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TOWARDS DIALOGIC FEEDBACK CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection of a strategic project on feedback system enhancement carried out at Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in Finland during the years 2015-2017. It is a retrospective of a pedagogical development project aiming at documenting the work completed and sharing the best practices. I believe that many of you can find an echo in this story. This paper describes the learning track taken and the lessons learned.

BACKGROUND

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (later Metropolia) is a multidisciplinary university of applied sciences (UAS) celebrating its 10th birthday this year. Metropolia started in 2008 as a merger of two former UAS with a long history in education. Metropolia is the largest UAS in Finland educating students in the fields of technology, social services, health care, business, and culture and arts. Over 16700 students and 1000 staff members form a learning community in three cities of the Helsinki metropolitan area.

Educational development at Metropolia is strongly based on its strategy and the pedagogical policies. The strategy of the years 2013-2016 was based on megatrends, vision, strategic goals and values. It was implemented through strategic goals, which were divided into action plans and further into strategic actions. The strategic actions were carried out by strategic teams and specific project groups. The strategic teams included teaching staff members and specialist from different disciplines of Metropolia. They worked part-time accomplishing institutional wide developmental tasks.



The quality policy of Metropolia is based on the cycle of continuous development (PDCA). The distributed quality system brings quality assurance as a part of everyone's daily responsibility. The principal of developmental evaluation makes a rich feedback culture essential.

BEFORE THE YEAR 2015

In 2014 a major curriculum reform was established aiming at enhancing a student-centered learning culture and collaborative teaching and learning practices. Based on the pedagogical principles of the new curricula, a need for feedback system enhancement was observed to better support the objectives of the new curricula. To promote the pedagogical vision and goals of the reform, a strategic project on enhancing the teaching and learning feedback system was initiated.

Enhancing the feedback system in teaching and learning then became one of the strategic actions for the years 2015-2016. The aim of the project was to enhance feedback practices in teaching and learning and to create a feedback system to support the pedagogical vision of the new curricula.

In the organisation model at that time, pedagogical development was the responsibility of the strategic teaching and learning development team led by the pedagogical director. The task of the team was the strategic pedagogical development at Metropolia. The aim and the operational philosophy of the team were to develop learning and teaching together with the members of the community. The team operated based on the shared pedagogical policies being co-operation, creative expertise, open and international networks as well as continuous development: quality, evaluation and feedback. The team consisted of teaching staff members of different disciplines, educational developers, students and specialists from different functions. For the years 2015-2016, the team defined two main focus areas being: enhancing the teaching and learning feedback system and collaborative teaching in teams. This paper describes the path of the prior.

THE YEAR 2015

The project group for enhancing the feedback system (later feedback group) included five of the members of the strategic team and a member of educational development services. The role of the strategic team was to lead and enrich the work by reflective discussions and co-creative working methods.



The starting point

The feedback group started its work in March 2015 by a preliminary debate of the strategic team. The primary commission given to the feedback group was to enhance the student feedback system. Straight from the beginning, it was clear that there were plenty of hopes and wishes as well as a diversity of needs and views. Various solutions to various challenges were presented. The wishes were connected to educational development, development of pedagogical competence of the teaching staff, enhancing the student learning as well as to organisational and managerial aspects together with work controlling aims. Quite surprisingly many of the comments were technical and connected to IT-systems. The discussion was therefore about processes, working methods, tools, IT-systems, managerial tasks, and control.

In the feedback group kick-off a week later, the group decided to discuss first the question of why and for what purposes a feedback system was needed. This was seen as a crucial decision point for the direction to which the development work was headed to. The purpose and the approach of a feedback system can be either towards a control-based evaluation or towards a development-based evaluation. This, of course, has an effect on the concrete actions and methods used. It was then much about feedback culture development and dialogue in the community.

To this end, the feedback group defined the aim for the project to be: to create a feedback system where all parties of the learning community, students, teaching staff members and educational leaders would get information on learning and teaching, development of skills and abilities and professional growth during the learning process. The intent was that feedback would be constructive, meaningful, transparent and especially usable for educational development. This meant interaction and dialogue in the feedback practices. In conclusion, the mind-set was from feedback to feedforward.

