

## **BUSINESSi: A student newsletter building bridges**

Camille Charles, Michael Wynn-Williams  
University of Greenwich

### **Abstract**

Feedback is seen as a link between the act of learning and the intended learning outcomes. In the early stages of education, it provides direct confirmation that the learning loop has been closed, but as the learner progresses through the educational system the learning becomes more exploratory. By the time of tertiary education, learning can expand far beyond the formalities of the classroom and the role of feedback becomes more complex. Universities create numerous channels of communication with students to bring this feedback into the open, but student-led newsletters may provide a platform for the most authentic student voice.

### **Introduction**

We tend to think of education as a closed system centred on the classroom, the black box of pedagogical activities and formative assessments so cogently argued by Black and William (2005). The role of feedback from the instructor is to create a communication loop linking the assessment back to the learning activity in order to complete the educational process. This suits a broadly prescriptive style of education with its stated objectives. Here, education is conceptualised as theory and practice, feedback providing the connection between the two. In this way, practice can illuminate the theory and thereby reinforce it. Yet, the further one progresses through the educational stages, the more one understands that learning is open-ended and that the feedback loop does not always neatly re-attach itself to some earlier theoretical starting point.

Learning reaches its sophisticated heights with the start of the adult educational period of higher education at university. There are still prescribed aims and objectives providing conspicuous purpose at all levels of the process, implying feedback mechanisms to check that the learning has reached its destination as intended. These learning outcomes (LOs) are often broad in scope in order to accommodate individual learning styles, but the end point must still be attained. Compare these LO excerpts for mathematics courses at contrasting ends of the United Kingdom (UK) educational spectrum, the first for the primary school Key Stage 1 syllabus and the second for a university Level 4 course, Advanced Calculus and Mathematical Methods:

*“By the end of year 2, pupils should know the number bonds to 20 and be precise in using and understanding place value...Pupils should read and spell mathematical vocabulary, at a level consistent with their increasing word reading and spelling knowledge at key stage 1.”* (National Curriculum, 2014).

*“On successful completion of this course a student will be able to: 1 apply basic methods of university calculus to a range of mathematical problems...4 use appropriate mathematical language.”* (University of Greenwich, 2018).

The similarities in the teaching purposes are striking, both setting quantifiable aims and both demanding linguistic competency. Even if we choose a course that is less amenable to strict

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definition of its learning outcomes, such as we might expect in a drama subject, we still find this excerpt from Kingston University's Level 4 Culture and Performance:

*"Explain the significance of cultural and critical perspectives in making, performing and responding to theatre...Articulate aims, strategies and ideas unambiguously in writing (Key Skills: Communication)"* (Kingston University, 2018).

While the role of feedback is not specified in any of these courses, at Key Stage 1 or Level 4, its importance as a link between stated LO and student performance is implied. Whenever students are asked to explain, articulate, demonstrate or understand within the bounds of the course objectives, then feedback provides the evidence that these have been successfully achieved. At the very least, the feedback shows by how much an outcome was a near miss and so indicate the corrective action needed. This narrow focus might work well in early stages of education, but when it comes to higher education it misses the point of an institution as a place of learning. Just as a university degree programme is more than the sum of its constituent courses, so the university experience is more than the sum of its constituent degree programmes.

If the purpose of a university is a complex one then the role of feedback adds further complications. In its Student Charter, the University of Hertfordshire (2018) commits itself, its students and the Students' Union to an interactive relationship that aims, *inter alia*, to:

- support academic, professional and personal development;
- work in partnership to improve university life;
- promote student representation;
- contribute to communities both inside and outside the university.

What is being recognised here is that feedback is no longer a mechanism for closing the learning circle but can instead be part of a dialogue between students and institution with the fundamental purpose of bettering both. The feedback process is therefore two-way or even three-way as each party needs to propose and respond. Chris Argyris termed this double-loop learning (Argyris, 2002), where the feedback brings about an evolutionary change in the original instruction. This is distinct from single-loop learning, which has the feedback loop as confirmation that learning has taken place as intended, as would be desirable in prescribed forms of education. At the tertiary level, the learning is, to various degrees, shared between the instructor and the student. This is notable in student-centred approaches, such as problem-based learning (PBL), but it has broader ramifications for the overall relationship between the student and the institution.

