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‘I Might as Well Give Up’: self-esteem and mature students’ feelings about feedback on assignments

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ABSTRACT Lecturers working with adult students balance the need to provide feedback and assess students’ work with a concern to protect vulnerable students. This article is based on a small-scale quantitative research project that looked at Access students’ responses to feedback on assignments. All students found the first assignment problematic, but thereafter great variations were found, which related to varying levels of self-esteem. Students varied in their attitudes to receiving feedback, their perceptions of the messages they were receiving and whether it was important to them that they receive positive comments. They also differed in the extent of the impact of the feedback, for some students, it was ‘only work’; for others, their whole sense of self was at stake.

Assessing students’ work is a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, there is the need to grade students’ work and provide feedback: on the other, a concern to protect psychologically vulnerable students and foster positive self-esteem. This dilemma, faced by teachers in all parts of the education system, and indeed in less formal kinds of learning, can be particularly acute when working with adult learners. The research which provides the basis of this article started with a desire to learn from students themselves how they react to feedback, here defined as comments (verbal and written) and grading in response to assignments.

The Role of Feedback in Adult Learning

No one seriously doubts the necessity for feedback in learning. As Diana Laurillard has argued, all learning involves feedback and “action without feedback is completely unproductive for a learner” (Laurillard, 1993, p. 61). The danger however is that the value of the feedback will be ‘eclipsed by learners’ reactions to scores or grades’ (Race, 1995, p. 67).

As well as providing a necessary element in learning, assessment is important for other reasons. The majority of students in this research are using their course as a means of moving on into higher education or professional training. Understandably,
the higher education institutions require assessment of their academic ability and skills. Indication of success is important to the students themselves as a measure of their suitability for continued education and to give them the confidence to take the next step.

I have suggested that the tensions around grading work and giving feedback are greater for lecturers teaching mature students. Knowles (1988) argues that receiving grades is contrary to the very nature of adult development:

Probably the crowning instance of incongruity between traditional educational practice and the adult’s self-concept of self-directivity is the act of a teacher giving a grade to a student. Nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult; it is the ultimate sign of disrespect and dependency, as the one who is being judged experiences it. (Knowles, 1988 p. 88)

Hanson’s (1998) research on adult students, however, found a more complex situation in which students were “prepared to suspend their adulthood at the door or the institution” and “only too willing to submit themselves to its constraints” (p. 103).

Given the possible contradictions between adult status and being judged and directed by others, I hoped to gain some insights into students’ perceptions which might in turn form a basis for later exploration of the best means of supporting students returning to education as adult learners.

Self-esteem

Experience in the classroom and as a personal tutor led me to expect variations in students’ reactions and I wanted some way of making sense of any differences the research might reveal. The concept of self-esteem is used here to loosely refer to individuals’ judgment of self-worth (Coopersmith, 1981; Lawrence 1981; Bandura, 1997) and degree of self-acceptance (Statman, 1993). Since people with differing levels of self-esteem experience the same or similar events differently (Coopersmith, 1981) it seemed likely that self-esteem would influence students’ reactions to the feedback they receive on their assignments.

In the analysis of the data, students are characterised as being of high, medium and low self-esteem. Although this does not imply any real, fixed or scientifically proven distinction between the students, it served as a convenient and, I believe, useful label through which to think about the differences which clearly emerged from the research.

Researching Students’ Perceptions

The research consisted of a series of semi-structured interview with students on an Access course in a college of further and higher education. Under a newly introduced assessment scheme, students receive grades of either Level 2 or Level 3 for their work. A certain number of Level 3 grades are required to achieve the Access
certificate which qualifies students for entry to HE courses and professional courses such as Nursing or Social Work. Work at Level 2 can be re-submitted once.

