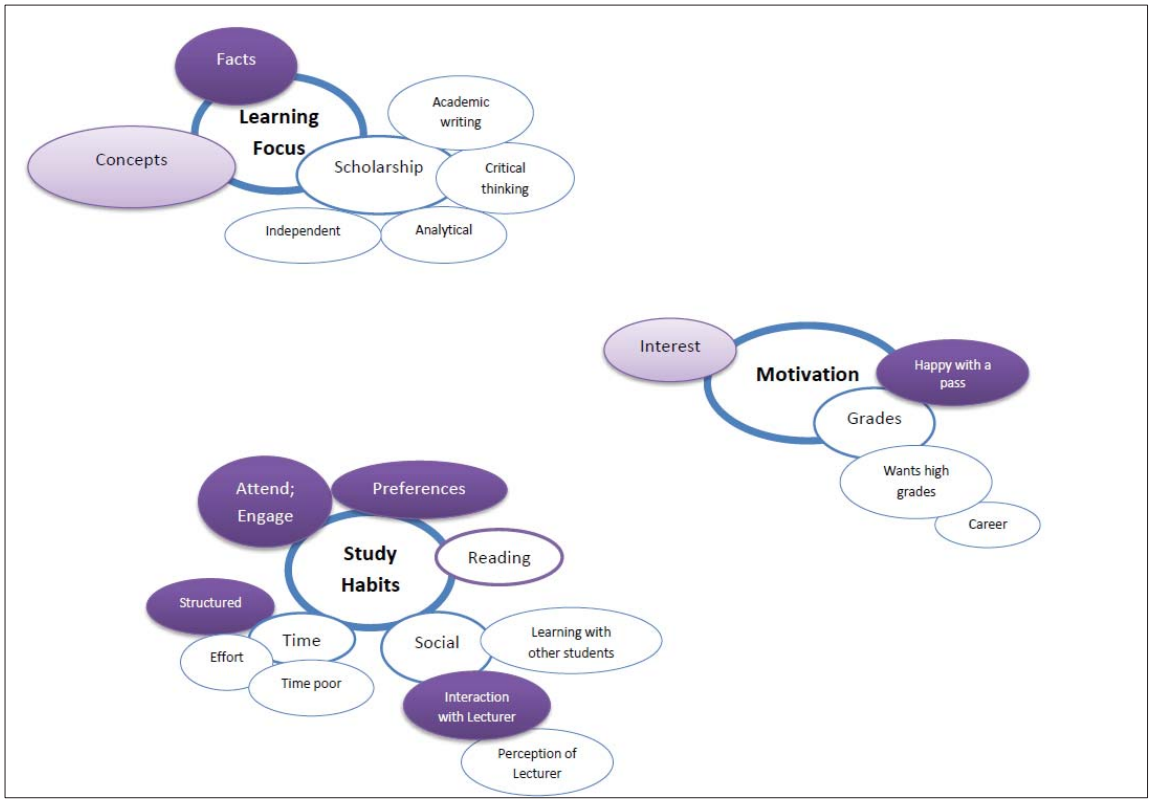
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Perception of Lecturer

Appendix Five: Analysis of Engagement with Feedback

Grade-Dependent, Feedback as Justification

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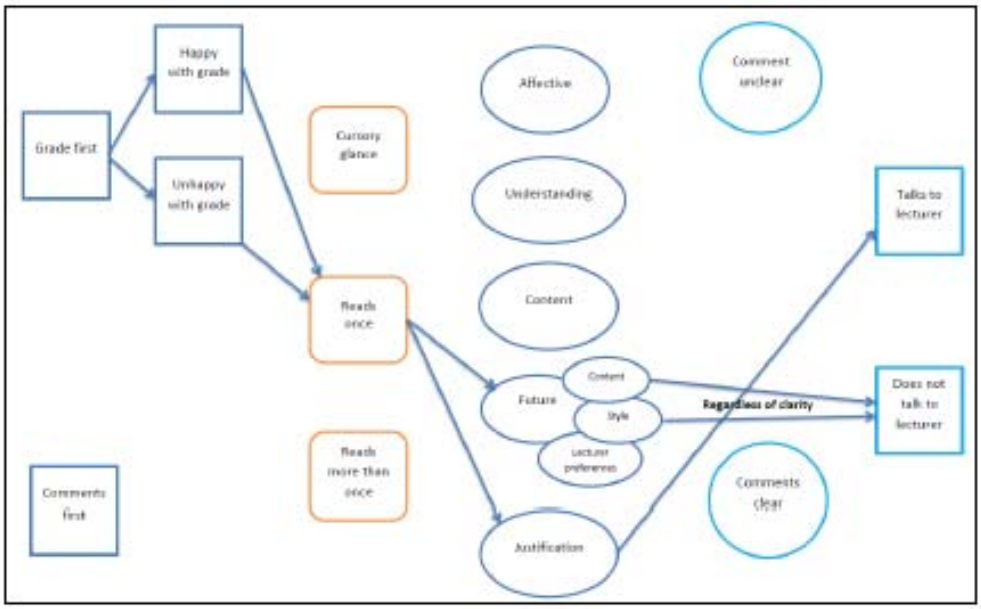

