

**Faculty Development:
Learning from the Student Whilst Developing the Higher
Order Thinking Skills of Right-to-Try Adult Learners
within the Higher Education Setting-
A Self-Directed Reflective Process**

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Abstract

Two members of the Operating Department Practice (ODP) lecturing team were surprised to receive poor National Student Survey results surrounding student assessment feedback despite positive remarks from the external examiners. A student-centred intervention was sought that would encourage meaningful engagement with their assessment feedback by employing self-directed and reflective learning that would aid in the development of the higher-order thinking so vitally needed in the students' pursuit of providing quality perioperative patient care. A learning activity involving positive reinforcement of the feedback through the use of the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) was created. This intervention asks students to engage in this Reflection-for-Learning process and articulate their personal action plan based upon their assessment feedback. This method has led to improvements in learner engagement with the assessment feedback and a 100% overall satisfaction rating from the students in a subsequent National Student Survey. An unexpected development has been the movement toward a mutually supportive relationship between lecturers and students as students transform into empowered learners willing to shape their own learning experiences.

Introduction

Upon inspection of the results of the National Student Survey's (NSS) student's satisfaction survey it was revealed that many students in the operating department practitioner (ODP) course gave the lowest responses to questions pertaining to

assessment feedback indicating deep dissatisfaction. This was a surprise to the Operating Department Practice (ODP) lecturers team because the external examiner's report had stated, '*Overall, markers have provided students with constructive feedback and support; it has been observed that some markers provide excellent in depth feedback; this is particularly noteworthy and extremely helpful for students who find academic writing a challenge.*' Indeed an incumbent external examiner expressed in a report: '*I have been very impressed with the standard of guidance and support provided to the students, ensuring the assessment process is also a learning activity*'. This evidence revealed a clear disconnect between the students' and educators' perceptions of assessment feedback. The lecturers suspected poor student engagement with the feedback provided despite their many hours involved in creating feedback that would assist the students in their learning. Indeed, this disconnect was succinctly illustrated by a student, that had been presented with two sides of A4 paper of feedback on his essay, stated "Yeah, but that's not feedback that's my grade!"

A bit of background information

In the United Kingdom (UK), registered operating department practitioners (ODPs) provide patient care relating to anaesthesia, surgery and postanaesthesia care both autonomously and as part of a perioperative team (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2004). The ODP course is a widening access (also known as a right-to-try) programme in which the students come from diverse backgrounds, typically ranging in age from 18 to 55 years, and require a minimum academic attainment of five General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) (a requirement that is lower than most university courses). Their lack of exposure to further education may contribute to their inappreciation of the feedback provided. Many ODP students are the first in their family to venture into higher education. It is common for students to cite the emphasis on learning in both the university and hospital settings as strong attractors to the course.

The National Student Survey (NSS) was introduced in the UK as a result of the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (Clarke, 2003). This report stated that a national annual survey that explicitly addresses teaching quality would be conducted in each university to assist students in making choices that would meet their own diverse needs. Ten years on, not only do the results of the NSS surveys inform

potential students, but also provide an avenue for continuous improvement for all university courses. The conflicting plea for improvement in assessment feedback from the students and the clear commendation from those critiquing the practices of the educators resulted in bewilderment and frustration amongst the two ODP lecturers. Yet, it was clear that improvements were necessary.

With further reflection, the lecturers acknowledged that despite the guidance provided in the classroom, during one-to-one tutorials, and in the assessment feedback, many students failed to progress in their theory assessments thus affecting their ability to progress in their practical assessments in the clinical setting. It was noted that many students often made the same errors from written assessment to written assessment prompting educators to provide the same feedback suggestions over and over. One had to wonder if the students were actually reading their feedback. Many students asked for advice on how to improve their assessment, but many failed to make any reference to his or her individualised feedback and no students asked for advice in the utilisation of the feedback provided. Perhaps students could benefit from guidance in addressing their feedback. Clearly the students could benefit from a learning activity that would guide the students in reading and then utilising the individualised feedback provided. Thus the quest to create a learning tool based upon evidence that would be meaningful to the student began.