The interviews were tape-recorded and carried out in college. All the students were initially asked about the very first assignment they handed in. From that point the interviews were allowed to develop in different ways. Areas covered included:

- the type of feedback students received;
- the amount of feedback;
- how they felt about negative and positive comments;
- how they felt (actually or hypothetically) about receiving a Level 2 (the lower grade);
- whether it was important to receive positive feedback at the beginning of the course;
- whether they experienced an initial reaction to feedback which changed over the course of time.

At the end of the interview the students completed a simple self-esteem scale (Burns, 1979). They were invited to comment on their responses to the scale and asked for a self-assessment of self-esteem as high, medium or low. Despite the simplicity of these procedures, the results showed considerable consistency. There was a very good match between the results from scale and the students’ self-assessment and also with my own intuitive evaluation based on classroom and tutorial knowledge and students’ responses during the interview.

The First Assignment

All of the students interviewed reported anxieties about handing in the first assignment of the course. This was expressed in terms of feeling nervous, and in some cases, scared. There appeared to be two sources of anxiety: whether or not they had done what was required and whether or not they were achieving the standard set for the course. There was a great deal of uniformity in students’ responses to questions about the first assignment. Other studies have charted this process but looked less at differences between students (Heywood, 1989; Boud, 1995).

Self-esteem and Responses to Feedback

Here, however, the uniformity ended and I was surprised by the variations I found in the way students responded to the feedback they received. As I began to analyse the differences in the data, a clear pattern emerged. The variations were not related to students’ ability (as perceived by me and in the grades they have received); nor to the grades students received for the pieces of work they discussed with me. Nor were they related to the positive or negative nature of the comments they received. However, the variations did relate to the students’ levels of self-esteem, as indicated by the self-esteem scale and their own evaluations.

In the comparisons that follow three of the students interviewed are used as exemplars of the three levels of self-esteem. Jo and Neil have been chosen because
they represent extremes of the low and high self-esteem scale; several other students could have taken Terri’s place in the middle category.

Neil’s answers to the self-esteem questionnaire match his own and my assessment of him as having high self-esteem. Neil is one of the minority of male students on the Access course and is younger than the norm, being aged 26. He has previously started Nursing training and has worked in social care for some years, before returning to education with the clear goal of becoming a social worker. At the time of the interview he had already been accepted onto a very competitive Diploma in Social Work course.

Terri represents students who fall into the middle of the self-esteem assessment, both in the scale and in her own assessment. She is 34 years old and left school at 15 with CSEs graded around three and four. There was no expectation that she would do anything other than leave school and begin work. Like Neil, she has been employed in the care sector, and now wants to train as a nurse. At the time of the interview she had not yet been interviewed or accepted onto a Nursing course.

Jo scores low on the self-esteem scale and rates herself as having low self-esteem. She is 39 years old and like Terri left school with a few low grade CSEs. She attributes this to having been brought up in the Middle East before moving to England and feeling lost in a much larger school amongst immensely more sophisticated and ‘street-wise’ young people. Her parents continued to move around and she never settled in a school. She worked in various jobs, in hairdressing, sales and as a chef. At the time of the interview she had been accepted onto a degree course at one of the universities she had applied to.

**Attitudes to Receiving Feedback**

The students with higher self-esteem started out with a positive attitude to being assessed and receiving criticism. Neil, along with other students who demonstrate high self-esteem, has a positive approach to receiving feedback: “criticism is the thing that will make me aware of the problems in my work which I can work on, and that will help me achieve my goal”. At another point in the interview, he adds, “seeing as I’m going to be going on to degree level, I need all the feedback—whether it’s positive or negative ...” This contrasts sharply with Jo’s feelings. Early on in the interview she is asked how she feels about handing in work to be assessed:

> Jo: ... it’s a bit like judge and jury. It does feel like that, because I think the thing is when you come back into education ... you almost put your teachers on this pedestal, so that if they say anything derogatory about your work, it’s absolutely annihilating.