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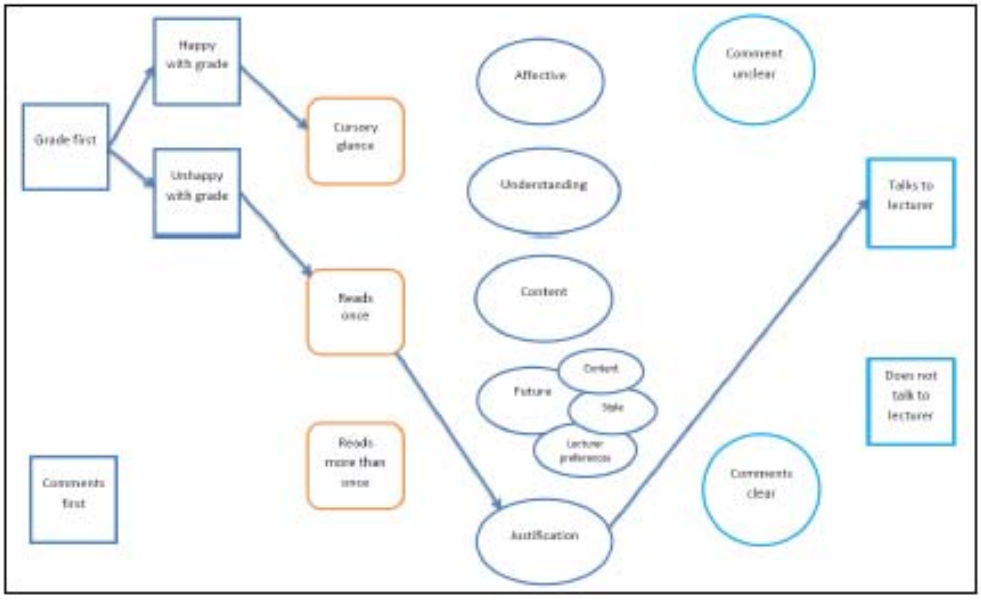

