Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast
Giving, Receiving, and Interpreting Feedback Special

Hello and welcome to Episode 18 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name is Susan Barfield and I'll be your guest host for this week.

In this episode, we're going to focus on the topic of giving, receiving and interpreting feedback. As we come to the end of the assessment period.

Students will be getting their marks and detailed feedback about how they have performed.

How we give feedback and how students interpret that feedback is key to their experience and success here at Newcastle University.

Over the next 25 minutes or so, we're going to look at the process of feedback.

Firstly, we have a returning guest to the podcast, Liv Jonassen, an academic skills development manager from the liaison services in the library.

Liv has put together a section about how students can interpret feedback by using common questions they receive in the liaison services.

Our next section is a conversation with Professor Caroline Walker Gleeves.

Caroline is Professor of Education and School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Caroline spoke to us about her work using structural and stylistic domains with informative

feedback to enhance students written and communication at Level 3. In the final section

Chris Whiting a professional development adviser and senior fellow of the HEA from academic practice team in LTDS

takes us through some of the key aspects of providing good feedback from the introduction to Learning and teaching in higher education program.

In the first part, we hear from Liv Jonassen.

Liv has put together a great section that looks at how to interpret feedback as a student using common queries

we hear from our students. Here's Liv. When he got a piece of work back.

You'll be given some feedback to help you develop as a learner. Quite often the first response to the feedback is an emotional one.

You've probably spent a lot of time on your work and might feel disappointed in the mark or you might not have spent enough time,

know that you should have spent more and don't need reminded of this, or you might just be surprised. Before anything else

it is important to consider these emotions and process how you feel.

These are all valid responses, but require some distance in order to be processed.

It's worth from a more neutral perspective, looking at what you wrote and the feedback you got.

When you feel more objective, the comments you've been given will hopefully be cleaver and you can put them into context.

After some distance and reflection, you should look at the comments in depth in order to apply strategies in your learning.

This will also help you develop on addressing future assignments.

We spoke to Matt about some comments he's been given for a piece of work and provided some advice and strategies which you can apply.

Although, of course, your comments may differ. The areas the feedback focuses on our typical issues that occur in academic work.

And these are structural incoherence, research and referencing, criticality and argument, language and style, and understanding and content.

So let's find out from Matt what feedback he got from his work.

The first comment I've been given is this work is unclear and difficult to follow.

So this is a fairly typical comment. Students get when there are issues with structure and coherence.

In this case, there are some things to think about, such as your introduction and conclusions

you might make. The overall structure of your work and the transition language as well as how you signpost your ideas.

You should clearly state the purpose of the piece of work. How it will be arranged and make the relationships between ideas clear to the reader.

Some useful strategies to consider in order to make sure your structure and coherence is

clear throughout your work is to plan out your piece of work before you begin writing.

This will help you organise your ideas into themes and key concepts.

You should also be careful to only use one key theme or concept per paragraph.

And finally, have an awareness of signposting language and use this to show connections between themes and concepts within and between paragraphs.

I've also got some feedback around the research I used, the comment I got was poor evidence.

How can I improve that? If you ever get feedback like this, then things to think about are the research that you've used,

your information sources and your understanding and knowledge of referencing.

There are some strategies you can employ to improve on this. Firstly, make sure you always look beyond core reading lists.

This will help your understanding and you'll be able to evidence this research throughout your work.

You also need to be clear about what constitutes a good quality resource in your subject.

As this can vary. When you're reading, make sure you have some criteria to evaluate what you are reading and use

prompt questions such as why and how to help you be critical in your reading.

As well as going beyond the reading list, you should also use a wide range of resources from different perspectives and make sure you use these

in your work to reflect the fact that there is a range of views and that you are aware of these.

Finally, it is important to make sure that you are familiar with the referencing system.

You're expected to use and that you are able to use this accurately.

I got a comment which states your work is too descriptive and superficial.

What do they mean? This type of comment is a prompt for you to consider if your writing is analytical in nature or is it quite descriptive.

