

Reconceptualising feedback in higher education – Developing a dialogue with students edited by Stephen Merry, Margaret Price, David Carless and Maddalena Taras. New York: Routledge. 2013. pp. 240.

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The monograph is edited by experts from a think-tank, a way of scientific collaboration rather unusual in Central-Eastern-Europe (CEE) and the majority of contributors are from the UK or other English-speaking countries (USA, Australia) with the only exception of the University of Hong Kong. As the result of the editors' background, the book offers a more down-to-earth and practical, change-driven approach to feedback in higher education than what you might expect from pure academia-nurtured works. As stated by the editors, feedback is such an essential part of each dimension of the pedagogical cycle, it "is a crucial element of teaching, learning and assessment" (Merry et al. 2013, cover) and according to the reviewer's belief, it is the essential path to academic and professional socialisation, "mastery", a fundamental component of each discussion and conversation that takes place in higher education institution classrooms.

The editors promise to cover a huge gap, from analysing current trends on feedback in higher education, to identifying key factors for effective feedback practices, describing change dimensions caused by implementing new feedback strategies and providing successful examples and best practices. Consequently, the targeted audience ranges from strategic policy-makers, to institutional level developers and change-managers, researchers, tutors, student representatives and academics in general, which covers all actors of the higher education arena at all levels. Such an overarching goal makes the reader curious and wishing to test if these aims are met in the end, especially for someone coming from a CEE background.

As for the structure of the content, the first part of the book on the state-of-the-art of feedback in higher education was edited by Taras and contains students' and institutions perspectives on the issue together with some guiding standards and principles. The second part of the book – edited by Carless – details students' and tutors' roles in the feedback process, thus pointing out several intervention possibilities in the pedagogy of higher education. The third part of the book that was edited by Price gives the audience an overview of the institutional processes that can be inspired by constructive feedback in higher education, that is, the ways we can implement learning-oriented, positive, community-based classroom practices to achieve planned educational change in the tertiary sector. The reviewer follows the same thematic structure in the review.

The approach that is taken by the editors is the so-called evidence-based perspective that feeds from and to experience with sound theoretical support (for example, social learning theory, learning theories, consumerism and massification in higher education) and the motto is "feedback-for-learning" (Merry et al. 2013, Foreword), for tutors to communicate efficiently, support and engage students, for students to learn and improve, and above all – and perhaps most important for teacher education students – to model the feedback process to be used in the classroom and at the future workplaces as well. Feedback is seen as an opportunity for learning, contrary to the

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standardised testing and grade-driven epidemic in education; an opportunity for continuous and interactive dialogue as opposed to summative, formative evaluation; a call for fair, criteria-based, explicit marking with the aim of improving learning; a way to integrative different modules, academic values and course works to develop self-assessment and point towards professional roles – a crucial element for future teachers’ reflective attitude (note by the reviewer); and a path towards academic roles in creating sound and ethical critique.

The problems around feedback involve diverse dimensions and perspectives. Such issues have been detected by a long time ago (Course Experience Questionnaire CEQ, National Student Survey NSS data) but data is not analysed in detail and still, serious educational policy decisions are made relying on these non-persistent analyses (Yorke 2013). Besides simplistic and limited measures to examine feedback efficiency, student union surveys also revealed further problems, such as uni-dimensional feedback, or students having difficulty in utilising, interpreting, and applying feedback (Bols and Wicklow 2013, Sambell 2013). Furthermore, it is a time-consuming task to write feedback especially if tutors apply individually interpreted, latent and differentiated academic standards (Bloxham 2013, Walker 2013). All these areas serve as points for improvement that have inspired and are discussed in the book.

The editors and authors provide the solution to all these problems: high-level and complex learning where feedback is continuous, sustainable, “dialogic and integral to teaching and learning” (Merry et al. 2013, Preface), both at the course- and institutional-level (system policy, departmental policy on feedback, course curricula, task-level feedback, etc.), feedback comes from varied sources (tutor, peers, self, verbal, written, presentations, comments, etc.), and relies on self- and peer-review to bridge the challenges of “resource-constrained educational environment” (Merry et al. 2013, Preface, Carless 2013) and support students’ professional development (Orsmond et al. 2013). Each part of the solution is explained and described in detail, supported by examples and best practices without having the handbook-approach to the feedback issue. What is even more, the ethical dimension of providing feedback is emphasized throughout the book, beginning with publicly set criteria and standards through open and timely dialogues to giving constructive critique.

Merry and colleagues’ book is more than a collection of research papers, this is evidence-based work grounded in theory. Starting from theory, it is revealed that the definitions and characteristics of the concept of feedback are so diverse that it is extremely difficult to understand each other but the Agenda for Change explains all efforts well (Taras 2013, Price et al. 2013). By arriving at a common conceptual ground, the book is lead by a unified synthesis, driven by theory and empirical research, relying on clearly set and tested (classroom-based and empirically verified) guidelines and principles, and what is rare in higher education research, it includes student voices/representatives. Throughout the work we see integrity-driven and learning-oriented pedagogy where all the actors and participants reach for the same goal, to develop and improve themselves, to become members of professional and/or academic communities.

The authors promise that “issues discussed are equally relevant to many European, Australian and North American Universities” (Merry et al. 2013, Preface), which is true in general, since global issues are described in each chapter, however, the

degree of agency and engagement shown by English student union representatives for example (Bols and Wicklow 2013) is striking for a CEE reader, who is coming from a background of limited – for times even repressed – student power and higher educational actorship. Besides, the book offers valuable content for educational governance/policy-makers and administrators for a critical perspective on how educational research data is used, how economic and market-driven, quality assurance issues impact the teaching and learning process, which is a phenomenon present in CEE countries as well. The work offers strategies, practices and notions that will serve every university and each classroom independent of the geographical, political or social unit that they belong to.

As the reviewer is particularly interested in teacher education students it is especially important that the book – besides offering ideas and strategies for all institutions and higher education actors and despite stemming from business school education – covers topics and includes suggestion that might be specifically applicable to this unique student target group. By emphasizing feedback as modelling classroom behaviour, practising reflective thinking and acknowledging the moral-ethical part of “humane teaching and assessment” (Merry et al. 2013, Foreword), the responsibility that it takes to provide feedback to learners and/or peers and the ability to judge quality (Sadler 2013), readers are given useful and specific guidelines for the teaching profession itself – outside the academia.

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