In search of the evidence: employability and professional standards

Although students often express their desire for future employment in the healthcare setting when they apply for the ODP course, many may not yet understand the difference between employment (simply having a job) and employability (possessing the qualities needed to not only maintain employment but also progress in the workplace over time) (Lees, 2002). Indeed employability is valued by the East of England Local Education and Training Board as this government body commissions the education of ODP students based upon local employment needs and graduate outcomes. Additionally, ODP course lecturers maintain close ties with operating department staff in area hospitals with the aim of assisting with the development and maintenance of the employability of hospital staff for the provision of high quality patient care. But the lecturers readily admit that creating and maintaining health care

employability is a complex process and can be difficult to foster in the developing adult learner.

In the UK the Health and Care Professions Council is a regulatory body that has established the Standards of Proficiency for operating department practitioners (Health Professions Council, 2008) with the intention of identifying the minimum standards necessary to protect members of the public. These standards require the practitioner to reflect and critically evaluate current practices and then use research to improve those processes in an evidence-based manner. These standards require the ODP to exercise personal initiative and effective self-management in recognising areas for improvement and initiating resolution of identified problems. Furthermore, these standards require the ODP practitioner to keep his or her skills and knowledge current through career-long learning (Health Professions Council, 2008). Guiding the adult student in developing and maintaining these standards can be challenging, particularly when there are some registered operating department practitioners that fail to demonstrate these ideals to the highest standard when mentoring students in the clinical setting.

In search of the evidence: the purpose and perceptions of feedback

It is worth considering that students and lecturers may not fully appreciate the purpose of assessment feedback. Reid and Fitzgerald (2010, p. 46) explain that within professional programmes, assessment processes must assess not only the technical and rational components needed to fulfil the professional role, but also the development of the self. They assert that it is necessary to guide the student to develop as a well-rounded, lifelong learning health practitioner that possesses the understanding, skills, efficacy, and metacognition required for professional competence and ongoing employability. This guidance can be provided through skilled assessment and feedback (Reid & Fitzgerald, 2010). When developing the curriculum for the operating department practitioner course, the lecturers had this aim in mind. Although it is well accepted that assessment reveals the students' current knowledge and performance, it is important to note that it also conveys what the students should be learning and how they should be developing (Reid & Fitzgerald, 2010, P. 46). After completing an assessment, students may identify areas where they

may lack sufficient knowledge or skill, but effective feedback reveals a true assessment of what has been achieved and what is yet to be learned. Yet, the poor NSS scores and the lecturers' observations revealed that even the best intentioned feedback is ineffective if the student fails to address the feedback in a manner that meaningful to the student.

In regards to the student that remarked “yeah, but that’s not feedback that’s my grade” when presented with his feedback one must assume that students do not appreciate the purpose of assessment feedback. Gibbon and Dearnley (2010, p. 73) do acknowledge that students “view the mark awarded as the most important aspect of any assessment” yet insist that a new student perspective is emerging in which students are seeking comprehensive feedback that they can use to improve their next assignment.

In search of the evidence: fostering student-centred, self-directed, reflective learning for the development of higher-order thinking

When working with students in guiding their learning it often becomes apparent that some students are simply collecting and memorising information rather than developing understanding and learning (Knight & Yorke, 2002). When working with struggling students, the lecturers have observed that many seem to be waiting to be told exactly what to learn and how to learn it. The natural maturation process is to move from dependency toward increasing self-directness, yet due to previous conditioning as dependent learners in former school experiences, adult students need assistance in overcoming this expectation (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012, p. 269). When adults learn in a self-directed manner, they learn more deeply and permanently than if taught as when they were children (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012, p. 269). Indeed this surface learning and learning dependence poses challenges to students in becoming lifelong learners (Race & Pickford, 2007, p. 22). Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (2009) assert that “lecturers that take a student-centred approach to teaching and learning will encourage students towards a deep approach to study.” Yet Weimer (2002) explains that one should not be surprised if students resist student-centred learning activities because they differ from traditional approaches to learning, require greater initiative, and involve more work.

