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The Perception of Students and Faculty Staff on the Role of Constructive Feedback

Abdulghani Ali Al-Hattami
Asst. Prof., Teachers College, University of Bahrain, Bahrain, *aalhattami@uob.edu.bh*

One of the most effective ways for teachers to ensure that their students have obtained the specified learning outcomes is to provide them with constructive feedback. If students are not given the optimal feedback and are not asked to re-do the work, teachers will not know whether the educational goals have been met. This study aimed to investigate whether Bahrain Teachers College students receive constructive feedback from their teachers. It explored both teachers' and students' perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback and how feedback may improve academic achievements. The sample consisted of 200 students and 37 faculty members representing the different academic divisions of the Bahrain Teachers College, majors and year of study. The results showed that students and instructors agree on the importance of providing constructive feedback as a crucial tool to the process of teaching and learning. A significant difference was found between students and their instructors' perceptions on whether constructive feedback is provided in their classrooms. Some recommendations are provided for teachers on how to reinforce students' learning by giving constrictive feedback and close the gap by seeking students' satisfaction with their learning.

Keywords: constructive feedback, teaching, learning, learning outcomes, student

INTRODUCTION

One of the most neglected issues in educational practices is giving constructive feedback to students (Walker, 2009). Teachers tend to score students' work and give them grades but constructive feedback is rarely provided to students to make sure the intended learning outcomes are met. This could be an important reason for students not fully achieving the required learning outcomes of higher education in the Kingdom of Bahrain, in general, and the learning outcomes of Bahrain Teachers College (BTC), in particular. BTC focuses on nine competencies that students have to master before graduation. These competencies are: content knowledge; student development; diverse learners; instructional strategies; learning environment (classroom management);

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assessment; communication and instructional technology; school, community, and civic engagement; and reflective practice, ethics and professionalism. At the end of their last year at BTC, students are asked to make a presentation in which they explain and provide evidence that they have achieved the nine required competences during their study in the college. Being involved in the evaluation panel for several years and following discussions with colleagues involved in the evaluation process, the concern was raised that many students appeared to be struggling to comprehensively achieve the BTC competencies that are taught in the courses they study.

Giving constructive feedback helps close the gap between the current and desired students' performance. Bloom (1976) suggested that 'feedback can reveal errors in learning shortly after they occur … a self-correcting system so that errors made at one time can be corrected before they are compounded with later errors'. Providing constructive written feedback to students is essential to encouraging deep learning and help meet the intended goals. Constructive feedback is the single most beneficial support teachers can provide for their students (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Irons, 2007; Yorke, 2003).

The shift from traditional testing of knowledge towards assessment for learning has grown incrementally in the 21st century (Dochy, Gijbels, and Segers, 2006). Traditionally, students have graduated from colleges and universities with the required knowledge in their disciplines, where the focus of education is on the mastery of knowledge. This knowledge by itself does not help graduates cope with the rapid developments of this century. The 21st century requires teaching and assessing higher order thinking (e.g. cognitive skills, problem-solving, and reasoning) rather than factual knowledge and lower order thinking. To achieve higher order learning, teachers should provide their students with clear constructive feedback appropriate for their grade level. Assessment followed by constructive feedback should attempt to assess the extent to which learning outcomes of the course or programme are reinforced and consequently met. If learning outcomes are not met, educational programmes would suffer from graduates having unmet objectives which may harm the country academically, socially, and economically.

The Bahraini government has been facilitating teacher education and providing all the means to produce highly qualified teacher graduates. The government founded the Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) and gave this authority responsibility to establish rules and standards and to obligate all educational institutions to abide by these rules and meet the BQA standards in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers in the Bahrain Teachers College must verify that all required learning outcomes are achieved by their students. The BQA's role then is to check whether the learning outcomes are consistent with the National Qualifications Framework by using different measurement tools. Feedback is an effective tool for teachers to enhance the achievement of learning outcomes and to identify levels of learning development that students reach. If students fail to achieve learning outcomes, feedback can redirect them to the track that leads to achieving the required goals, increase content area knowledge and master generic skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review showed that feedback could enhance the learning process for students as well as teaching performance (Carlson, 1979; Dinkmeyer and Losoncy, 1980; Schutz and Weinstein, 1990). Teachers have a major role in improving teaching and learning processes and outcomes through providing constructive feedback. Good teaching practice involves checking students' progress regularly and adjusting their teaching strategies accordingly. Feedback is said to help teachers recheck the effectiveness of their teaching and identify areas that need improvement.