Feedback discourse in higher education

The discourse of feedback is current and on-going in the higher education sector. At the same time, it can be said that the feedback discussion has been present during the last 20 years quite similarly. Even if the digitalisation has touched feedback practices, the problems considering feedback processes have remained the same.

The feedback discourse is also strongly connected to the time after the Bologna process. Higher education institutions have been instructed to measure the quality of the education, therefore they have started to develop the quality systems and the quality assurance. Student feedback and especially student feedback surveys have traditionally been an important part of the higher education quality systems.



Especially course feedback has been an important measure of the quality of the education.

Still, the use of student feedback survey results is not simple. It is well known fact that collecting feedback is not a straight quality measure but more focus and effort should be put on how the feedback results are put into educational development actions and how they are followed and evaluated.

Quantitative analyses are typically used to analyse the data in spite of low response rates and distortion of the results. In many cases, it is not about a random sample. Results are in many cases compared with others even if degree programmes are very different in sizes and activity of the respondents vary considerably.

Secondly, the quality of the surveys is challenging. It is a question of which measure is used. Student surveys are not necessarily based on educational research and are not therefore always scientifically proven. This is why student surveys are under a constant development. Bad results are also many times explained by bad questions. Many of the student surveys are actually only satisfaction surveys, which is not many times the aim of the higher education. Hence, higher education institutions need measures for high-quality learning. This kind of measure is recently developed at the University of Helsinki (Parpala, 2010; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012).

In bringing a lot of good, quality systems and a certain quality thinking have side effects too. Feedback is collected a lot which brings feedback invasion for all. Feedback is collected without a clear connection to development actions. In many cases there are not a lot of evidence on the connection of feedback to the educational quality enhancements. Quality assurance typically trusts much on student feedback and quantitative analyses which in many cases suffer from reliability as was presented earlier. In addition, course feedback is sometimes used in finding solutions to managerial or pedagogical competence problems for which there exist many more advanced methods.

Feedback discourse is as well a value discussion and is often considered personal. Sometimes feedback is connected to fear and criticism. The unclear aims of feedback may cause questions of the possible consequences feedback may have.

The meaning of the concept feedback

For the reasons above, the feedback group decided to define the concept of feedback holistically aiming at a renewal of the corporate culture, more precisely to the dialogic feedback culture.



The actors of the feedback system were defined to be students, teaching staff, educational leaders, management, working life and alumnae. The varying roles of the actors present the fact that the needs for the feedback system were different depending on the point of view of the actor. That is why there was no unambiguous solution but the phenomenon was needed to be tackled from different angles.

In their first meeting, the feedback group created a proposal for the purpose of the feedback system. It was named as feedback system actors' map. It was then presented to the strategic team who developed it further. The response was positive and supportive.

The next focal point of the process was engaging students, teaching staff and other members of the community. For the project to be successful, it was important to find out the opinion of the community on the principles of the feedback group. Workshops for discussing the principles and preliminary ideas of the feedback group was planned for fall 2015.

In the work shop with the student union, the meaning of feedback and feedback system was discussed. The view of the students agreed with the view of the feedback group. Interaction and dialogue was seen important for the students.

Benchmarking others

International and internal benchmarking were started in late spring 2015. The feedback group saw that it was important to have a look at what is happening in feedback development in the higher education field. A workshop was also prepared for the national educational development days to widen the view of the feedback group and to get comments and coaching for the ideas. Two more in-depth international benchmarks were carried out with Glasgow Caledonian University (Feedback for Further Learning) and KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Learning Experience Questionnaire, LEQ).

The LEQ-questionnaire and its teacher peer feedback process were tested with two teacher groups as sharing the same educational developmental aim than the philosophy of the feedback group. This feedback process was later included in the proposal of the new feedback system as a collaborative tool to help teachers to develop course feedback into the next phase of the course syllabus.