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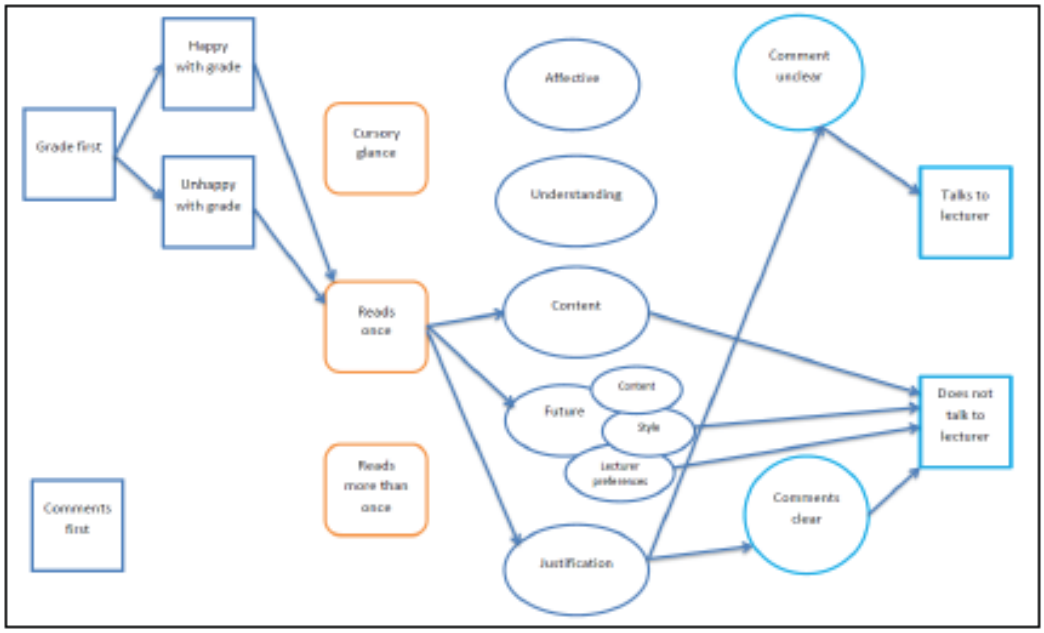
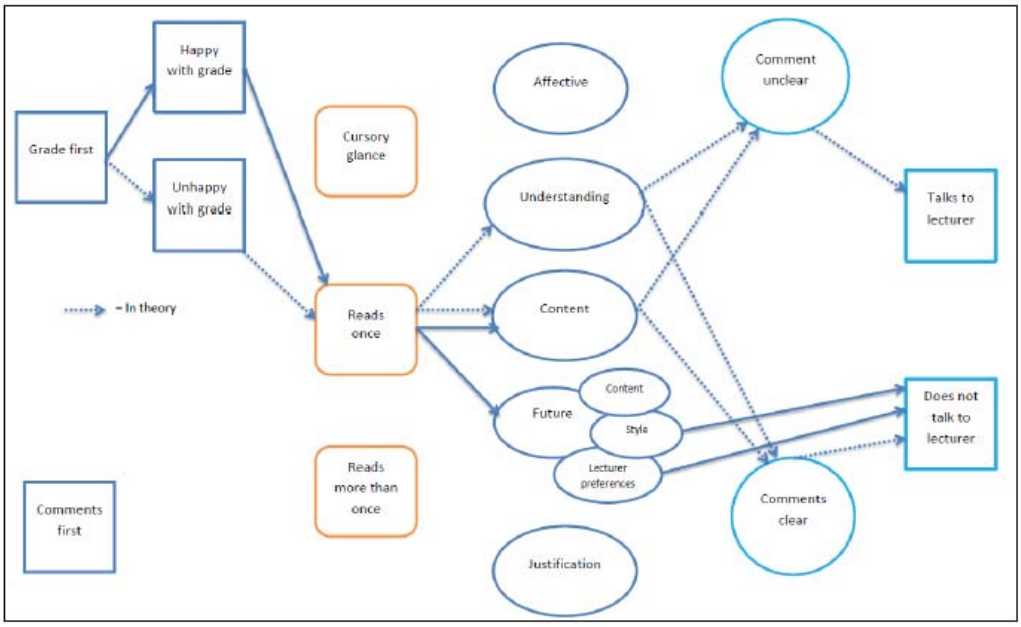