Acheson and Gall (1987) argued that 'students of teachers who emphasized teaching behaviors such as praise and encouragement tend to learn more than students of teachers who emphasize criticism and punishment'. Furthermore, Lipnevich and Smith (2009) in an experimental study of 464 university students concluded that students who were given detailed feedback performed better than students who were given grades or praise. Nevertheless, Kulhavy et al. (1985) and Schimmel (1983) argued that very complex feedback does not boost learning compared to simpler feedback. Effective feedback should be provided constructively and simply, and be focused and compatible with students' prior knowledge (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Feedback is most effective when it is effectively timed and clearly linked to learning outcomes.

Yorke (2003) stated that the reasons that lead teachers to fail to use constructive written feedback are their focus on grades and standards, large class size, and commitment to traditional teaching practices without keeping up-to date with teaching innovations. However, some teachers believe that feedback does not always help learning or benefit performance (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Those teachers may be confused about how to deliver feedback effectively. They may focus on the learners rather than the task. Many people misguidedly assume that using expressions like 'Good', 'Very poor', 'Well done', 'Please try harder' are what is meant by feedback. Such words and phrases are most common form of feedback – yet have little impact on learning. Cohen (1985) defined feedback as 'one of the more instructionally powerful and least understood features in instructional design' (p. 33). Systematic feedback will lead not only to effective teaching but also to positive learning. Written feedback is constructive if it provides clear expectations about students' performance, encourages students to increase efforts and provides directions about their future learning. Therefore, in this study the author tried to find answers to the following research questions:

1- To what extent are Bahrain Teachers College students provided with constructive feedback by their teachers?

2- What are the students and teachers' perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback?

3- What are the students' and teachers' perceptions about the barriers to providing constructive feedback?

METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach to answer the research questions. It aimed to examine current practices in giving constructive feedback to BTC students and to

determine if there are significant differences between students' and their instructors' responses. It also explored students' and teachers' perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback to improve students' academic achievements.

Samples

This study involved a purposive sample of 37 teachers and 200 students. The sample of students consisted of 8 males and 192 females. As male students form approximately 5% BTC students, this gender distribution ensured that males were appropriately represented in the study sample.

Measurement

A questionnaire was used to collect study data. The questionnaire comprised three areas: students' and instructors' perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback (5 items), their perceptions about the extent to which students are provided with constructive feedback (12 items), and their perceptions about the barriers to provide and be provided with constructive feedback (5 items). Responses were recorded on a Likert-scale (Strongly agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, and Strongly disagree = 1). A space for comments was also provided. The questionnaire was developed by the author based on a literature review and then validated by two education experts.

For closed questions the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to test for differences in responses between students and teachers. Coding schemes were developed for the open-ended questions to provide themes in responses. An online form of the questionnaire was sent to students through the student information services at the college and to faculty members through the Dean's office. A hard copy was also distributed to students and faculty if they did not respond to the online survey to achieve as high a response rate as possible.

FINDINGS

Overall, 37 teachers (58.7% of all BTC teachers) and 200 students (44% of all BTC students) responded to the survey. The sample reflected the students in each of the four years of study (1st year – 4th year) and each of the four departments (Arabic & Islamic Studies, English Language Education, Mathematics and Science, and Cycle One) (see table 1). Cycle One refers to grades one to three of primary education.

Table 1
Distribution of students by year of study and their majors

		Major				Total N (%)
		Arabic & Islamic Studies	English Language Education	Math & Science	Cycle One	
Year of study	1st Year	5	2	1	8	16 (8.0%)
	2nd Year	4	2	2	4	12 (6.0%)
	3rd Year	33	32	27	47	139 (69.5%)
	4th Year	6	3	9	15	33 (16.5%)
All Years		48 (24.0%)	39 (19.5%)	39 (19.5%)	74 (37.0%)	200 (100%)

Faculty members included 18 males and 19 females. Of these, 13 were lecturers, 22 were assistant professors, one was an associate professor, and one a full professor. Faculty participants represented five departments as show in table 2. Table 2 also shows the distribution of their teaching experience in years.

Table 2
Distribution of faculty members by their departments and years of experience

		Major										
	Years	Arabic & Islamic Studies		English Language Education		Math & Science	Cycle One	Other	Total N (%)			
Teaching experience	1-3	1		1		1	0	2	5 (13.5%)			
	4-6	1		2		1	2	0	6 (16.2%)			
	7-10	0		1		1	1	0	3 (8.1%)			
	>10	4		7		7	4	1	23 (62.2%)			
	All	6	(16.2%)	11	(29.7%)	10 (27.0%)	7 (18.9%)	3 (8.1%)	37 (100%)			

Importance of Feedback

Both students and instructors agreed on the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback to improve students' academic performance. Their answers were similar for all the items in this category with a range of 4.40 – 4.68, except for the fourth item, 'feedback focuses on behaviour rather than the person' (Mean = 3.82, SD = 1.06). This item may not have been clear to some students as the standard deviation was 1.06. The item referred to what a student does rather than what the instructor knows about the student. Overall all the answers indicated positive perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving construction feedback (See table 3).