Lecturers easily forget the extent to which students experience them as powerful (Boud, 1995). Jo’s feeling that derogatory comments on her work are “absolutely annihilating” also illustrates the extent to which people with low self-esteem are vulnerable to unfavourable judgements (Coopersmith, 1981).
Perceptions of Feedback

Something I did not expect to be so strikingly illustrated in the interviews was revealed through further comparison of Neil and Jo’s interviews. Neil had the ability to perceive even negative comments as positive whereas Jo vividly expressed the ways in which a student can perceive comments intended to be positive as negative. Neil’s work showed some (to my mind at least) quite critical comments which accompanied a Level 2 grade which he received in one of his option subjects. However, he insists that the comments are positive:

Interviewer: Did you perceive the comments as being completely positive or negative or a mixture?

Neil: I saw them as being positive because obviously it’s been quite a while since I’ve actually done essays.

Even when pressed,

Interviewer: Some comments here that could be seen as being negative?

Neil: I see them as being positive, because they’re actually being commented on, so I’m aware of them. That’s how I see most forms of comment. Feedback—I see it as being positive because they’ve put it down.

At the other end of the self-esteem continuum, Jo perceives positive comments with a higher grade as negative. Here she is talking about her first Sociology essay for which she received a Level 3 and some strongly positive comments:

Jo: Carol’s (the lecturer) was “a good start, well structured”, blah, blah, blah, “BUT”. So all I could see was the “but”, I couldn’t see the “excellent” or the “well structured” or the “it’s fluent” or anything. All I could see was, “but obviously you’ve done this wrong, you idiot”, and it took one of my friends to say, “for god’s sake, don’t be so ridiculous”.

The Need for Positive Feedback

As well as having a positive attitude to being assessed, students with high self-esteem did not feel it was important for lecturers to balance any criticism with positive feedback. This was the case with Neil. Students in the middle self-esteem category shared with those of high self-esteem a tendency to welcome feedback, but felt it was important that they receive a balance of positive and negative comments. Here, Terri illustrates this point when she is asked if it is important to her that good points are made:

Terri: Probably. I think it helps, having a little bit of “it’s not all bad. A little bit’s got to be changed and you’ve not got to do too much”.

Two other students also illustrate this tendency for high self-esteem students not to need praise, where medium self-esteem students require more of a balance.
David’s assessment indicates him to have high self-esteem; Kelly is in the middle category.

Interviewer: So you wouldn’t want people either to be nicer to you or more critical?

David: I don’t think it would help for the comments to be nicer. I don’t know about more critical—that might be more beneficial in the long term.

Interviewer: How would you feel if you had something that was all criticism?

Kelly: I think it would upset me a little bit, if it was all criticism, not “you’ve put a little bit of effort into it” or whatever. ...

The Impact of Feedback

One of the most powerful and potentially dangerous dimensions of students’ feelings about feedback is the extent it impacts on themselves as people.

Too often the distinction between giving feedback on a specific product which has been produced by a person and judging them as a person is not made. Teachers write and say things which can readily be taken as comments about the person rather than their work and in doing so they link in to the doubts and uncertainties which learners have of themselves. These remarks are often magnified at great cost to the self-esteem of the persons concerned. (Boud, 1995, p. 45)

There is a tendency for students with low self-esteem to take any comment as an indictment of themselves: high self-esteem students see the comments as bearing on their work only. We can see this difference in most extreme terms in a comparison of Jo and Neil.

Interviewer: So it sounds like when you get these comments—it isn’t just like, this is work, it’s you?

Jo: (very emphatically) Yes, yes. It’s personal.

Interviewer: It has a big impact on you?

Jo: Yes, definitely. It’s a personal thing and I think that because now I’ve come back into education and it’s the first time that I’ve done something academic really. Now I’ve put that value on myself, my value is that I’m good at this. So if I get criticised, the value’s taken away. Do you see what I mean? Oh god. There is so much that’s hinged on that, because you make yourself—I do at least—into I’m going to be good at this, I’m going to succeed at this. So then all your value is on that.