You also might need to think about the extent to which you've displayed critical

thinking and if you've been able to develop an argument in your writing.

Or have you simply told a story?

You can ensure that you are writing analytically by using questions to prompt your analysis, thinking about the how the why the why not the what if?

And so what, can really develop your writing?

You should also ensure that you include a range of views in your writing and that it just clear to the reader what your overall stance is.

You can review your work to check whether it's as analytical as opposed to descriptive.

And you can do this by looking at the language you've used and thinking about whether you've address some of these questions.

So the how, the why and the so-what. The marker of this work has commented on my language.

They've said lots of stylistic and grammatical errors impede understanding.

I'm not really sure how to address this.

In order to ensure that you have written in the appropriate style and that you are accurate in your written work, you can think about the following.

So firstly, think about developing your academic voice. You can observe how this is done and the text you're reading.
When you read

it's also worth taking note of the types of words and phrases that are used in your discipline

and any conventions that you notice so that you are able to use these in your own work.

It's also important to use clear sentences and to avoid overcomplicating your language.

Make sure you use evidence to back up your points. And it's also worth checking for any previous feedback on pieces of work you've submitted.

If you've had feedback about grammar and language,

etc. and you can do this because then you can identify the types of spelling and grammar mistakes you tend to make.

You can then focus and check for those particular types of errors when you're checking your work.

Another very useful technique is to read your aloud.

This is a very effective way of identifying errors and if you like, you can use software to help you do this.

Another comment I've been given is that I haven't addressed the key concepts and learning outcomes adequately.

How can I make sure I do this moving forward? In this case, you should reread your work and reflect on whether you've addressed the task or not.

Have you stayed on topic? Have you analysed the question and shown your understanding of it?

Finally, have you read widely and not only relied on a few sources?

You can also check the market criteria to find out what the markers are looking for.

In future work

it's always useful to take time to read the assignment brief, to make sure that you understand the task and think about how you approach it.

Then you can take some time to map out a plan for the assignment.

This means that you can think about and select the concepts and themes that you

wish to include and think about the order you're going to present them in.

Reading around the subject also gives you an overview of the different perspectives

that people have and can help you to include these where appropriate.

This will also mean that you have evidence to back up and support the points you wish to make.

Finally, to show you've really understood what you've read and where it fits into your overall argument,

you should paraphrase and summarise where possible and you should avoid the overuse of quotes.

If you'd like more information about feedback, check out our collection on the academic skills kit.

If you'd like to chat to one of the team, we run dropin slots every Tuesday and Thursday.

Please email us at AcademicSkills@Newcastle.ac.uk

For more information about our support offer. Thank you live for great insights into the feedback process.

We're not going to catch up with Professor Caroline Walker Gleeves, we Caroline about her work using structural and stylistic domains within the

formative feedback to enhance students writing and communication at Level 3.

So Caroline can you tell me a little bit about what you did.

OK. So I can sum it up by really calling it putting the professional into academic practicing in year 3.

So it's about feedback. It's about teaching students how to really think and write much more critically.

Bearing in mind that in year three of their studies they're going to further study the work place.

So they're trying to become more professional. So I'm trying to professionalise what I'm teaching them.

Plus, give them more knowledge and skills. So putting the professional into academic practice is a good headline really.

How did you do it? What steps did you take from the initial idea to completion?

I teach Level 3 modules on the education studies course.

And my lectures, like many year three vocational oriented subjects, were kind of an uneasy mixture of level three academic and practice.

So lots and lots of reading and high level content.

But also they were looking at very, very contextual subjects, you know, as you would expect in level three.

So one lecture was on research on child protection.

Another topic might be, for example, looking at the research of school exclusion amongst looked after children.

But I noticed over the last few years that I've been teaching that more and more students were saying,

well, we're always you know, the university is always going on about employability.

But it just kind of just meeting means doing work placements.

And we don't really know how to translate these into our work to make better grades and also make us better prepared.