Table 3
Student and faculty responses for the importance of providing feedback

Items	Students	Faculty	*P*-value
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Feedback helps students to improve their learning	4.6 (0.68)	4.7 (0.63)	*P* = 0.405
Feedback helps students to check their performance	4.5 (0.74)	4.7 (0.59)	*P* = 0.267
Feedback helps students to be self-regulated about their learning	4.4 (0.78)	4.6 (0.60)	*P* = 0.161
Feedback focuses on behavior rather than the person	3.8 (1.06)	4.5 (0.87)	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is a powerful tool to help students learn	4.6 (0.68)	4.7 (0.53)	*P* = 0.448
Overall	4.4(0.78)	4.6 (0.67)	*P* = 0.009*

*Statistically significant difference between students and faculty members responses

Some faculty and students also provided additional information about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback. One instructor wrote 'Without feedback, students are missing a lot of opportunities for learning'. Another commented that 'Overall, feedback encompasses all areas of students' performance including behavior, attendance, and participation in class'. Although comments were formed to elicit classroom behavior assessments, some instructors blamed the students for focusing on the grades rather than on the feedback. For example, one said 'It is sad that students

worry only about their assignment grades and do not see it as a learning tool whereby they can learn something from the teacher's comments or feedback'. Another went further to say that 'Many students repeat the same mistakes after receiving the feedback. They focus only on grades and do not listen carefully to the feedback'.

Students also asserted the importance of feedback. One student stated that 'I believe that feedback is an essential part of learning process' and another that 'We really need feedback to improve'. A third student stated that 'Feedback is very important to develop students and motivate them to learn, but it should be in the right way'. These responses show that both students and teachers value the giving and receiving of constructive feedback.

Constructive Feedback

The second research question explored the extent to which BTC students are provided with constructive feedback, from the students and instructors perspectives. There was a clear difference between the two groups. Students' response mean was 3.28 (SD = 1.36), whereas the response mean for faculty members was 4.47 (SD = 0.68). Faculty members believe that they provide constructive feedback that is effective, consistent, objective, fair, and enhances learning to students inside and outside classrooms. However, the students' responses were almost neutral with a range of 2.92 - 3.82. The descriptive statistics for the 12 items is presented in table 4.

Table 4
Students and faculty responses for the status of giving and receiving feedback

Items	Students		Faculty		*P*-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Feedback is provided effectively	3.4	1.05	4.5	0.69	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided to all students	3.4	1.11	4.7	0.56	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided in different ways (oral and written)	3.5	1.09	4.6	0.60	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided at any time during the learning process	3.1	1.12	4.4	0.89	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided consistently	2.9	1.09	4.4	0.73	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided objectively	3.5	3.80	4.7	0.51	*P* = 0.048*
Feedback is provided fairly	3.1	1.13	4.6	0.59	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided inside and outside the classroom	3.1	1.28	4.6	0.73	*P* = 0.000*
Feedback is provided to enhance learning	3.8	1.04	4.9	0.35	*P* = 0.000*
Strengths and weaknesses are explained when feedback is provided to students	3.3	1.22	4.6	0.55	*P* = 0.000*
Students accept feedback whether it is positive or negative	3.4	1.14	3.4	1.19	*P* = 0.682
You check if the feedback has been understood	3.1	1.23	4.3	0.81	*P* = 0.000*
Overall	3.3	1.36	4.5	0.68	*P* = 0.000*

In open-ended responses, students indicated that it is hard for them to get feedback from their instructors. One student wrote 'Doing major final projects and not receiving feedback is unfair'. Another stated that 'Most of the time we don't get the feedback until we ask about it'. Student responses suggested that there are few instructors who provide constructive feedback or who provide it systematically and fairly. For example a student wrote 'Some instructors discriminate between the students regarding feedback. If you are an excellent student, you will always get positive feedback regardless the level of the "thing" you perform. Unfair'.

Faculty members, on the other hand, contended that they do provide constructive feedback to their students. One instructor stated:

Assessment and formative assessment have been a focus of our classroom. We even discussed why "Wrong", "Good job" etc, are not adequate feedback. We specifically said that feedback must be useful, students must know what is correct or incorrect, and why and how to correct it. As a general practice, the answer keys were posted on Moodle (The University's web platform). In addition, both classroom discussion and a slide presentation were used after each assessment. Students do not accept the negative feedback unless it is provided with evidence.