The challenge with assessment feedback is to ensure that students understand their role in the process of assessment and feedback and how feedback can help them improve (Gibbon & Dearnley, 2010, p. 78). Reflection is an important aspect of the assessment process as this is a metacognitive skill that will enhance life-long learning and employability (Gibbon & Dearnley, 2010, p. 78). This begs the question: do educators fully understand the intended role of feedback and craft it in a manner that can be used appropriately by the student?

Lazear (2005, p. 12) explains that most educators agree that evidence that the student can synthesise and evaluate new learning, otherwise known as higher-order thinking, is proof of deep learning. He goes on to explain that higher-order thinking occurs when the student integrates new information with other knowledge, explores the personal implications, makes personal judgments regarding relevance, and creates plans for use of this new knowledge in his or her daily life. Students are encouraged to engage in higher-order thinking as this empowers them develop personal values and realise their responsibility to be effective and productive contributors to society (Lazear, 2005. P. 12). Yet McNeilla, Gospera, and Xu, (2012) readily admit that assessment of higher-order learning, such as problem solving, creativity and metacognition, continues to be a challenge .

With this evidence in mind, the lecturers concluded that creating a learning intervention that employed positive reinforcement of the feedback through the use of reflection was considered the most appropriate. The model of reflection used was the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) (Appendix 1). This model of reflection had been developed for use within this programme and continues to prove its value through student engagement. It asks the reflector to focus upon his or her learning and to include evidence to guide his or her personal development as an evidence based practitioner, with the last step of the model asking the reflector to create a personal develop plan. Thus the emergent hypothesis: Will the student's use of the Reflection-for-Learning model with his or her individualised assessment feedback change his or her perception of feedback and encourage self-directed and deeper learning that leads to higher ordered thinking?

Reflection-for-Learning

The Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) has the potential to meet many requirements of good feedback practice as well as help the student develop as a lifelong learner. Firstly, the *event* portion of the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) requires the student to recognise and identify an area in which there may be a problem, lack of understanding, or gap in their knowledge or understanding.

Secondly, for the *influence* portion of this model, the learner is asked to identify the impact the recognised *event* has upon the learner's development as a person and practitioner. The lecturers have observed that although the students often express emotions and self-perceptions, they are also encouraged to reach through and beyond initial reactions to look at the long range influence of the focus of their chosen *event*.

Thirdly, for the *overview* portion of the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) the learner is asked to research aspects of the event to move beyond current knowledge and develop further in an evidence based manner. Many students new to this model attempt to skip this part of the model often times deciding that they've made an error and they will simply avoid making such an error again. But this simply lends the student to the trials and tribulations of making error after error until he or she has learned all of the mistakes one must avoid. This may be acceptable in some aspects of life, but certainly unacceptable in the field of healthcare where errors can easily lead to patient harm.

For the *synthesis* portion of the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) the student is asked to take the new evidence discovered and apply this to his or her identified event demonstrating new evidence based thinking and perhaps a different approach to the *event* that will affect future strategies and practice. Lastly, for the *personal development plan* portion of this reflective model, the learner is required to formalise this synthesis by creating a plan to continue to employ this new learning and identify resources needed in order to re-encounter the identified event once again. This is another part of the reflective process that some students fail to appreciate. The Higher Education Academy (2007) asserts that the primary objective of creating a personal development plan is to aid the student in

understanding what and how he or she is learning, to empower the student to take responsibility for his or her learning, and to encourage an independent and positive attitude toward learning throughout one's career and life. Due to the inclusion of a personal development plan, the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) is not cyclical, but helical (Appendix 2) as the personal development plan is intended to propel the learner forward to new experiences, learning, and development.

