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Feedback-giving as social practice: teachers' perspectives on feedback as institutional requirement, work and dialogue.

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The lived experience of academic teachers as they engage in feedback has received relatively little attention compared to student perspectives on feedback. The present study used an ethnographically-informed methodology to investigate the everyday practices around undergraduates' writing of fourteen UK HE teachers, in a range of disciplines and institutions, focusing on teachers' perspectives. This paper presents analysis of interviews conducted as part of the study, in which feedback-giving emerged as significant, understood by participants in several potentially dissonant ways: as institutional requirement, as work, and as dialogue. Findings suggest participants sometimes managed to reconcile these conflicts and carve out small spaces for dialogue with students, and also indicate that attempts to create greater opportunities for such work, by offering greater support and recognition at institutional level, must take account of teachers' need for a sense of personal investment in student writing in their disciplinary contexts.

Keywords: feedback; marking; student writing; dialogue; academic literacies

Introduction

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This paper aims to explore teachers' lived experience of feedback and thus to contribute a focus on feedback-*giving* as a social practice to a research field which has often emphasised written feedback comments themselves and students' experience of *receiving* them. As with other aspects of higher education pedagogy, there has been a tendency in recent decades towards research which views feedback through the lens of students' experience: this focus on student learning (rather than teaching) partly arose as a critique of "the conventional focus [in HE in the UK and elsewhere] upon the transmission of content knowledge, which largely ignored how learners themselves might make sense of and learn from pedagogical practices" (Haggis, 2006 p. 531). A focus on the student experience of learning derives in part from the phenomenographic research tradition (e.g. see Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1997) and its influential paradigm of "deep" and "surface" approaches to learning. Some authors have pointed to potential limitations of this tradition for pedagogy. For example, Haggis (2003) raises questions about how this model can 'provide support for practitioners, when they try to actually apply such ideas to the messy and complex realities of their individual teaching and learning situations' (p. 95), and Cousin (2010) has recently argued that while phenomenographically-based higher education enquiry has 'been ...a valuable approach in so many ways ...it has been responsible for de-centering the academic teacher in its emphasis on student experience research' (p. 5). The study documented in this paper set out to give a central place to the complex lived experiences of teachers as they engaged with undergraduate student writing, and thus to contribute an understanding of feedback-giving as social practice situated in teachers' disciplinary and institutional contexts.

Student perspectives on feedback

There has been a consistent interest in assessment and feedback as key linked aspects of pedagogy (e.g. Ramsden 1992; Knight 2002; Boud and Falchikov 2007). Assessment, particularly the passing of summative judgments on students' work which contribute to formal outcomes, is a 'high stakes' activity (Knight 2002; Lillis and Scott 2007); feedback, offering information to students about the basis of those judgments and how they could improve their formal outcome next time, continues to be an area of mutual dissatisfaction and misunderstanding for students and teachers (Hounsell 2008; Nicol 2010). Students' experience of feedback has also figured more recently as an *institutional* concern. Hounsell commented in 2007 that 'feedback...frequently goes unevaluated in module questionnaires, unmonitored in course and programme reviews, and unscrutinised by external examiners' (p. 110); this is arguably no longer the case, due to the introduction of national quality surveys based on student views, such as the UK National Student Survey and the Course Experience Questionnaire in Australia¹, and because of increasing recognition of the connection between feedback, quality of student experience, and student retention (Yorke 2001). As Bailey and Garner (2010) have pointed out, much interest in assessment and feedback has been focused on the student perspective, variously emphasising students' understandings of assessment criteria (e.g. Lillis and Turner 2001), their experience and perceptions of feedback (e.g. Duncan 2007; Poulos and Mahony 2008), or the content/language/timing of feedback comments (e.g. Mutch 2003; Duncan 2007; Walker 2009).