In response to a similar line of questioning, Neil is equally emphatic that, for him, ‘it’s just work’ and he contrasts himself to students who he feels ‘are coming back
basically for affirmation’. Terri falls in the middle: sometimes seeing the impact as being on her self, but more about the work. She also can distinguish between a notion of herself at the moment and herself as she continues to improve. Although there are contradictions in what she says, and it appears that she oscillates between these two stances, she contrasts with Neil who is very clear at several points in his interview that he would never consider leaving or feel personally devastated by feedback, even the comments were adverse or he did not receive the grade he wanted.

Interviewer: Would it be for you just about the work or would that spill over into your self generally? Would you think “oh, I’m hopeless”?

Terri: Sometimes it does. I think what’s the point? I’ll never improve … Sometimes I go away feeling a bit low, and what’s the point?

Interviewer: Whether you see it as being a judgment on you, or whether you see it as being, right okay, I’ll go away and improve that?

Terri: Well, I suppose I feel it as a judgment on how we are at the moment, but I think it’s a lot to do with the research and things like that. The more information you get, you can improve things. But originally its a judgment—I feel it’s a judgment on me as a person, what you’ve got up top sort of thing

Terri’s comments also show her confidence that she can improve her work. High and medium self-esteem students tended to see feedback as something they were able to act on and make use of; students with low self-esteem were more likely to feel defeated and consider leaving the course. The feedback is not seen as indicating potential and direction for change, but as a definitive judgement of ability.

Other students also show the variations in the way feedback impacts on them. Mary has high self-esteem:

Interviewer: … are you the sort of person that it becomes something about you, or is it for you just the work

Mary: Just the work. I don’t take it personally. You get upset because you’ve spent a lot of time doing it and if you’ve spent a lot of time and you’re totally on the wrong track, it’s so wasted. You’ve had all these books out and you’ve spent hours and hours reading

Interviewer: But you’re not the sort of person who would think “I’m rubbish”?

Mary: No, no. I’m saying no but you do in a way. “Are you so stupid that you didn’t realise that it wasn’t about that, that you’d missed what the assignment should have been, that you’d missed the whole idea of it?” I suppose you do, you think “am I so daft that I couldn’t see that?” when it’s been pointed out that that was what was wanted.

Interviewer: It seems to me, from these interviews, that some people
can just think it’s a judgment on my work, and some people take it really personally and just think I’m complete rubbish.

Mary: Oh no, I don’t do that. I don’t take it personally.

Although Mary is heard here accusing herself of being stupid, the accusation is specifically focused what she feels she has done wrong, not on herself as a person or her ability as a whole. Ian is another student whose self-esteem is high and he shows the same tendency to focus on a particular skill. He says, “It certainly wouldn’t have been personally targeted, because it would have meant that I wouldn’t have grasped the concept well enough, what was actually required”.

This area of difference also comes out when students talk about how they would react if they felt they had completed a piece of work well and the feedback did not match their expectations. Neil would see the problem as lying with the assessor:

Neil: ... If I had a piece of work that I was expecting a good mark? When I didn’t get a good mark, I think, well, what’s this person playing at? Why have they marked it so low? I’d see it as someone else’s problem—of marking, not my own work. Because I’ve done all this work I deserve—I wouldn’t demand a 3 or whatever, but I’d feel it wasn’t my problem until I’d seen the person and asked them to explain why they’d given it such a mark.

As Mary’s comment below illustrates, students with high self-esteem tend to become angry, rather than upset, directing emotion against the assessor, rather than against themselves.

Mary: ... If you’ve handed a piece of work in and you think it’s really good, and it comes back and it wasn’t, you’re disappointed then, with all the work you’ve put in.

Me: So you’d be disappointed. Would you be upset? Would you be angry?

Mary: I would yes, really angry.

Me: Angry towards the person who’s marked it or?

Mary: I think at first you are. You would feel angry towards that person. But I suppose then when you start reading the comments you think well yeh, that’s right, that’s right, but then it should have been explained better in the first place.

Jo experiences the same situation quite differently. She is upset, not angry.

