

# FEEDING BACK POWERFUL TEXTS TO FEED FORWARD LEARNING

by Dr Gloria Latham, School of Education RMIT University

*We cannot change what we do until we change how we think, and we cannot change how we think until we change who we are.*

Stephanie Pace Marshall

As English teachers we seek out texts that will resonate with our students' lives, texts that will illuminate their world in new ways, challenge their current assumptions, and provide them with the courage to change or strengthen who they are. C. S. Lewis (1961: 137) reminds us that 'Literature enlarges our being by admitting us to experiences not our own. My own eyes are not enough for me ... Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough'.

In this paper I argue that many of the most powerful texts we provide students are authored by teachers in the form of feedback. This feedback often strengthens or impedes further learning and students' images of themselves as learners. We can hold fond memories of teachers who found something meaningful in a piece we wrote, spoke, sang, visualised or constructed. Through their considered words these teachers not only moved our thinking further but also encouraged us to see ourselves as worthy learners. We can also hold unpleasant memories of teachers who let us know softly or loudly that we were unworthy learners, teachers who told us we could not read deeply or sing, or draw, dance or write... Thus, the feedback we provide can be viewed as a powerful text for learning but it can also be viewed as a powerful weapon for impeding learning. Hattie and Timparley's (2007) extensive review of 500 meta-analyses on the effectiveness of student feedback found that negative feedback can be worse than no feedback at all.

Another extensive review of feedback by Black and William's (1998) draws together 250 studies that spanned all educational sectors. Not surprisingly, the review found there are substantial benefits of formative feedback to learning across all disciplines and across all levels of education. Feedback has extremely large and consistently positive effects on learning compared with other aspects of teaching or other interventions designed to improve learning. While students claim feedback is highly valued, a recent study of university students by Sinclair and Cleland (2007) found that less than half of the students, 46%, actually collected their formative feedback. Yorke, (2003) and Boud and Solomon (2003) have looked closely at the ways in which the feedback that is collected is interpreted by the students. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) and Ivancic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2001) explore some of the difficulties students have in deciphering the messages provided. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) also highlight the

importance of the feedback being understandable to students but caution that it must also be provided in a timely fashion and then be acted upon. Duncan (2007) examines the importance of moving the feedback forward.

The research confirms that whether the feedback provided is formative or summative it involves far more than the written comments that are recorded on pieces of assessable work. Every mark or remark, every gesture, facial expression, every act and every omission that occurs in and beyond the learning spaces is a form of feedback. While we continue to invest heavily in searching for worthy texts, analysing these texts, assessing and measuring student performance and providing extensive feedback, it is also necessary to invest time and energy documenting, analysing and dialoguing with others about the nature and content of the feedback that is imparted to students (Latham, 2009).

My interest in feedback stemmed from some critical incidents. After re-reading the (2001) narrative study of one exemplary teacher, Donald Forrester, a highschool teacher in North Carolina, I was struck by several confronting notions. Donald Forrester, the art teacher under scrutiny, is a teacher who was awarded an Outstanding Teacher prize by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Tom Barone went in search of the qualities that make Forrester an outstanding teacher. Barone says, (134) 'Forrester promoted self knowledge within his students so that each might act wisely in constructing a unique self-identity, rather than moving to replicate his own'. Then Barone asks:

*But what if Forrester had not advised students to 'follow your own heart' and do what you think is right for you? What if he had modeled a life narrowed by a prevailing cultural script?*

This question Barone raises resonated with me as I

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wondered to what degree my feedback is advising and encouraging students to follow my heart? What is inferred in the language I use? What sense of agency am I denying if students try to follow my heart? I seek to disrupt students' thinking and understand that adopting new thinking can be problematic. They are already *insiders* (Britzman, 2006) in terms of what it means to be a learner. They come with intimate knowledge and firmly ingrained images of the practices of schooling from direct experience. Common practices in schools tend to reinforce traditional beliefs and assumptions about learning, and how schools are organised with beliefs being deeply connected to identity formations around teaching. These ingrained practices get challenged, yet if students desire to *be on the right track* are they denying their beliefs in order to conform to what their teachers desire? Many are investing their time and energy in learning how to read their teachers instead of learning how to read and critique the literature. So I began questioning how I can disrupt students' thinking, provide unimagined possibilities while still allowing their personal voice to surface.

Feedback asks people to change the way that they are – change the way that they think – and often to change who they are. This changing is not superficial. It can foster learning, and the things that we learn; it shapes us and the cultural contexts that we inhabit. Feedback can also ask us to un-learn and also to re-learn. It can ask us to disrupt current thinking. Years later I began talking about strategies for successful feedback with a number of colleagues.