In addition discussions with some of the Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences were carried out in benchmarking their feedback processes and testing the idea of the feedback group. The feedback from them was positive and many of these institutions found the idea relevant.



The feedback group continued the co-operation with Helsinki University and the HowULearn-survey (<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/howulearn/en/>). HowULearn is a research-based questionnaire and feedback for students on their experiences and opinions on studying, teaching and learning (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). Students get personalised feedback on their learning to help their studying. It is also a tool for degree programmes and educational leaders for educational development.

The former version of HowULearn has been in use in Metropolia since 2012 in some of the degree programmes. The learning-centered approach and validity for measuring learning fitted well with the aim of the feedback project.

High-quality learning was one of the keywords of the feedback group's work and the notion of feedback was then defined broadly. The work was focused towards feedback culture development and enhancement of interaction and dialogue between the community members. For that reason, the typical way of enhancing feedback systems, developing student surveys was not put in the focus.

Involving through workshops

Fall 2015 started directly with the workshops in the departments. The aim of the workshops was to involve the staff members to discuss the ideas of feedback enhancement and to find out if they agreed on the philosophy behind the work. It was important to find out what kind of feedback culture they wanted to support.

In the workshops the participants worked in groups giving their points of view on the following questions:

- For what purposes is feedback system needed?
- What kind of a feedback culture would you like to support?
- From the viewpoint of your discipline, what aspects are important to be taken into account in the development of the feedback system?
- What are your best feedback practices?

Workshops were organised in all of the departments of Metropolia. The results of the workshops were verbal and picture illustrations of the feedback culture the community wanted to support. It was clearly realised that the staff members of the community wanted to have dialogic, open and developmental feedback culture.

The workshop results were also analysed thematically creating a three-dimensional feedback orientation map. The most of the views were student-centered and only a few presentations were directly teacher-centered. Some of the presentations



illustrated a more holistic view where the learning-centered view was present and where feedback thinking was presented as a joint developmental dialogue between the students and staff. (Koponen & Holvikivi, 2016).

The results of the workshops gave rise to the Feedback Principles. Four principles were created to illustrate the feedback culture of Metropolia. In addition, the principles were opened once again for public commenting to make sure that the feedback group had interpreted the material correctly.

Because the feedback culture development is a change process, the feedback group saw that enhancing the feedback culture required such tools as the Feedback Principles to support the learning of new ways of working. That is why it was seen crucial that the new and shared Feedback Principles formed a backbone of the new feedback culture. Feedback Principles became later a part of the new feedback system.

The best practices and peer support

The third concrete action in fall 2015 was the feedback pilots in the degree programmes. The goal of the pilots was actually not to create anything new but more towards highlighting the best feedback practices. These pilots handled issues like weekly reflective self-evaluations, feedback afternoons and course development discussion forums with students. It was evident that lots of good and dialogic practices were in use nevertheless there existed a typical challenge of sharing good practices in the community. The best practices found were presented in every case where the feedback enhancement work was presented.

Finally, the last concrete action of the project in 2015 was the collegial peer feedback pilots for the teaching staff. The pilot was planned together with another higher education institution. The idea of the collegial peer feedback was that the teachers would have a possibility to get feedback from their peer colleagues. What was new in the idea was that many times the only feedback that the teachers got was the student feedback which is a different point of view and not always the best source to do pedagogical development.

In the concept, teachers from different disciplines formed peer groups which participated in each other's teaching sessions, familiarised themselves with the curriculum and the course syllabus and then gave feedback through a reflective discussion model.



Unfortunately, there was too few teachers interested in the practice and the pilot was not implemented. Nonetheless, the plans for this action may be implemented again when the time is more suitable for it.

The last months of the year 2015 brought the information of organisational change intentions. In the end of the year, the knowledge on the new organisation was ready.