With this in mind, we find that the concept of a feedback loop that can be neatly closed slips gently from our grasp. Whereas feedback for a course LO needs to fit only within the specific organisational and technical limits, be it through personal contact, hardcopy or electronic means, for the broader remit of double-loop learning a more comprehensive approach is required. At the tertiary level of education, a university must, therefore, maintain with its students multiple contact points, at least one of which must communicate the genuine voice of the student body.

## Newsletters

University newsletters are a form of communication across groups at the institutional level and also a way to close the feedback loop (Watson, 2003). It should be said that, although newsletters can help to facilitate and further the communication web at the institutional level, not all university newsletters do so. There are two distinct forms of university newsletters that should be considered for this discussion:

- i. Those written by the university for its students and the general public – often produced by a university administration and with publication titles recognisably in keeping with related titles produced by that institution’s communication or media relations department. The aim here is to boost the university’s reputation or image – in other words, its brand recognition. The university newsletter for Stockholm University, for example, is published by the “External Relations and Communications Office” (External Relations and Communications Office, 2018).
- ii. The student-led publication. Here, content control is held by the students who make up the editorial team, the writers and any other contributors involved in the creation of the newsletter. The aim is to further communication horizontally across the student body as well as vertically between the student body, faculty and upper-level management (Wayment and Dickson, 2008).

A quick Google search reveals the presence of many university newsletters (Google.co.uk, 2018). The point of interest here, though, is how these newsletters might facilitate the flow of information across the communication web. Do they strengthen the communication between students and faculty? It becomes quickly apparent that many of the newsletters are still university-led. The alternative would be to allow the students to construct their own mechanism for communicating, thereby generating a more authentic message.

It is salutary to learn that even at elementary school level, Prupas *et al.* (1994) found that the student-led newsletter became a hub for contributors to vent their problems anonymously. They could then receive considered responses from their seniors in a cycle that proved highly effective. Indeed, it appeared that the newsletter offered a secure literary outlet for views that might otherwise become distorted – or even entirely suppressed – by peer pressure in the real world. Another striking example of the freedom of expression that seems to cleave to the newsletter format is the South African Students Organisation (SASO) newsletter that became a focal point for impassioned argument during the height of the apartheid era, acting as an authentic voice for the struggle (Badat, 1999). While most university newsletters, at least in the UK, would fall short of such high standards of social and political ambition, there is no reason why they too should not provide an arena for a credible student voice.

## The age of change

There is a case to be made for saying that the current period is an age of change for education. Student expectations of the university experience as a whole are high and their feelings find their expression in the polls. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) 2017 student academic experience survey highlighted students’ opinions that, although the quality of teaching is perceived to be rising, value for money is still a major issue for them. It was also noted that students placed a considerable amount of value on the collaborative aspect

of their relationship with universities (HEPI, 2017), further highlighting the need for alternative communication channels between institutions and their students. Frameworks and articles highlight the introduction of different projects aimed at fostering greater collaboration between institutions and their students. 'Students as Agents of Change' (Berman, 2013) and the 'Meaningful Student Involvement' framework (Fletcher, 2003) are examples of such projects. Student-led newsletters could be one way by which to achieve this new collaborative relationship.

### **Case study: University of Greenwich and BUSINESS*i***

The University of Greenwich International Business departmental newsletter was born out of a dream. It was dreamed up, quite literally, by the programme leader for the BA International Business degree. The newsletter idea had long been lurking in the background, but it took this nocturnal inspiration to give it the final push. Initially, the plan was kept deliberately vague, but the founding principle was for the newsletter to be created by students, for students. Most of all, the students were to have all editorial control. The ultimate aim was to build bridges between students and staff while deepening the sense of community across the department as well as, ultimately, throughout the university.

The title of the newsletter was, again, a deliberately amorphous choice designed to allow maximum latitude for editorial development by the students while providing a firm root in the faculty's academic discipline. Since the long-term intention was for the newsletter to target subject specialist students throughout the business school, from accounting and finance to economics and all business-related subjects in between, the title BUSINESS*i* was seen as one that could encompass any issue relevant to such students.

The prototype issue was put together at the end of the academic year by a business student on an internal placement within the university. It was effectively a repurposing of articles compiled for the official faculty newsletter but with the BUSINESS*i* title on the masthead. Although this first publication demonstrated intent and overcame any early dangers of project inertia, the content was nevertheless totally inappropriate. As noted above, for the authentic voice to emerge, editorial control needed to be in student hands and a faculty-sponsored newsletter would, at worst, come across as institutional propaganda. Nevertheless, it was effective in establishing a holding-place for the subsequent, genuine student newsletter.