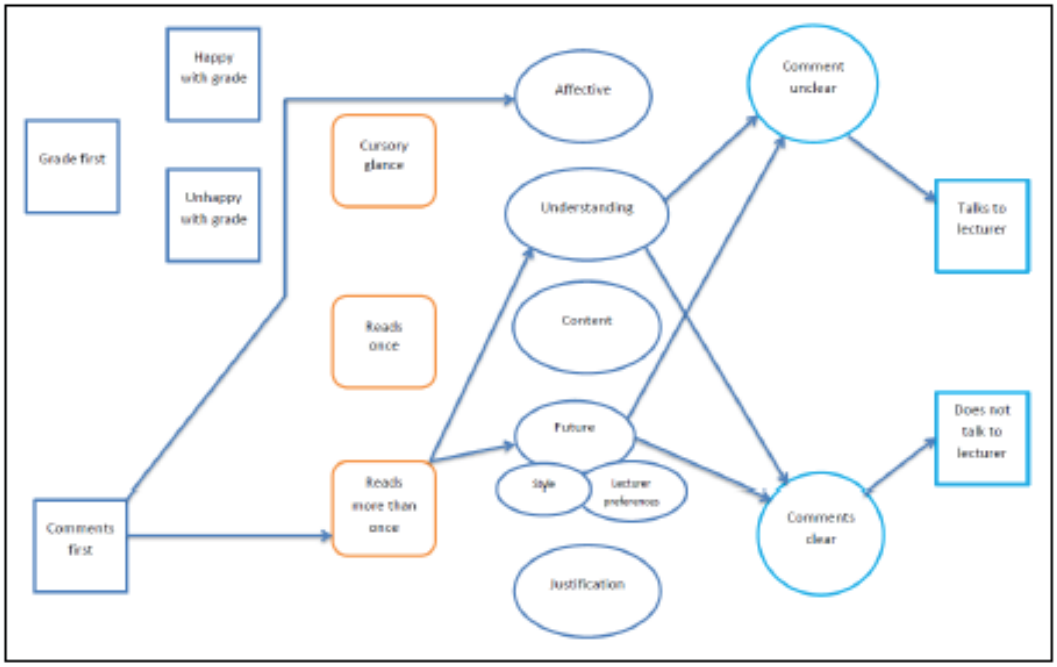
Grade-dependent – Minimal Engagement

S6



Grade-Independent Engagement

S1



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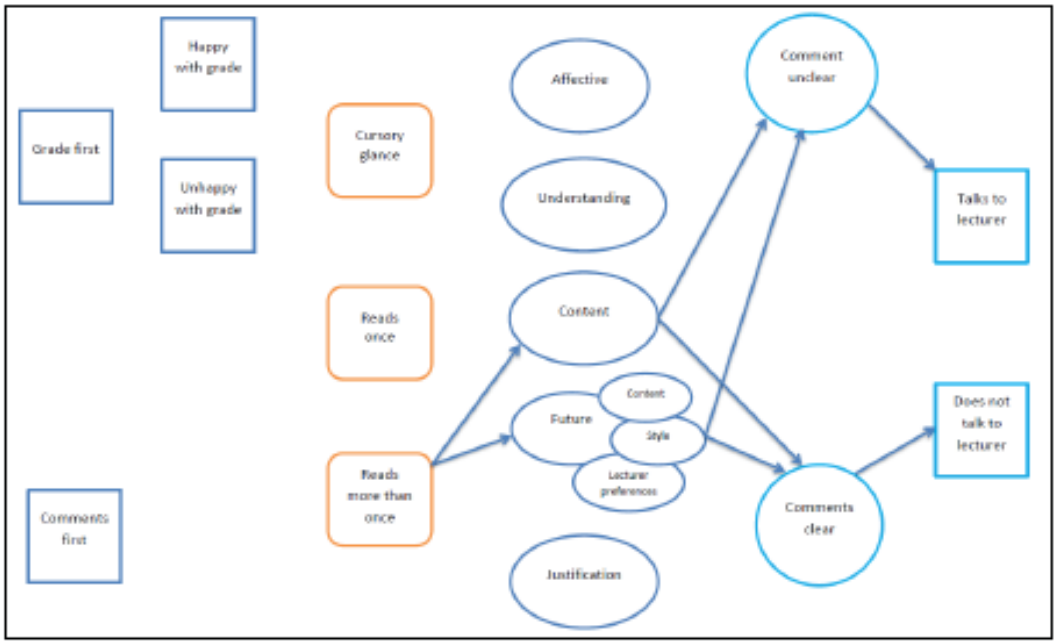