THE YEAR 2016

The year 2016 started with the knowledge of the changes in the organisation. It meant simultaneously that the strategic team together with the feedback group was disbanded. The strategic team and the feedback group got six months' time to finish the job. The knowledge of ending the work affected the activity of the groups.

Old and new

The spring term 2016 was focused on compiling the work of the feedback group to form a proposal for the new feedback system as a result of the project. As mentioned already, the knowledge of ending the work already before the final schedule had an effect on participation activity.

By request of the new management, the project plan was delivered to them. The feedback group had also a possibility of discussing the work completed with the new management.

Just before the summer, the feedback group returned a proposal for a new feedback system. The most central idea of the proposal was the dialogic feedback culture development and holistic and systemic approach to feedback. The new feedback system included collaboratively constructed tools and methods to support dialogue and interaction having a strong developmental evaluation approach as a base. The proposal included the idea that learning new is a change process and requires, therefore, tools and methods to be successful. The new feedback system was approved by the pedagogical director in late fall 2016.

To be able to implement the work of the feedback group, a group of educational experts formed a new feedback group to start the implementation after summer 2016.

HowULearn?

In 2016 an important phase of the new feedback system started when the more in-depth learning about HowULearn started (<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/howulearn/en/>).



It was decided to run a pilot of HowULearn for all the 1.-3. year bachelor students. It was a big decision touching over 10 000 students. The process included a data collection by the survey but more importantly, it included a feedback session for the students and staff to foster the developmental dialog between them.

The process started by meeting all the degree programmes and informing the staff members about the meaning of HowULearn because it was seen important in activating the staff members to motivate the students into the process. To get enough responses, staff members were asked to organise a time slot for the students to respond to the survey, for example at the end of a teaching session.

The data was collected electronically in November-December 2016. The response rate alternated much between different programmes. In addition, some of the degree programmes left out certain student groups while they could not be separated in the data analysis. The results were analysed using statistical analysis at the beginning of the year 2017.

Finding and presenting the best practices

The feedback pilots in the degree programmes continued also in 2016 when the information technology students sketched a mobile application solution to the needs of fostering dialogue between students and teaching staff in higher education. The course used project-based approach to learning where the students worked during an intensive period of time resulting in a concept of a mobile application. In the beginning, the students gained only an idea of dialogic feedback and a question of how a mobile application could help to reach the aim of the dialogue. With that in mind, they started their development process. Two groups end up with a ready idea and a sample of a mobile application. One of the groups interested in continuing the work after the actual course.

In the year 2016, the feedback project was presented in several instances as Taito 2016-conference (Koponen & Holvikivi, 2016), national Peda Forum-conference (<https://www.jyu.fi/koulutus/pedaforum2016>) and in the Finnish UAS Journal (Koponen, Kokko, Perkiö, Savander-Ranne, Toivanen & Utrio, 2016).

In November 2016 Metropolia took part in the international audit by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. The implementation of the feedback system was then totally unfinished but was presented as an ongoing educational development task. In its report (Pirie, Abebe, Jukic, Nurkka, Ristimäki, Kolhinen & Aurén, 2017), the audit group gave positive feedback on the feedback system development carried out. It also raised a concern on how the implementation of it in the degree programme level will be fulfilled.



The last task of the spring 2016 was a self-evaluation of the work of the original feedback group. The group evaluated as a success the fact of being daring to take a new look at the feedback practices. The concern the group presented was the implementation the ideas of the group in the teaching and learning practices.

As a strategic action, “Enhancing the teaching and learning feedback system” ended 31.12.2016.

THE YEAR 2017

Even though the project as a strategic action ended in 2016, the implementation on the feedback system continued within a strategic action “Enhancing quality and feedback culture”.

Developmental dialogues

The year 2017 started by analysing the HowULearn data using statistical analysis. For every degree programme, all five parts of the HowULearn (educational development, approaches to learning, study progress, study exhaustion and work-life skills) were analysed.