The intervention: reflecting upon the assessment feedback

In efforts to teach the students how to approach his or her assessment feedback, students were asked to engage in a formative learning activity that utilised the Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) by using their feedback as the *event*. This encouraged the learner to look beyond the letter grade earned and view their feedback and learning in a broader and holistic manner. Prompts for each step of the reflective model were provided to guide the student through this process. For example for the *influence* portion of the reflection students were asked: How does this class or unit and its related learning outcomes influence my educational goals? Why is this learning important? How does this affect my ability to reach my goals? The *overview* portion was also expanded to suggest the students consider: What did I learn whilst engaging in the learning related to this class or unit? What did I learn whilst preparing for this assessment? What are the gaps in my understanding of this topic? For the process of *synthesis*, the student prompts were: How much of this new learning has been incorporated into my clinical practice? Have I eliminated any theory/practice gaps? Did I demonstrate in my assessment task that I have met the learning outcomes? Finally the student was prompted to create a *personal development plan* by asking: Did I adequately express that I have met the learning outcomes? What did I do well? How can I be more successful when encountering this *event* once again? What resources will I need to improve? How can I take this information and move forward in my learning (even if this is the end of this class or unit)?

An important part of this intervention was the request for suggestions for improvement with the assessment feedback that was provided by the educator.

Students were asked to articulate which part of the feedback helped them the most and what might improve their engagement with future assessment feedback.

Early Results

This learning activity was well received by the students perhaps because it was intended to help them improve in a variety of manners, but also because it is a symbiotic process as it generates feedback for the educator. This allowed the students to express their uncertainty in interpreting the feedback. It was also revealed that many students needed assistance in appropriately prioritising aspects of the feedback. It is with the students' suggestions for improvement that the lecturers have looked to continually improve their feedback methods.

Going forward

It is important to acknowledge that there will always be an element of resistance when change is suggested, not only for the students but for the lecturers as well (Gibbon & Dearnley, 2010, p. 78). This experience revealed to the lecturers that although it is often the students that are asked to change, realistically the lecturers may need to change as well. There is much to be gained through a mutually supportive relationship between lecturers and students, especially as students transform into empowered learners willing to independently shape their own learning experiences (Race & Pickford, 2007, p. 27). As the lecturers have been reminded that assessment and feedback is best when it is provided *for* learning, rather than *of* learning (Gibbon and Dearnley, 2010, p. 79) student suggestions have created a need to scrutinise and change how feedback is provided. For example, because this process has revealed that students sometimes misinterpret the language used by the lecturer, examples are now also provided to add clarity to the message. Because students have demonstrated difficulty prioritising the suggestions for improvement, feedback now includes the 'top three areas for improvement'. Realising that students sometimes read their feedback in a defensive manner, the assessment feedback has begun to be more 'forward-pointing', also known as 'feeding-forward' (Race & Pickford, 2007, p. 116) with a more consistent focus of improving on the student's next assessment instead of simply feeding back on what has already been completed.