Barriers to Providing Constructive Feedback

The third research question was about the barriers for faculty to providing constructive feedback to students from both students' and teachers' perspectives. The responses showed that students and instructors were both somewhat neutral about the listed barriers. The students' mean response in this category was 2.65 (SD = 1.24) and the instructors' mean was 3.08 (SD = 1.19), indicating they neither agree nor disagree about each of the listed reasons for not giving and receiving constructive feedback (Table 5). They do not think that faculty need more time to provide feedback, have limited information available about students, that learning outcomes are not kept in sight, or that lack of knowledge about feedback or undesirable consequences could be considered barriers or acceptable reasons for not providing feedback.

Table 5
Students and faculty responses for the barriers of providing feedback

Items	Students		Faculty		*P*-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
It is time consuming	3.5	1.20	3.7	1.23	*P* = 0.296
Limited information is available about students' performance	3.4	1.14	2.8	1.16	*P* = 0.004*
The learning outcomes are not kept in sight	3.4	1.73	2.8	1.26	*P* = 0.056
There is inadequate knowledge for providing constructive feedback	3.4	1.13	2.1	1.24	*P* = 0.067
There are concerns about undesirable consequences for learners	3.2	0.99	3.2	1.04	*P* = 0.968
Overall	3.34	1.24	3.08	1.19	*P* = 0.060

*Statistically significant difference between students and faculty members responses

Some faculty members provided additional information, such as 'Generally, feedback is not provided if the students are not willing or cannot take it well'. One instructor also showed concern about potential undesirable consequences for students, stating that 'Giving good feedback requires thinking of student potential misunderstanding and or confusion while planning the lesson. Instructors who do not plan carefully - or in detail - may not be able to think well enough on their feet to provide feedback'. Furthermore, one instructor proposed that the reason that 'most instructors do not provide (constructive) feedback [because they] are just not willing to put in the time and effort'.

Students, on the other hand, indicated that 'Feedback is provided for those who ask about it'. Other students commented 'Instructors here do not care about the students' progress (some do not even know their students' names). The excuse is that there is not enough time for the feedback but actually there is' and 'I have to ask about my feedback in BTC. Teachers should provide [it to] me without asking'. The students further mentioned that 'Most instructors never appreciate the time spent on each assignment and they make the student upset with their limited feedback'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore teachers' and students' perceptions about the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback and how such feedback may improve students' academic achievement. The results showed that both teachers and students realize the importance of feedback on students' learning. These findings agree with studies in other countries about this topic (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Irons, 2007; Yorke, 2003). The results also agree with many other studies showing that constructive feedback enhances learning and teaching (Carlson, 1979; Dinkmeyer and Losoncy, 1980; Schutz and Weinstein, 1990). Nevertheless, the literature also shows that some practitioners believe that feedback does not always help learning or benefit performance (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), contradicting the results of this study.

The results of this study are in line with the findings of Hattie and Timperley (2007) that to enhance learning, feedback should be provided effectively to all students consistently, fairly and soon after the students have done the task. Providing constructive feedback has a crucial effect on students learning as was concluded by Lipnevich and Smith (2009). When giving feedback the focus needs to be on the behavior rather than the person; meaning what a student does rather than on what is known about who she or he is.

Although most teachers have difficulty finding time to give all students the feedback they need when they need it (Yorke, 2003), in this study most teachers and students did not see that time or any other reason could be deemed a barrier to not providing constructive feedback.

The information provided to students to improve their learning can come from different sources (tests, quizzes, performance tasks, projects, and assignments) during the academic year. Based on the students' performance teachers can give students constructive feedback. To ensure the effectiveness of the feedback, the learning outcomes should be clearly stated, a rubric for students' performance should be

explained to students as they implement the tasks and collect the information, and constructive feedback should be provided to students who need it along with encouragement for good achievers. In feedback, teachers should suggest learning activities and learning tools for the students to improve their performance. Consistency in giving constructive feedback will lead to credibility to the programme and prevent discrepancies in performance. Teachers should give praise where it is due and turn student failings into opportunities for constructive feedback. It seems clear that constructive feedback may lead to successful teaching and learning as well as personal satisfaction for both teachers and students. Feedback needs to be provided systematically, consistently, effectively, and objectively with an aim to achieve the desired learning outcomes and make the process of teaching and learning fruitful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, the author recommends that teachers should provide their students with clear constructive feedback appropriate for their grade level. Assessment followed by a constructive feedback provides an assessment of the extent to which learning outcomes of the course or the programme are reinforced and consequently met. Faculty of Teachers Colleges internationally should:

- realize the importance of giving constructive feedback by monitoring the progress of their students, refining their curriculum, and adjusting their teaching strategies.
- diagnose and improve educational programmes based on students' perceptions of whether they receive constructive feedback.
- monitor the quality of education, direct resources and align between students' performance with intended learning outcomes.

- ensure lifelong learning. Feedback helps in upgrading and ensuring the quality of higher education.

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