At the beginning of the new academic year an editorial board, representing the cohorts of the three years of the degree programme, was put together by advertising the venture via email to all students. Though this may appear to have been admirably democratic, in fact familiarity with the character of the student cohort meant that the identity of the volunteers could have been predicted in advance. As a consequence, it was hardly surprising when the leading personalities for each year group came forward: two each for the first and final years but just one from the second year. The problem with the second-year cohort was that, by their nature, such willing and proactive personalities had already embraced the possibilities of the Erasmus study abroad programme. One such student did come forward and it was thought that this individual could play a role coordinating the contributions of students overseas. However, the student soon found the new overseas environment too demanding and so relinquished the editor's position. This left an editorial board for the first and final

years, with the editor-in-chief being appointed by that team from the final-year pair. From then on, the programme leader's role became largely irrelevant.

During the preparation of the first issue it quickly became apparent that the first hurdle to be overcome would be the paucity of student participation. Despite an eager editorial team, sourcing fellow students willing to contribute written pieces was a challenge. The articles were insipid in tone and tended to convey little to inspire or interest the reader. Upon its release, staff were the first to comment and encourage the continuation of the newsletter but there was little overt reaction from the student body.

With the second issue many more students came forward with contributions. From a technical perspective, the newsletter was more advanced, with pictures and links to blogs. These revealed how, once the students were aware of the platform the newsletter gave them, they were much more willing to participate and contribute. A particularly popular article within the newsletter was the so-called 'faculty spotlight'. Essentially a brief but interesting set of questions put to a faculty member to offer students a more informal insight into their instructor, it provided the kind of human-interest story the students were looking for in the newsletter. It was an easy yet effective way of creating a sense of connection between students and staff. Other articles were contributed by a work placement student, an alumnus and a business project competition winner.

### **Future development of the newsletter**

The second issue had been released towards the end of the second term and it was clear that there would not be the opportunity to produce another when exams and graduation were so close. The editorial board members were proud of their work but still enthusiastic to do more. They felt that the newsletter provided an authentic voice for students at a time of very limited representational opportunities elsewhere. Specifically, the students wanted departments to be more receptive to student feedback and the Students' Union more vocal in supporting local issues.

As an effective alternative to these underperforming channels of communication, the board felt that efforts should be made to increase the newsletter's reach. A departmental newsletter is a great start but it should be seen as just that, a start. The editorial board felt that the final goal should be a student-led newsletter that was not just university-wide, but with national aspirations. This would encourage continued communication between students, staff and upper-level management over the broadest range of issues: lofty aims for sure, but, at the local level, the challenge will be to maintain this momentum even as the editorial board has to be reconstituted at the beginning of each academic year.

The early signs have been that the change to the new academic year created a substantial barrier to continuing the progress made up to that point. In a bid to maintain consistency, the new editorial board evolved out of the previous one, the incoming editor-in-chief being one of the previous board's first-year editors. Despite this, a smooth transition was not achieved and much of the driving force of the original team has been lost. If it is the case that the newsletter needs to be founded afresh at the start of each academic year, then the responsibility for this must fall to the programme leader. Since this means that the newsletter is essentially a succession of one-year projects driven by the programme leader, it is unlikely to expand beyond the degree programme in which it is rooted.

## Conclusion

The feedback loop is not simply a direct connecting link between instruction and practice, a confirmation that learning has taken place, but is part of a complex dialogue between the teacher and the student. As the student progresses through the learning process, this dialogue becomes ever more complex and the feedback loop no longer attaches directly to specific learning outcomes. By the time of tertiary education, new channels of communication need to be opened to facilitate this process and one such conduit is the student newsletter. While the founding framework for the publication may have to be initiated by the institution or faculty to overcome student inertia, the content of the newsletter needs to continue under student leadership in order to attain an authentic voice. However, it has been found that the quantum change occurring between the academic years as the student cohorts progress to the next stage, or graduate, fatally undermines the continuing development of the newsletter. No matter how successful the publication might have been in any one period, or how lofty the long-term ambitions of the editorial team, it seems a newsletter is doomed to be founded anew at the beginning of every academic year. The greater challenge for the faculty, then, is to devise a structure that encourages continuity without suppressing student editorial freedom.

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