Academic writing, though in an increasing range of genres, is still the dominant mode of assessment in higher education (Lillis and Scott 2007), and thus a key location of teacher feedback on students' work. A growing body of research known as 'academic literacies' (Lea and

¹ Responses to the NSS in the UK and elsewhere have consistently shown poorer ratings nationally for assessment and feedback than for any other broad category (Nicol 2010 p.502).

Street 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007) has broken new ground in understanding students' encounters with academic writing, recognising the central role of literacy practices in the success, or failure, of students as they negotiate the complex demands of their degree journey. Academic literacies research has made a significant contribution to our understanding of students' experience of receiving feedback on assessed work; for example see Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2002. Academic teachers' presence in the feedback literature is felt primarily through textual feedback comments and only occasionally through teachers' own reflections on their experiences (Lea and Street, 1999). Consequently, the emphasis has been on feedback as a textual product rather than on feedback-giving as a complex social practice. Drawing on Laurillard, Nicol (2010) discusses the problems created by an emphasis on feedback as "product", because it frames feedback as monologue, rather than as an interactive process of dialogue between teacher and student.

Teacher perspectives on feedback

Some research has begun to take more account of subject teacher's experience around student writing at university and of 'the conditions of production' of feedback (Mutch 2003, p.36). For example, Bailey and Garner (2010) set out explicitly to investigate 'the lived experiences with writing assessment feedback' (p.187) of lecturers in one institution, across a range of subject disciplines, mainly through interview. A number of insights emerged from this engagement with teachers' perspectives: for example, institutional requirements (such as standardised feedback forms) intended to promote transparency, equity and to ensure consistent quality, were often experienced by academic teachers as having a negative impact on feedback-giving. Some

appeared to feel a lack of ‘ownership’ over their feedback practices; many expressed uncertainty about feedback’s purpose and/or efficacy. Some of these findings are echoed in the present study.

The study: methodology

Academic literacies research uses ethnographic methodologies involving multiple data sources to situate the experience of reading and writing at university within specific social, institutional and disciplinary contexts which are understood to be structured by and constitutive of particular power relations and epistemologies – in other words, to investigate academic literacy as situated social practice (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007). Although academic literacies research has usually foregrounded the perspectives of student writers, its ethnographically-informed approach provides a possible basis for exploring the perspectives of HE teachers as they engage with texts. For example, Gourlay (2011) studied the writing-related experiences of mid-career professionals entering universities as new academics in vocational disciplines. Lea and Stierer (2009) examined academics’ everyday textual practices in the university as workplace. However, as yet, little work has been done which focuses on higher education teachers’ practices in relation to *students’* writing. The present study aimed to explore this relatively under-researched aspect of academic practice, using academic literacies research as a theoretical and methodological point of reference. Drawing on multiple sources of data over time enabled the building up of a rich and detailed picture of participants’ practices (Lillis 2008) seen within their institutional contexts. This paper focuses mainly on data gathered during interviews.

The study: data collection

This paper reports on a study of fourteen academic teachers in a range of disciplines (including traditional and newer vocational subjects) in six diverse UK universities: one Russell Group (prestigious, research-intensive) [RG], one Distance Learning [DL], one Oxbridge [OB], one ‘post-1992’ [P1992], and two ‘new’ [N1, N2] institutions, inaugurated as universities within the past decade. Participants (six women, eight men) occupied a variety of institutional roles, and ranged from “early-career” to well-established academics. All taught undergraduates, though the proportion of teaching to research, administrative and other (e.g. clinical) activity varied considerably. Data gathering included face-to-face interviews, collection of a range of texts, audio-recorded observations of meetings and taught sessions; some participants also made audio recordings while marking written assignments. Texts gathered included module handbooks, online assessment information, advice sheets, feedback sheets, e-mails and marked and moderated assignments. In the first of two in-depth, semi-structured interviews, teachers were asked to talk about all aspects of their work connected with undergraduate students’ writing; how they did it and why; how they felt students responded; how the activities described fitted into their working lives; the significance to them of this work and how they felt it was viewed in their department, faculty and institution. In the follow-up interview, the aim was to elicit ‘talk around [a] text’ (Lillis 2008) chosen by the participant as reflecting their work around student writing; each was asked in detail about the text’s past, present and future, about what they had done with the text and why, its purpose and whether they felt this had been achieved. Because of the dominance of writing for assessment in the current UK HE context, any exploration of lecturers’ practices in connection with student writing is likely to engage in large measure with assessment-related practices. Hence, although the study as a whole was not confined to exploring lecturers’

experiences of the assessment of student writing, this article focuses on findings relating in particular to written feedback on undergraduates' assessed texts.