In 2008, a group of six of us in the School of Education at RMIT University began having informal conversations around the potential for effective feedback to strengthen learning and learner identity. We came together to explore how we might better our feedback practices and those of our colleagues. The lecturers, Nicky Carr, Jennifer Elsdon-Clifton, Robyn Colls, Michael Crowhurst, Julie Faulkner and I teach across a wide range of discipline areas and across all programs in the School, undergraduate and post graduate. In 2008 we received a grant from the College of Design and Social Context to conduct a research project we entitled: *Building and sustaining critical pedagogy and effective feedback strategies within communities of practice*.

Feedback in this project was defined as a written, or oral, exchange between staff and student(s), students and students, and staff and staff, that is both summative and formative in nature. Through the formation of communities of practice, the project sought to examine the existing and potential roles of timely individualised

critical feedback as learning opportunities that further support and sustain transformative views of education. We began by informally formulating some guiding principles for quality feedback for learning and assessment practices.

### Guiding principles for quality feedback

#### Feedback should:

- be formative and qualitative in nature
- have built in strategies for change
- empower students to enact strategies and skills for change
- allow students to challenge/disrupt pre-existing notions
- be ongoing throughout the course/semester or term
- be immediate and timely
- be constructive;
- consider the individual and collective – adjusted to individuals and/ or to groups
- be specific and without jargon
- target areas of students' strengths
- practice the model we wish for our students
- help students make developmental links
- be underpinned by a positive relationship between assessor and student
- linked to relevant and purposeful tasks
- reinforce common ideas around scholarship
- reinforce common ideas/view around best practice and pedagogy
- be resourced (this creates more workload issue for staff)
- be considerate of student workload;
- teach students how to give feedback and how to reflect ('feedback sandwich')
- offer transparency and balance within year levels and the program
- be part of ongoing explicit communication with members of the team and students of what is being undertaken and why
- lead to moderation conversations between teachers to inform future assessment and feedback practices: feedback between teaching staff, and from students to teaching staff
- give a sense of autonomy to the students.

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## Feedback as relational

As we formulated the action research project we began reading the literature around feedback in order to better articulate our individual and collective views. We were in agreement that feedback is dialogic, an ongoing conversation between teacher and student, student and student either oral or written. We recognised that this view reflects a particular contemporary set of understandings regarding what it means to be a teacher and what it means to be a learner, as well as regarding how learners and teachers create knowledge. We see feedback as 'discourse' or a 'social practice' that enables students to own their learning and to find ways to move their learning forward. These are the implicit messages we share and send forth to students. And yet, we became aware that what our feedback reflects may tell us far more about other beliefs. Ramona Tang (2000: 157) challenges notions of authority and asks ... 'if we implicitly allow our students to be who we explicitly encourage them to be?' Tang suggests that 'who the students are depends in part on who we are.' As we shared views the research team became aware that there were many tensions between what we said we wanted to do and the messages that were received.

Our first formal task as a research team was to wrestle with what quality feedback might look like, sound like and feel like and how we might document changes in students' behaviour. We began by examining Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) list of good feedback practices (2006), which are to:

- help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
- facilitate the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning
- deliver high-quality information to students about their learning
- encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching

We embraced the beliefs behind these feedback practices but felt the need to add qualities to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's list, which included:

- ensuring information to students feeds forward (Duncan, 2007) to future learning tasks
- providing timely and individualised feedback
- enabling constructive and consistent feedback across the School

We recognised that particular fields of study have some discipline specific needs that feedback should address. The year level, undergraduate or graduate, also influenced the nature of our response. For instance, in the current climate of teacher education we need to be responsive to criticisms of teachers' personal literacy skills. Pre-service teachers are often aware

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of their accountability in this area, and need to revise (or learn) metalinguistic elements of English. We also need to remind them, however, that control over the technicalities of English, while important for clear communication, is only one dimension of meaning-making.

This idea is captured in significant literacy frameworks, such as Bill Green's (1988) 3D model and the 4 Roles of the Reader (Luke & Freebody, 1990). In both models, spelling and syntactical features of language use are part of one dimension or role of a number of dimensions or roles contributing to powerful literacy practice. Another way of situating this approach is through discussing the tensions between the secretarial and authorial roles of the writer.

Our next step was to secure Ethics and then create an online survey to find out what sense our students made of feedback and what they desired. Two hundred students across all undergraduate and graduate programs in Teacher Education participated. Once completed we transcribed the data and it was analysed to draw forth emerging themes. These themes were interrogated further in a series of student and staff focus groups.

When describing the nature of the feedback received, students only described feedback in association with assessed tasks. There was no mention of informal feedback provided in tutorials, emails, online, in conferences or at exhibitions.