A feedback session for students and staff members was organised. Based on their responses, students got personalised feedback on their approaches to learning and guidance on how to enhance the studying. Degree programmes got important information on students’ experiences in teaching-learning environments. The session brought good joint discussion and reflection among students and teaching staff. The quality of the dialogue changed much between the sessions, it was seen that some of the programmes had stronger tendency to reflection and for development of ideas.

The degree programmes reflected their experience and thoughts through a shared document where they made action plans based on the results. Based on the feedback sessions, it was suggested that the degree programmes would share their best practices on how they activate and involve students into educational development.

After the feedback sessions, degree programmes got the results for more in-depth use of educational development to support educational leadership and pedagogical decision making.

The pilot process was evaluated firstly by a self-reflection of the key organisers. Then a feedback questionnaire was sent out to all the staff members involved in the process. In the end, a structured evaluation discussion was organised for selected



members of the process. Based on the evaluation, a plan for the next phase including a resource plan was completed.

The results of the pilot were summarised as follows:

Benefits:

- Student-centered approach – HowULearn gives understanding and feedback to students about the quality on their learning.
- Learning-centered approach – The aim of the process is to enhance learning, which supports the strategic goal of “High-quality learning”
- Reliability – HowULearn is based on educational research and is a valid measure for measuring learning.
- Supports pedagogical leadership – Gives such information for the degree programmes and the pedagogical leaders which is not available anywhere else.
- Significance – The process was seen significant as participants experienced it being well planned and implemented. The feedback for the students was seen as useful.

Development ideas:

- Communication and informing – Still more information and communication with the whole community is needed about the meaning and the aims of the process. It is important to understand that it is not solely about a student survey but more a development process.
- Joint co-creation and development actions with the students – The developmental approach varied between different stakeholders. Joint educational development approach together with students and staff should be enhanced.
- Feedback sessions – Face to face feedback sessions and dialogue are important for the students to be able to discuss about learning and studying.
- Integration of HowULearn to the curricula – The survey and feedback session should be integrated as a natural part of the curricula so that self-development and reflection would be written in the learning outcomes of the degree programmes.
- Analysis and automatization – What kind of reports of the results are provided for different stakeholders should be planned more in-depth. The process should be automated (questionnaire and analysis).



Workshops and forums

The second main activity of the year 2017 was the workshop roadshow organised for all the staff members. The aim of the workshops was that every staff member had then heard about the new feedback system and the feedback principles as well as reflected the meaning of the feedback principles through their own work. The workshops were tailor-made for the needs and phase of educational development of every degree programme. The workshops generated in-depth discussions about feedback and widened the view of different pedagogical approaches existing.

To support the enhancement of quality and feedback culture, an online forum for pedagogical discussion on the internet was launched. One hour session once a month was seen as an agile way for the participants to join the dialogue. The session had a theme and 3-4 guests of active pedagogical developers of their own teaching in a studio for leading the discussion. Participants could participate online. The studio method was a new approach for the organisers and a pedagogical manuscript was made to start the discussion.

Unfortunately, the forums suffered a low number of participants and were stopped after the spring term. The reason for the low turnout might be the lack of time of the staff members or the unsuitable time slot when it was organised. The same format was tested for degree programme leaders.

A pedagogical discussion is anyway an important issue to be alive so the method of implementing it, must be reflected. How to catch people's interest and motivate them in educational development work at the time of resource cuts, rush, and overload.

The strategic project of "Enhancing quality and feedback culture" was ended at the end of the year 2017. Several project proposals were suggested to continue the work.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational development is about learning new and giving up of something old at the same time. It is a change process that challenges people's conceptions and forces them to shift somewhere uncomfortable. Learning has happened when the uncomfortable starts to be comfortable. When everything is ready, you must start all over again.

In the digital era, educational development still needs face to face discussion and shared dialogue together with all the members of the learning community. In other words, time spent together. It requires strong support from leaders and commitment of everyone in taking part to the shared development actions.



Feedback culture development is worth of investing even though the results may be visible after a long time. This challenges the evaluation of development actions which is carried out many times in short time periods.

Learning new needs feedback. Feedback needs new learning.

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