Exploring feedback from teachers' perspectives

Interviewing teachers in depth allowed exploration of what was significant to participants, rather than relying on the researcher's pre-defined focus (Lillis 2008, p. 360). Analysis of interview data allowed a number of general insights about the issue of feedback to emerge. For example, feedback was often mentioned in connection with institutional pre-occupations, as well as with teacher's own feedback-giving activities:

Feedback is this year's mantra again as we unpick the reasons for a worsening score in the National Student Survey. [e-mail][RG, Physical Geography]

I think colleagues do take [feedback] very seriously anyway but ...it is one of the categories in the [national] student survey so therefore it does get highlighted ... [N2, Sports Development]

the university as a whole got very poor results for feedback and in fact they dropped [in the NSS] ... so the university is currently running around saying ooh we must focus on feedback and we're sort of sitting here saying 'hello-o' [P1992, History]

These and other similar frequently made comments seem to lend weight to the view that 'feedback' on student assignments was relatively high on the agenda as a live *institutional* issue for these teachers. Participants often used the word *marking* as well as feedback, to mean both the physical pile of students' scripts and the task of tackling this pile, highlighting that for these teachers, engagement with student writing often meant not a one-to-one exchange, but working

with large batches of students' texts. The term was used also to incorporate both the act of allocating a "mark" or score, and making marks on the script in the form of ticks, lines, comments etc., pointing to the fact that, for teachers marking students' assessed writing, these two actions of assessment and feedback are inextricably bound together in the same textual practice.

Opening up a research space which elicits ethnographically fine-grained detail about teachers' work around student writing also challenged neat categories and preconceptions about what might count as 'giving feedback'. For example, one participant explained in relation to a particularly detailed feedback comment she had made:

It's not just what I've written but the fact that [the students' text] read to me as slightly plagiarized so then I had to go to Google and do the search and find out what it's relying on and establish that it isn't actually plagiarized... So it's not just the words [feedback comments] that are there it's all the stuff that's gone on behind the words. [P1992, History]

This exemplifies many instances where written feedback comments appeared to be only a very partial textual trace of a complex series of activities (reading and re-reading, internet searching, conversations with colleagues, one-to-one informal talks with students, etc.) in which teachers were engaged, some of which might not always be recognized as giving feedback. This is important because in institutional contexts such as a UK university, questions of "what counts" can be answered in different ways from different standpoints and can have profound implications for the 'visibility' (and resourcing) of practices within academic institutions. In the following analysis, the focus will be on three often conflicting, sometimes overlapping, understandings of feedback which emerged in participants' accounts of their practice: as institutional requirement,

as work, and as dialogue, all of which invoked different relationships between the writer and reader(s) of feedback.

Teachers' 'feedback' as institutional requirement

One significant understanding which emerged from interviews was that of feedback-giving as conforming to *institutional requirements*: that is, subject teachers experienced themselves as required to give feedback on writing in the same way that students may experience the requirement to write: both are subject to institutional processes of evaluation. Interviewees sometimes appeared to experience feedback-giving as bound by rules, regulations and imposed procedures. For example, one participant explained that after an assignment has been marked:

The moderator then has to just check that good practice has occurred, that there's enough text on the document as feedback for improvement... it seems sort of fairly draconian to me but I think the idea is that this form is written in such a way that you wouldn't be handing in a thing that had inappropriate amount of text on it. [RG, Physical Geography]