Interviewer: If you had something and you thought it was a good piece and you’d put a lot of effort into it, and then you got bad comments, would you be devastated in yourself, or would you be angry, would you blame the other person?

Jo: No, I’d take it on myself. I’d just think I might as well give up then. Because I don’t know what else I could do. There’s nothing else I could
do … if I really felt that I had worked so hard and this was my best, that would be devastating. No I wouldn’t be angry, I’d be very upset.

**Supporting Adult Students**

I was full of admiration for these students: their positive attitudes to feedback, the seriousness with which they used the comments made by their lecturers, their abilities to deal with difficult emotions and the courage and determination they displayed in staying on the course when all they wanted to do was run. I ended the research feeling more confident about giving feedback to adult students. I felt more inspired to spent time on assessment and feedback as my awareness of the importance of feedback for students increased.

To fully explore the best ways of supporting students would require another research project, testing out the effectiveness of various approaches, and is beyond the more limited scope of this research. However, some tentative points can be made. The first of these relates to the differences I found between individual students. When I started the research I imagined any recommendations would relate to the type of feedback which lecturers should give. However, the data suggested that students are so varied in this respect that no overall formulas can be offered. Students like Neil saw all feedback in positive terms and welcomed opportunities to learn from mistakes Others like Jo found any negative comment potentially annihilating and were many times on the verge of ‘running away and never coming back’. I believe there are other students excluded from this study for this very reason.

It is therefore crucially important that lecturers identify their students’ needs in this respect, and do so at a very early point in the course. Guessing will not do. The research showed that no assumptions can be made about this aspect of students. Jo was thought by everyone concerned with the course to be a very successful student with a high level of academic ability, but she had the lowest self-esteem of all the students I interviewed. The quality of her work therefore provides no clue to how she feels about herself. Her story demonstrates powerfully the way in which good marks and mainly positive comments will not necessarily be perceived as positive by the recipient. Another false trail involves judging on the basis of presumed personality characteristics, as the following extract demonstrates.

Jean: I’m quite a quiet person in the class, so therefore you’d probably think “oh treat her with kid gloves”, but really, on a one-to-one, I’d benefit more being told directly.

I am not suggesting that students be subjected to questionnaires or other pseudo-scientific measures to discover their levels of self-esteem and corresponding attitudes to feedback. However, informal discussion in tutorials or when setting and returning assignments, with an awareness of these issues, would be likely to reveal those students who are most vulnerable.

There is no single remedy for low self-esteem (Bandura, 1997). Although some have tried to propose classroom programmes to improve self-esteem in children (Lawrence, 1996) and some classroom practices clearly are more beneficial than
others, self-esteem, I feel, with adult students at least, is a bigger issue than a classroom teacher could take on. However, even high self-esteem students saw benefits in the provision of brief tutorials when work is returned at the beginning of the course, and in opportunities for tutorials as students become confident enough to decide their needs for themselves.

Finally, as in other research, (Hanson, 1998) all the students found the earliest assignments to be the greatest source of anxiety. Ideally this hurdle should be got over quickly, with minimum delay in providing feedback, and without too much importance attached. Modular courses with no time for improvement and progression create problems in this respect. Students on all courses are unsure of the standards and their own abilities at the beginning, but this is especially acute with adults returning to education. Many of the students in the research felt that lecturers sometimes forgot this. Early assignments should not carry too much weight and should allow value-free opportunities for supported re-submission. Ruth is a student with high self-esteem who has never had to re-submit any work. I leave the last words to her, as she comments on the experience receiving feedback on the first assignment on her course:

Ruth: ... everybody was very nervous, and no one knew what was expected of them. Everyone was very cautious, but once we got the feedback, then that was fine. I think the first time (the feedback) had to be spoken, and you sort of mollycoddled us a bit, because you had to. ... You said “just do it”, “just write it”. Mature students have a tendency to worry and want to be perfect so everybody had this big hurdle.

References