And I also noticed that the students who I was interviewing because in my other hat,

I'm a school governor and we were I found myself interviewing graduates who actually

couldn't do the professional things that we were wanting them to do in schools like writing,

working papers, understanding really complex data. So I started to think that something really missing.

There's a missing link between employability and what that means becoming more professional,

but also trying to help students to do that properly because in Level 3, if their learning how to do that for the first time.

That's a big ask. You know, so I thought about assessment feedback as well.

And so I started to think about actually how I could change the module. So that leads me on to exactly.

Well, what did I do? Well, I changed the module that I was teaching this particular one.

It was like a pilot study in three ways. The first thing I did was to change the balance of lectures and seminars.

It's a traditionally being

each week, two hours lecture, one hour seminar where you just used a research paper to kind of back go over the big ideas.

I changed it to two hours of seminars and one of lecture for the reason that ironically I shortened the module in terms of the content.

So I made that I make it have less stuff in it, but I made the big idea.

It's what I call through lines much more clear for the students.

So there was there was a smaller amount of content, but we spent longer practicing in through formative assessment and talking about it.

And the last thing I did, and probably most importantly, was I changed the assessment and the feedback much more to replicate professional

preparation and to distinguish between employability and professional preparation,

because I think in higher education we often go on about employability, but they send a quite a vague catchall thing.

What I really wanted to do was to prepare my students to be professionals.

So that meant thinking much more carefully about how I was assessing them and why.

So I introduced things like writing, working papers.

But we practiced them in a seminar and I gave them constant feedback on what it might look like.

We I wanted to teach them how to persuade for an audience.

Bearing in mind that there were lots of different kinds of professionals who might be in an audience for them,

but I gave them again writing tasks and gave them constant feedback on different kinds of persuasion.

So I suppose it was quite an ambitious change. I changed everything in the module, really,

but I made it have less stuff and more thinking really deeply about what I wanted the students to be at the end of it.

So why do you think this was important? Why was it needed? It's a very good question.

I think it was needed for me. There's often a tendency to assume that employability is it is a key concern of Level 3 studies and should be.

And I don't think that's right. I think employability of students is right.

But I think in a way it's quite a kind of vague and nebulous concept to many students.

They associate employability, for example, with work experience,

but fail to understand how it can be translated to really make them better thinkers and better writers.

So in contrast, my approach was by putting the professional into academic practice.

So rather than time sending them out to get work experience,

this was taking the essence of what constitutes an education professional and translating that into an academic sense.

So it was a much more kind of, I think, aspirational and constructive approach, you know.

So I could get them really very, very particular professional knowledge and

skills that they could then go out. That would make them more employable.

That would make them highly professional in a very, very particular area.

How have you and the students all found this process? Has it worked?

Yes. The short answer is, Yes, it has.

but with a but. In terms of students finding it very, very, very important for thinking about jobs.

And most importantly, have, I think, thinking about the really big issues very, very critically using data and evidence

for example. I think some of them never, never dreamt that actually there was a very big difference between presenting a working

paper to an audience of teachers and then comparing that with an audience of parents.

So the sense of audience and sense of what is needed to persuade, I think is being a maybe big, big awakening for many students.

The process for me and students is required an awful lot of thinking and practicing.

And I think if I'm that strange, you know, very often in seminars,

I think there is a tendency amongst us as academics to kind of say, right, here's the idea of the paper.

Now go away and think about it and then we'll have a little talk about it.

But we've practiced ideas again and again and again, and I think that's been quite unusual for them.

Has been useful. Well, in terms of the feedback, yes, this the students on the whole have loved it.

They find it really, really useful, but very challenging.

Some have said and this is this is quite right. It's a high risk strategy, you know, to include this in a year 3 module.

And I agree with that. I take that on board. And I think, you know, it should have probably been introduced earlier.

But I only teach level three modules, so that's not possible on this occasion.

But I think as an idea, it would be a good idea to introduce it at an earlier level.

So again, to give them much more practice about thinking about the issues.

But I think it's been an entirely, entirely excellent learning experience for them.