Here the word 'draconian' and the expression 'handing in' to refer to submission of marked assignments to the moderator (echoing students 'handing in' assignments) suggest a sense of distance between the individual teacher and institutional processes of assessment, as well as the notion that the institution is a third, surveilling "audience", influencing textual "choices" e.g. about the amount and format of feedback:

There's a house style [for feedback] ... which I think is extremely boring, but because of the [moderation] system it seems to be reinforced ...I've found in the past you tend to cause more ructions from breaking out into something different.[DL, Social Science]

In these examples, teachers' careful choices about which and how many words they use in feedback appear to be more strongly shaped by institutional pressures than driven by individual judgments about what would be most helpful to students' learning. These findings echo perspectives of higher education teachers recorded in Bailey and Garner's study (2010).

The notion of conformity to a required style also emerged in relation to the requirements made of students' writing which felt restrictive to the marker too:

What we're trying to do is get [students] to conform as much as possible to a style... in some ways one sort of rebels against it a little bit because it's a kind of conformity. [N1, Human Geography]

Despite this unease, such conformity was usually seen as being in students' best interests – some teachers saw it as essential to a fairer marking system. Notions of transparency, objectivity and fairness in assessment emerged as salient for many participants as they talked about their feedback practices. For example, several teachers interviewed asserted the importance of anonymity for promoting fairness, but nevertheless sensed its possible disadvantages:

It seems to me that I should mark them anonymously ... but there's no doubt that I'd like to ... go back and see if there has been that progression. [N2, Sports Development]

Actually there are many occasions when I am very much in favour of anonymous marking but for this [portfolio assignment] I don't think it's any help at all. I think it's really important to know the student and to know how to respond to each individual. [P1992, History]

Here there is an apparent tension between marking as assessment – allocating a mark – and marking as a feedback response intended to help the individual student make progress, suggesting

that having to conform to institutional procedures designed to ensure fairness, such as anonymous assessment, may reduce teachers' potential sense of pedagogic connection between themselves as feedback-giver and student as feedback-receiver.

Another way in which tutors' feedback on students writing emerged as an institutionally required act of assessment was through frequent references to justifying the grade:

T: I feel like I have to be able to justify the mark that I've given it 'cause if it feels like a B that's not good enough...

R: so is that a sense of needing to justify it to a student who enquires

T: Yes, yes...to an external examiner as well [N2, Sports Science]

This extract suggests a complex addressivity for feedback comments, including accountability to students and to institutional quality assurance requirements. Participants often described their feedback practices in ways which suggested they were paying careful attention to both student and other 'audiences':

I've highlighted to her dissertation supervisor what her specific weaknesses are so that he can address them and doesn't have to discover them for himself. [P1992, History]

I don't necessarily agree that [learning outcome-structured feedback] enhance[s] the student experience but ...I have decided to go along with it ... it's ... an outward face to the moderator to say 'I'm thinking about this'. [DL, Social Science]

Just as students' writing has been understood as a delicate exercise in simultaneously addressing a range of real and imagined readers and thus performing a range of authorial identities (e.g. Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001), so, as Bailey and Garner (2010) found: 'Teachers are writing for more than one reader; feedback is not exclusively for the student.'

Teachers' feedback-giving as work

A second understanding which emerged, relatively absent from previous studies, was that of feedback-giving, especially *written* feedback, as a marginalized aspect of academics' *work*, in terms of timing (often done at the end of the day, or late in the evening) and place (at home in the kitchen or in bed, on trains, in hotel rooms). One participant [OB, Law] commented trenchantly that there was "no chance" of his finding time for marking during the working day. Along with marginality, comes *invisibility* in terms of recognition:

I don't think [senior management] even see it, I don't think they know it exists ... they think we ask them to write two and a half thousand word essays and that we then give them [students] minimal feedback... that seems to be what they think we do.[P1992, History]

and in terms of payment:

R: and so would you generally say you find yourself spending more time than is allocated
T: yes but of course that does make us even more voluntary workers doesn't it? [DL, Environmental Science]

and career:

Supervisors of undergraduates [for dissertations] do it without official recognition and therefore do it reluctantly ... it will not appear in their tally of what they've done that year; it's invisible because grants and publications are all that an academic is assessed on obviously. [RG, Medicine]

Interviewees' comments also provided a sharp reminder that the feedback relationship is not an ideal 'teacher/ learner' dyad, but one in which he or she must respond to several – or many – students' texts. Typically, interviewees said they found their work with students' scripts

“laborious” and “tedious”, especially when tackling large batches of assignments on the same topic:

That is just horrendous because it’s fifty times the same stuff. [RG, Computer Science]

I think every academic feels like slashing their wrists ... about two thirds of the way through [a pile of marking], don’t they? [P1992, History]

One response reported was to adopt time-saving strategies such as skim reading for “buzz words” or annotating only the first page or two of assignments. Marking was also a task that tended to be put off, for example the following comment was typical:

I never look forward to marking. ...I tend to leave my marking as long as I can and then sit down and do it at the last minute [N2, Sports Science]

The ways in which the term “marking” is used in these extracts are a reminder that feedback-giving involves writing, reading and related activities *as work*, and is often experienced as ‘a task to be done, to be got out of the way, ...outside the realm of the [teacher’s] own control, to satisfy the demands of others rather than to fulfil the [teacher’s] own purposes...’ (adapted from Mann 2000, writing about *students’* experience of reading at university, words in square brackets substituted). Mann comments elsewhere in relation to students: ‘It is ... through assessment that we most vividly see the relationship between the individual and the institution and its potentially alienating effects’ (2008, p. 114). These findings prompt the question of whether this may also often apply to *teachers* engaged in assessment of students’ writing.

Teacher’s feedback as seeking dialogue

A third understanding which emerged, though less prominently, in interviewees' talk was feedback as a desired sharing, reciprocity or *dialogue* with the student:

I want to have an adult discussion with them about [referencing conventions]... we're not at school, I'm not just telling them a set of rules, I want them to have the knowledge about how it works...what it's all about. [N2, Sports Development]

We're always saying to them 'you can't just assert things you must illustrate it with evidence', so I think it's really important when we give them feedback that we abide by that same principle... they've worked hard at this and I owe it to them to take it seriously... It's an attempt to be in conversation with the student. [P1992, History]

The word 'attempt' here suggests uncertainty over whether the desired pedagogic engagement with an individual student is possible. Despite teachers' best intentions, efforts to create dialogue were all too often experienced as "disheartening", or as a nagging attempt to get through to students, giving the same feedback over and over again:

"despite being told, some students just don't do it ... you can say it 'til you're black and blue and they don't do it".[DL, Social Science]

Perhaps these and similar comments throw light on some striking textual strategies which participants sometimes adopted, such as the use of repeated exclamation marks, underlining, huge letters, or italics for emphasis. In echoing the informality of speech, these written choices seem to inscribe a frustrated desire to be 'heard' by the student.

A sense that the feedback-giver's effort was often not reciprocated by students was a common theme:

I'll show you where the coursework is returned and you'll see ... there will be piles that high [*makes a gesture indicating tall piles, then mimes picking up and replacing a script from one of them*] of work which is looked at and put back and that's a real problem for us because we write feedback and they don't even read it. [N2, Geography]

Several participants expressed a view that many students were only interested in the grade, and that the awarding of a score was a barrier to their engagement with detailed feedback:

I've just got this notion that what they do is they do *that* [*turns to front page and glances at page showing numerical grade*] and if somebody's written it in on the front ... they go away and they say 'what did you get?' 'fifty-seven' 'that's great' and then that's it. [P1992 Human Geography]

Perhaps this pervasive sense of failure to achieve dialogue through feedback added to the sense of disengagement and weariness which participants often expressed about the work of feedback. As one participant said: "you wonder why you're doing it" [RG Computer Science]. In a mass higher education system, where the task of feedback-giving to large numbers of students can be overwhelming, the sense of being engaged in unproductive work is particularly acute; teachers seem unsure that their efforts count.