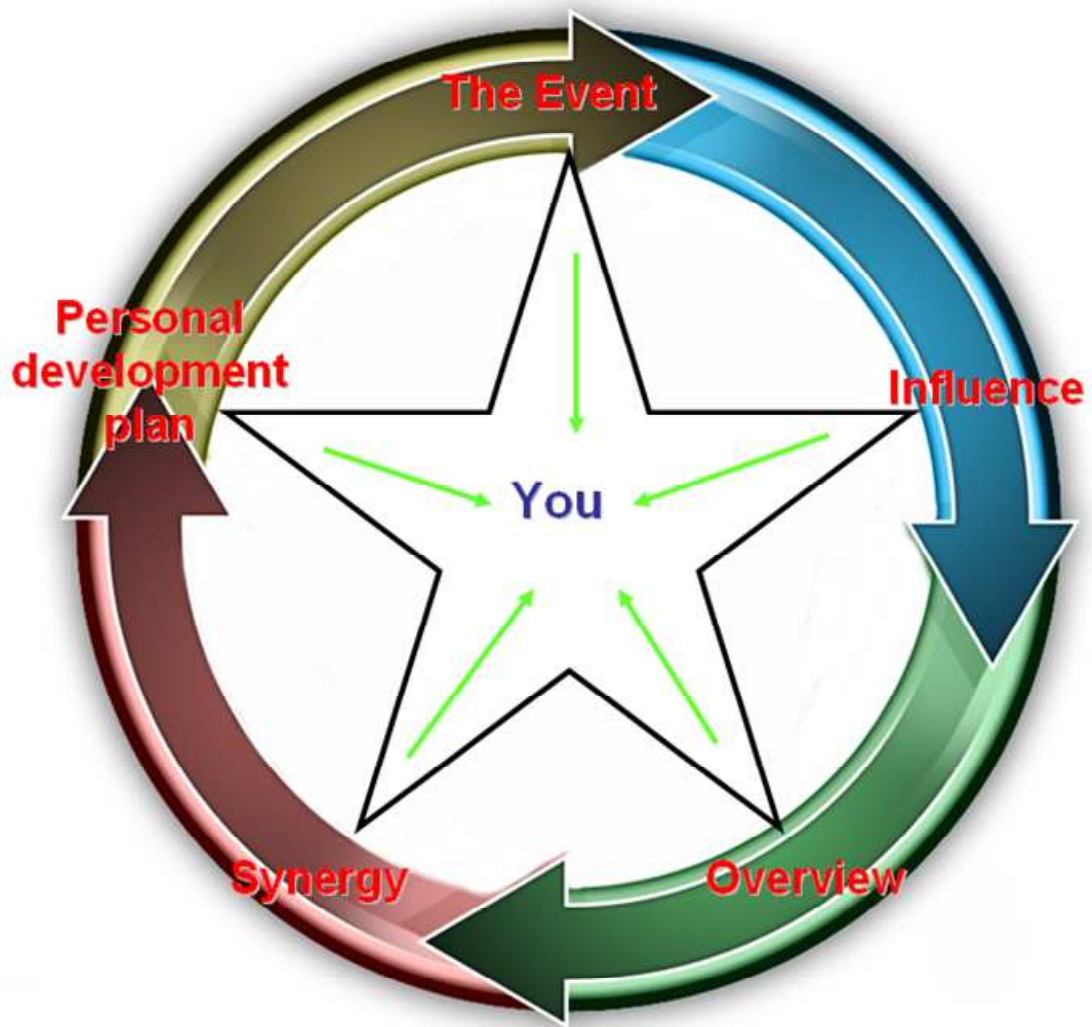
This student-centred intervention has helped the lecturers learn to continually seek students' insight in not only the assessment feedback but in other areas of the course as well. Encouraging more student/lecturer collaboration with the aim to strengthen the quality of learning appears to have been successful. After the implementation of this intervention the ODP course earned a 100% overall satisfaction rating from the students through the subsequent NSS survey!

Using the Reflection-for-Learning model for many types of learning

The Reflection-for-Learning model (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) is a versatile tool and was used in the construction of the intervention described within this paper as follows: *the event* was the identification of poor NSS scores regarding feedback and the recognition that many students continued to make the same errors assessment after assessment. The *influence* was the poor student engagement with the feedback that negatively impacted on student learning and frustrated the lecturers, for whom marking and creating worthwhile feedback required substantial time and hard work. The *overview* was the exploration of current evidence relating to professional standards, employability, feedback, student-centred learning, self-directed learning, and reflective learning for the development of higher-order thinking. The *synthesis* involved the creation of a student-centred intervention using Reflection-for-learning (Beckwith & Beckwith, 2008) to help the student realise the value of their assessment feedback and learn how to move forward in their educational goals. The *personal development plan* included adopting a new attitude toward student/lecturer collaboration with the aim to strengthen the quality of learning within the ODP course.