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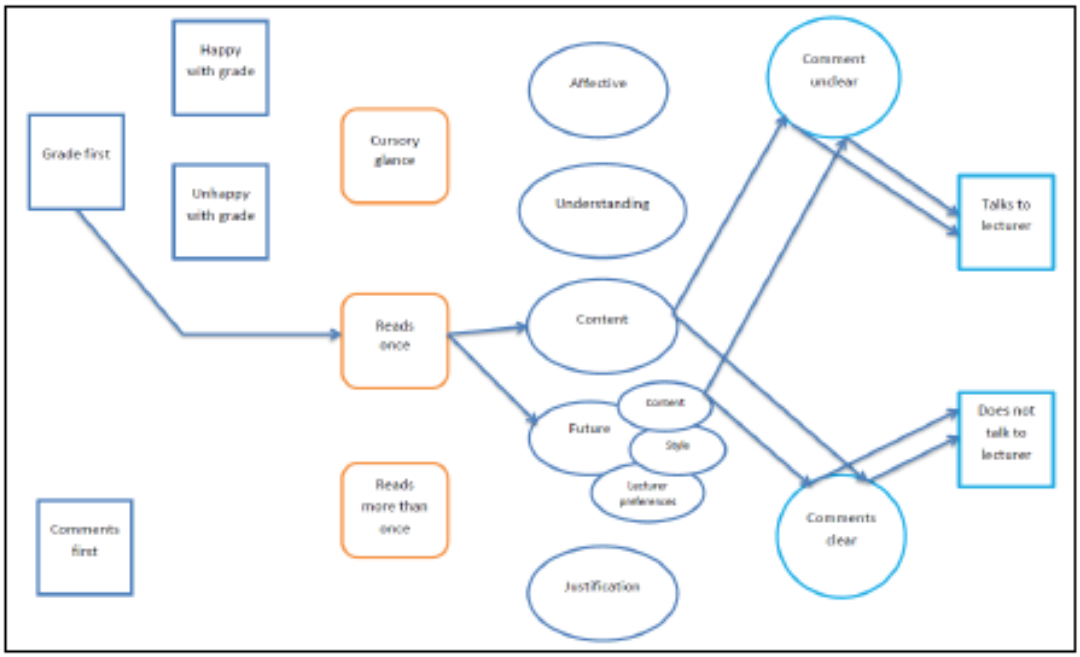
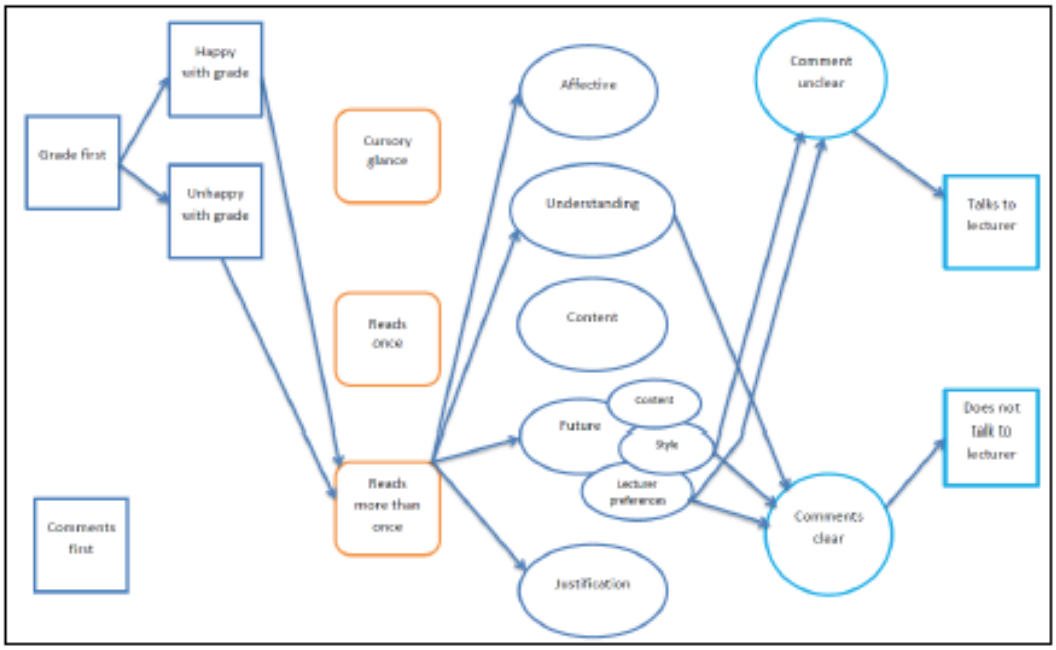
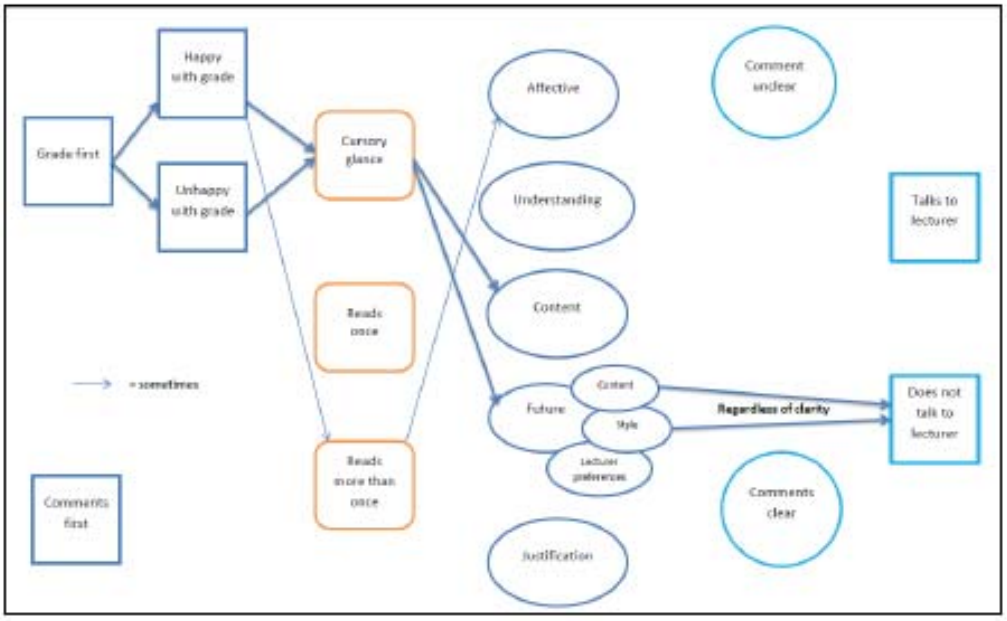