Carving out spaces and times for dialogue around students' writing

Despite these frustrations, many participants in the study were keen to talk in detail about more satisfactory *parts* of their work with undergraduate writers, often involving face-to-face contact. Participants described attempts to make written feedback part of an iterative dialogue, seeing this as a vital aspect of students' overall disciplinary development. These more satisfying moments often seemed to result from creative problem-solving within the resource constraints of particular

contexts: participants had found ways to actively carve out a space and time for dialogue with students around their writing. For example, one participant negotiated time/resources to run interactive workshop-style sessions around writing in her discipline (History) on one undergraduate module, by accepting a ‘trade-off’ with departmental colleagues who favoured a content-heavy, lecture-based approach which was cheaper to deliver. One participant spent a lot of time with second level Sports Development students who had to produce a “consultant-style” evaluation report for an external organisation. As he explained:

they’re actually getting feedback ...quite intense and quite often on all aspects really... the ongoing feedback and development of that is [a] pretty constant and ongoing process and it needs to be, because they are live situations [N2, Sports Development]

Here, time for dialogue around writing could be found because the stakes were high for teachers as well as for students. A picture emerged of a series of “ad hoc”, informal and small-scale strategies, and variations *within* the routine practices of individual teachers. For example, one participant replaced a traditional essay-style assignment for a third-year module with a group task involving a ‘feedforward’ meeting prior to the production of a final assignment. Although more time-consuming, this approach enabled her to give some guidance to future dissertation students, thus saving later supervision and draft-reading time. She also appeared to gain satisfaction from reading students’ assignments because they had chosen their own topics and hence were able to offer “value-added”. She commented:

normally [in] all of them I discover something I haven’t read, so it’s really quite nice to read through [RG, Computer Science].

In contrast with this proactive and rewarding approach, the same teacher said of her work on another module:

I'm neither the unit director nor the person who actually really sets the assignments, I'm just one of the markers ...if he decides to set the assignment in the same way in the next term then so be it.
[RG, Computer Science]

This extract above highlights a theme running through many of the interviews, echoing Bailey and Garner's finding that a sense of 'ownership' and personal investment plays a crucial role in subject teachers' work around student writing. To be "just one of the markers" does not alone provide the sense of agency or motivation to develop new, more satisfactory ways to give feedback. This seems to suggest a risk of patchiness in students' experience of feedback. However, interview data also suggest that there is a fine line to tread between 'spreading good practice' through institutional initiatives to improve consistency and threatening academic teachers' vital sense of 'ownership' of student writing in their disciplinary contexts:

The university introduced something ...but ... they didn't come and say well what are you already doing, they said you have to do this that we have designed in a completely different context for people teaching technical subjects and science, and you now have to do it... we had to stop everything we were doing and do a [X] session. [P1992, History]

On the whole... we don't have the platform any more [to share effective practice around student writing in the department] because everything goes via the teaching and learning programme. [RG, Computer Science].

Discussion

This study provides some empirical support for the claim that feedback continues to be a source of unresolved concern from the point of view of teachers, as well as of students, whose dissatisfactions have been made clear in national surveys, as noted earlier. An approach to engagement around writing which begins from the perspective of the ‘lived experience’ of the teacher provides an alternative lens which foregrounds the significant but under-researched practice of *feedback-giving*. The study showed individual academic teachers struggling to manage conflicts between different understandings of this activity. Interviews revealed their struggles to reconcile the different roles involved in feedback-giving, to combine the position of fair *assessor* (whose own judgments and comments are in turn assessed) with those of academic *worker*, managing competing demands on time and resources within contexts where some activities are more highly valued than others, and of academic *teacher* seeking to engage in productive dialogue with individual students. All of these roles imply different – and not always easily reconcilable - relationships between writers and various reader(s) of feedback.