And for me, it's made me really think about, you know,

some of the content and some of the concepts that I teach really deeply in a different way to what I've ever done before.

So I think we may be successful and I'll can continue to kind of like iterate it over the next few years.

I think. Thank you, Caroline. More information about Caroline's work can be found in the show notes. In its final section

Chris Whiting from the Academic Practice Team in LTDS takes us through some of the key highlights from

the marking feedback course for introduction to learning and teaching in higher education course.

Here's Chris. When discussing feedback, you might have heard the term the feedback loop.

But don't be fooled. The feedback loop is not closed.

Perhaps it might be better. Think of feedback as a dialogue between you and the students with a goal of improving their learning.

For example, when a student submits or shows their work to you, you respond with feedback.

That feedback should give the opportunity for the student to then respond to you.

That might be an immediate response with more questions or comments or ideas or more longer term response in future

assignments that they submit to you where they've hopefully taken on board your feedback and put it into action in their work.

At which point you will again respond with more feedback. That way, the dialogue carries on throughout the student's journey with us.

Whether that dialogue moves from one lecture to another,

it continues throughout the years with us at Newcastle University and hopefully something that

they will continue to use beyond their education into a successful career out in the big,

wide world. But there are four things we might consider and how we make our feedback effective for those students.

Those are to be concise, constructive, specific and honest.

We need to keep our feedback concise.

If we overwhelm the student with a hundred and one things that they can do to improve on their work, it's going to feel like too much.

It's a mountain of work. I can't achieve this and they will therefore disengage.

But when we offer, say, three very specific things that they could do to see themselves moving up to the next great boundary,

that feels achievable and that's motivating.

Speaking of being constructive, how we give this feedback needs to be something that the student can do in response to your comments.

It's not just the comments about what the work has presented to you.

But we need to let them know what they have done well. Make sure they know what they have done well.

Be clear, but also what they can do to make that work better in future.

These can be very specific actions, which is my third point.

When we give feedback such as I would like to hear more about X.

This work isn't adequately structured. These comments are so vague it's almost impossible for a student to respond to them.

And if a student's work is unstructured, for example, the chances are they don't know what your expectations are of a well-structured essay.

Therefore, we need to be specific. Tell them this work is not adequately structured as it lacks an introduction

for example. We might then be further specific by giving them examples,

show them and share with them examples of well-structured essays, or in the example of the

I would like to hear more about X. That may sound to a student as though you want them to write more words.

Nobody wants to read more words. What we want are more words of substance.

Let the student know what those words should be.

I would like to hear more about X isn't going to give you that substance.

I would like to hear more reflections on.

I would like to see more depth in your analysis of. I would like to have heard more evaluation of the material presented.

This is a little more specific, but yet again, we can't assume that students understand what we mean by analysis or critical analysis, evaluation.

These are terms that we use every day and sometimes forget. We never stop to explain them.

Explain the terminology and give them specific examples.

What you would like them to work towards.

Lastly, make sure that your feedback and the language you use in your feedback reflects the grade you have given the student.

We use the QAA benchmarking standards here at Newcastle University and that gives us a clear set of language.

And the words that we can use to coincide with the grades we give 40 to 50 percent is satisfactory.

Where as 70 percent and up is excellent. If we mixed these words and these numbers up in the wrong order, we become dishonest.

There is no point fighting extremely complimentary feedback to a student who's only getting a 40 percent grade.

Tell them exactly what it is they have done in the work, what they have demonstrated to you, what they can do better.

And likewise, if a students work is excellent. Use those words.

Tell them this is excellent. Our feedback shouldn't be restricted to the top ranks of the QAA benchmarking.

Our students strive to achieve beyond that into their lives beyond the university.

And our feedback should support them in achieving this. Thank you, Chris.

Thank you again to Liv, Caroline and Chris for your time and input into this episode.

Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed this episode. If you want to learn more, please check out the show notes.

As always, remember to download our past episodes. Tell your friends and like and subscribe.

Thank you and goodbye.