Appendix 1

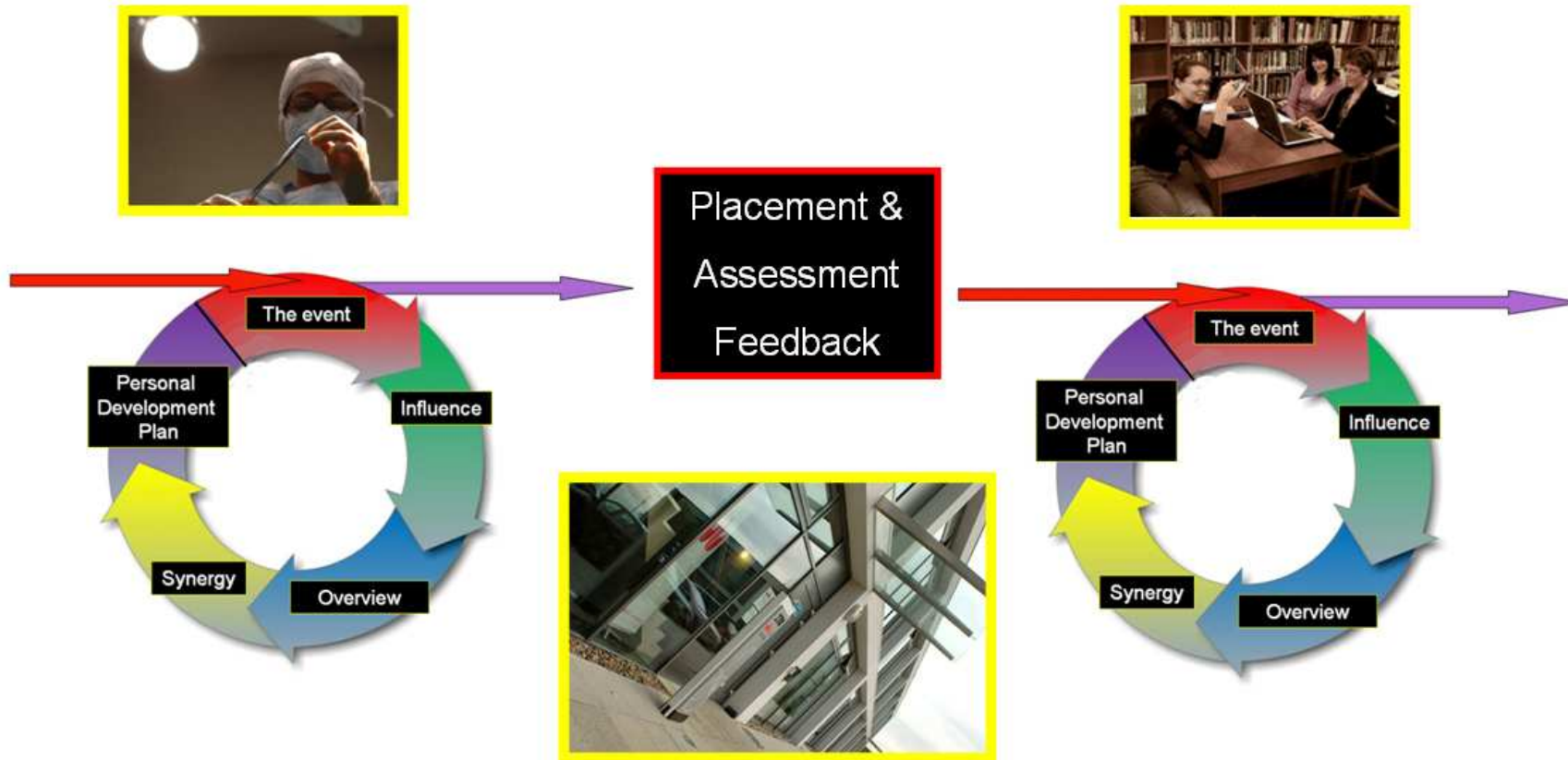
Reflection-for-learning



Beckwith, 2005

Appendix 2

Helical representation of Reflection-for-Learning



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