Exploring individual teachers’ practices in depth raises important questions about what feedback means and to whom in contemporary higher education contexts, and throws further light on the complex addressivity of feedback comments. In keeping with the findings of Bailey and Garner (2010), academic teachers in this study appeared to feel constrained by institutional quality assurance and assessment regimes, in terms both of overall feedback approaches and of textual choices for feedback comments. Some of these constraints related to institutional priorities concerning fairness, objectivity and transparency, for example anonymous assessment and the requirement for standardised formats for feedback. Teachers understood the benefits of these procedures for students, but at the same time struggled to balance them with efforts to build

fruitful pedagogic relationships. This appeared to be particularly the case with feedback on students' written assignments, since rhetorical values associated with traditional forms of academic text, such as the widespread requirement to write in the third person, meant that participants saw writing as more suited to anonymity and standardisation than some other forms of assessment. Written feedback comments also lend themselves more easily to meeting audit and accountability requirements than off-the-record discussions. Nicol (2010) suggests that the "high stakes" of formal assessment may inhibit the success of innovative approaches involving peer feedback; this study's findings suggest that this may also apply to attempts to innovate in teacher feedback.

Academic teachers in this study responded in different ways to the challenges of reconciling conflicting understandings of feedback. In some cases, teachers sought to write more feedback either in an attempt to 'get through' the barrier of the grade to students, or as a response to quality assurance monitoring. As Nicol (2010) has argued, a focus on writing more and better feedback comments has limitations in a mass higher education system, since "most teachers feel overwhelmed by the workload associated with providing such feedback when student numbers are large" (p.511). At other times, participants saved time by writing less feedback and engaging more superficially with students' texts: at such times, they seemed to be less engaged as readers and to view their feedback-giving as a process of taking students through the "academic hoops".

Despite these difficulties, some participants, at some times, seemed to find ways to carve out small spaces for meaningful dialogue with students around their writing, while allowing for the assessment context. This seemed to be possible particularly when there was a sense of personal

investment for the teacher, for example, an opportunity to solve professional issues of workload or reputation, or for rewarding intellectual engagement. These spaces for dialogue tended to involve face-to-face engagement with students, away from the glare of formal assessment and audit procedures, and were often shaped by individuals and small collaborative groups to suit their particular contexts, rather than imposed at institutional level. Teachers were finding ways to establish dialogic contexts for feedback on writing *within the curriculum* in which the monologue of written feedback could be transformed (Nicol 2010).

Data for this study indicated that teacher-led innovations were often small-scale and sometimes short-lived, and depended on time, resources and teachers' personal priorities. This finding points to the need for *institutional* recognition of and support for such initiatives if they are to become more widespread and sustainable, and particularly for resources to incorporate productive dialogue around writing as an integral part of disciplinary teaching provision. If quality assurance and pedagogic development focus only on improving written feedback per se, the onus will remain unproductively on individual teachers to renew and redouble their efforts, while working in demanding and shifting conditions. Perhaps as the stakes become higher for institutions, with the increasing prominence given to student satisfaction in a fee-paying environment, the creative pedagogic changes needed to solve the perennial feedback problem may receive greater institutional support. At the same time, this study indicates that it is important that teachers retain a sense of disciplinary ownership of initiatives to improve the effectiveness of feedback, rather than experiencing innovation as change imposed from above or without.

This study throws light on some of the more unproductive routines of feedback-giving as well as on changes to those routines being initiated by academic teachers, and on some of the barriers to desired change. These insights *into* academic teachers' practice are an important step towards advice *for* professional practice, but call for a response which is structural and institutional, not only at the level of individual teachers. However, more in-depth, ethnographic research is needed to understand the experience of academic teachers within specific disciplinary and institutional contexts in relation to taken-for-granted practices such as feedback-giving, in order to point more firmly towards the conditions in which engagement, satisfaction and learning through feedback might be shared by both teachers and their students.

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