Happy with grade
Grade first
Unhappy with grade
Cursory glance
Affective
Comment unclear
Understanding
Talks to lecturer
Reads once
Content
Future
content
Style
Lecturer preferences
Does not talk to lecturer
Reads more than once
Comments first
Comments clear
Justification

S7


Happy with grade
Grade first
Unhappy with grade
Cursory glance
Affective
Comment unclear
Understanding
Talks to lecturer
Reads once
Content
Future
content
Style
Lecturer preferences
Does not talk to lecturer
Reads more than once
Comments first
Comments clear
Justification

Minimal Engagement, Affective Impact

S5



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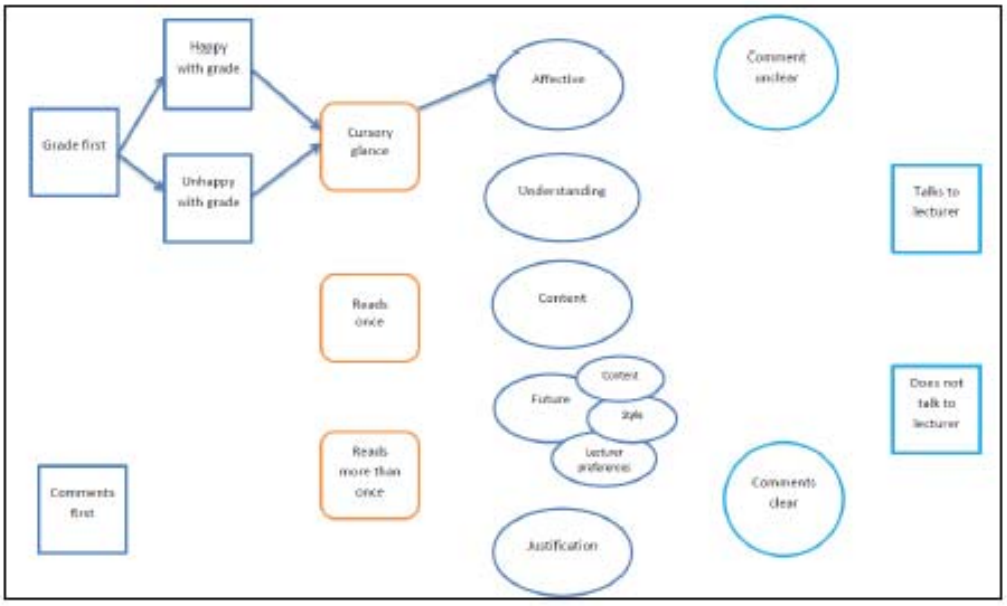

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