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‘Answering Back! Encouraging Proactive Dialogue in the Context of an Interdisciplinary Professional Doctorate Pathway’

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Contextual Backdrop to the Doctorates - Sunderland



Focus of the Intervention:

► Aim:

To investigate how integrating a dialogic feedback loop impacted on student perceptions of the process of formative assessment in a Professional Doctoral study at the University of Sunderland

► Objectives:

1. To illuminate, using a phenomenological case study methodology, how using dialogic feedback loops impacted on university of Sunderland Prof Doc students in pedagogic practice.
2. To provide salient themes for developmental progression in doctoral curriculum design / evaluation



Meet Two Typical Professional Doctorate Students...

Dr Lynzee McShea



Dr Lisa Alcorn



Critical Reflective Practice Module



- ▶ Challenging assumptions at epistemic, metacognitive and cognitive levels.
- ▶ Providing opportunities to decontextualize and reconstruct professional practice.
- ▶ Onus on feedback for learning rather than feedback on assessment.

Rationale for the Study

- ▶ Students are required to acknowledge the fundamental basis of epistemic cognition and the relevance of this to the situated nature of their own cognitive development.
- ▶ This is pivotal to their capacity to decontextualize and reconstruct professional practice, to demystify the epistemological basis of their work and to recognise the implicit philosophical and ontological bases corresponding with not just what they know but also how they know.
- ▶ Feedback for learning rather than feedback on assessment has become a prevailing focus for research in Higher Education (HE). Despite repeated attempts to improve the metric measures of NSS/PT ES outcomes percentages relating to the levels of student satisfaction in this field remain largely unchanged with feedback remaining the most singularly recognised area for improvement in the student experience in recent years (Wouters et al, 2015).

Situating Feedback in Formative Assessment

Formal feedback exists as an ideological concept rather than a tangible force with clear infrastructure or prescribed form. The linkage between feedback and integration into reflexivity is littered with the impact of:

- ▶ a. 'Modularity'
- ▶ b. 'Programmeness'
- ▶ c. Capacity of Professional Doctorate students to effectively articulate their individual contributions to professional practice

What is significant about the potential use of dialogic feedback mechanisms is their capacity to focus more on the learning experiences and prognostic outcomes of Professional Doctoral students and less on the concept of teaching.

Background Literature...

- ▶ UK taught doctoral programmes have been characterised by modularity where the consolidation of feedback on transferable academic skills such as criticality and a capacity for relativism can be overlooked in relation to the consolidation of learning and development at a programme level (Roberts and Loftus, 2013).
- ▶ Piloting new ways of providing students with formative feedback to aid them in using this effectively in subsequent summative assessments is a key mechanism of advocating not only the sustainability of feedback but also an acknowledgement of its context specificity (Pilbeam, Lloyd-Jones and Denyer, 2013).
- ▶ This has the potential to empower students in their capacity to become proactive rather than reactive in the way they respond to feedback, as well as emphasising the dialogic nature that ought to characterise the process of academic progression (Skidmore and Murakami, 2016; Carter and Kumar, 2015).
- ▶ Debate continues as to whether current feedback processes in the context of taught doctoral programmes are fit for purpose (Shah, Cheng and Fitzgerald, 2016).
- ▶ This debate stems from the consistency of national student surveys such as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and its undergraduate counterpart the National Student Survey (NSS), both of which are annually characterised by the student voice indicating issues with processes of communication, timeliness and relevance (Entwistle and Ramsden, 2015).

Social Mechanisms of Formative and Summative Assessment

Rationale for integration of a 'dialogic feedback loop' was fivefold:

- ▶ Establishment of **meaning making**
- ▶ Incorporation of a mechanism of **critical reflection** on progress to date and **reflexivity** on how this can be used to inform future practice
- ▶ Move **beyond transmission** and receipt of metric data and **beyond tokenistic approaches** to assessment for learning
- ▶ Focus on the **interpretation and functional use** of feedback
- ▶ Development and progression of the **negotiated assessment strategies** that characterise doctoral education
- ▶ All of these lead to issues and the need for **consideration of sustainability, parity and reliability** and **validity** of assessment mechanisms.



Modifying Module Assessment to:



- ▶ Expand students' understanding of the concept of feedback.
- ▶ Promote opportunity for students to enter an iterative feedback dialogue.
- ▶ Provide an opportunity for staff to reflect on doctoral level assessment and feedback.
- ▶ Enhance the opportunity to incorporate feed forward comments in all feedback

Assessment Requirements of the Module

- ▶ **Task 1.** Critical incident diary and critical review of professional norms, values and behaviours that underpin learning and development within the participant's profession.
- ▶ **Task 2.** Professional autobiography and critical review of personal norms, values and behaviours underpinning the participant's professional identity.



Methodology



- ▶ Following formal institutional ethical approval, this study adopted an interpretive method, where emphasis was placed directly on accessing the lived experience of participants through the use of semi-structured telephone interviews and the formal evaluation questionnaires regarding the dialogic feedback loop.
- ▶ A basic modification of the phenomenological method originally developed by the Duquesne School, first articulated and demonstrated by Giorgi and further developed by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen as documented by Moustakas (1994) was used.
- ▶ In the last fifty years a wealth of research has demonstrated the convergence of shared experience and interpretation of experience that can be captured by the phenomenological tradition (see Pringle et al., 2011 for review).
- ▶ Debates have emerged around the ability of interpretive phenomenological approaches to demonstrate relevance in the development of new patient/practitioner experiences in healthcare provision (e.g. Kuller, 2007). Often it is the question of whether or not consistency between the philosophical origin and its application to methodological execution exists (e.g. Knox, 2004).

Methods...

Questionnaires



Telephone Interviews



Sampling and Data Collection

- ▶ All seven students (who were allocated a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality throughout the study) completed a questionnaire that contained only three areas for focused commentary, as follows:
 - ▶ Comments on the usefulness of written feedback annotation in preparing for dialogic feedback
 - 1. Comments on using the telephone as a mechanism of facilitating the process of dialogic feedback
 - 2. Comments on how much reassurance the dialogic feedback gave in relation to the preparation of summative assessment
- ▶ In accordance with a phenomenological approach, a position of 'conceptual silence' or naivety, was adopted and bracketed off pre-existing suppositions about what the participants might disclose (Stones, 1988).

Interviewing

- ▶ Each of these participants was then interviewed, with the telephone questions varying according to the responses to the questionnaire.
- ▶ Questions typically asked for clarification or more detail of opinions and perceptions. Telephone interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full.
- ▶ The transcript of each interview was then given to each respective participant for checking of respondent (content) validity to ensure that the transcript accurately represented the dialogue between researcher and participant.
- ▶ In three cases, some additional follow up questioning due to a lack of clarity of expression within the interviews was necessary and was obtained using a further brief interview, which again was transcribed and checked with the participant.



Findings

- ▶ Thematic Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 2004) of the revealed six core themes of:
 1. Empowerment in Learning Autonomy
 2. Driving Higher Order Thinking and Criticality
 3. Meaning Making and Articulating Responsiveness to Feedback
 4. Negating Metric Evaluation and Benchmarking Achievement
 5. The intervention enhanced student capacity for self- evaluation and critical reflexivity in relation to progressive development in critical thinking and articulation of 'doctoralness'.

The process stimulated an **ethos of proactivity** for doctoral students

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