The students overwhelmingly supported their need to receive early feedback so that they had greater opportunity to improve their performance. They discussed the vast discrepancies between staffs' feedback practices,

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describing some teachers who only gave them ticks on a rubric which the students had difficulty interpreting (*'Is one tick good and two ticks excellent?'*) while other gave detailed, critical feedback. Many students felt they were getting mixed messages from their tutors. *'Sometimes I get feedback from one lecturer that my referencing is wrong like I should have indented or something and then the next lecturer says it's fine the way it is.'*

The students often mentioned that they couldn't understand the feedback they received because the writing wasn't legible or more often because the terminology wasn't clear. They expressed difficulty reading the meanings, trying to learn from our intended (coded) messages. They also expressed difficulty transferring the feedback into changed habits and practices.

Another strong finding was that the students appear to learn most from being informed about what they were doing incorrectly or what they had misunderstood and why. Feedback that was given as praise did little to foster learning.

### Some Surprises

Several issues raised by students surprised us. For instance, students were more highly aware (at varying year levels and at both undergraduate and graduate levels) than we imagined about the kinds of feedback they required. They were not asking for larger amounts of feedback but rather more informed and timely feedback.

When asked whether the grade or the feedback was most important they responded that feedback was most important. This came as a surprise because of the large number of students who fail to collect their assessed tasks. The students offered many explanations. They didn't collect their assignments when they couldn't get hold of their lecturers or when they didn't value the comments of the lecturer or tutor or value the assigned task.

We were also surprised by how little they appeared to feel they learn from the feedback they had received. They had difficulty describing anything the feedback taught them beyond surface features such as referencing style or clarity. There was no mention of their learning around the ideas expressed.

### Recommendations

After analysing the group interviews interim recommendations were proposed to our colleagues in a half day feedback workshop in late 2008. Here we asked each participant to commit to working on one aspect of their feedback practice which they identified on the day and to document the process in semester 1, 2009.

We offered the following possibilities:

- Feeding-forward: creating learning opportunities where the comments provided inform further study and opportunity to improve practice.
- Timely (or as David Boud describes it 'just in time' feedback) individualised feedback: providing students with feedback early in the semester and allowing some choice as to the type of feedback they want to receive.
- Informal feedback practices made more explicit to students: letting them know when you are providing formative feedback.
- Challenging /disruptive feedback that contests pre-existing notions: asking probing questions
- Developing feedback that further extends strong students
- More consistent and constructive feedback across the School

Postcards with their selected strategy(ies) were posted to staff who attended the workshop early in 2009 to remind them of their commitment to the process. We then interviewed those interested educators with a view to writing up a series of case studies that we will circulate to staff in the School of Education and beyond.

We feel we are heading in the right direction by becoming far more aware of the affect of our feedback practices and far more informed about existing possibilities. We are asking students to reread the feedback they received in previous courses and defend how they are systematically attending to this feedback. This has been revealing as it has raised awareness of the sheer quantity of secretarial comments teachers have provided rather than authorial comments about students' ideas. We have shared this finding with staff.

If feedback is considered a text with the possibility to be as life forming, challenging and empowering as a great novel, English teachers might select their words with care as they seek to perfect their skill.

*This is a version of a paper given at the 2009 AATE conference in Tasmania. To read this paper and other papers form the conference log into [www.aate.org.au](http://www.aate.org.au) and follow the prompts to the conference website.*

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## A Good Read...

LOVESONG by Alex Miller

I couldn't resist this book – the cover was so beautiful and reflected the Tunisian background of the characters, Houria and Sabiha in the book. It's narrated by Ken, who is an author who thinks he has finished his writing career but when he is told the story of their lovematch by John Patterner, husband of Sabiha, he is inspired to write again.

At first I was annoyed by the narrator. He seemed intrusive and interfered with the love story which I felt formed the central narrative. Stylistically, the rhythm of the lovesong in an exotic and romantic Parisian café setting was disturbed by the dullness of the narrator and his life in Melbourne. As you read on, however, you realise that the real story is not about the love match between an Australian and a Tunisian woman living in Paris but it's about the author embodied in the narrator and the role of the author as a thief.

After many years of marriage Sabiha realises that she is unfulfilled without a child. She remembers a song her grandmother used to sing about a woman venturing into the desert to kill a lion, which had been threatening her

children, and understands the message of the song "For her to take matters into her own hands." Her desire to be a mother is so strong that she focuses her attention on Bruno, father of eleven children, who delivers tomatoes to the shop.

After arriving in Australia with his wife and the child born from her infidelity, John shares his story to the author, without suspecting that his tale is being 'stolen'. Ken, the author, becomes like Sabiha in the story, yearning for the child of creativity so much that he steals life from another.

Miller implicitly raises interesting questions about the relationship of the author with the people about him. There are hints that he may be talking about himself – the narrator is an author whose last novel had the word farewell (*Landscape of Farewell*) as he believed it was his swansong and now perhaps Miller is playing with the word swansong in the title *Lovesong*.

This interesting novel from a well-established Australian author will make you think before talking to a writer about your life!

Mel Dixon