Quality Podcast 2021: Feedback system in education development

Saija Halminen: Welcome to the Laatuporinat podcast series of the University of Lapland, which aims to go through, among other things, the university's quality management, feedback systems and auditing for the development of operations. In today's episode, our topic is a feedback system on the development of education.

Over the years, the university's feedback system has been developed to better serve the forms of feedback collection, reporting and processing. The feedback system is really a key part in the development of quality management, functions and services, especially in education. However, the feedback system should be developed in a more reflective and reciprocal direction. Last spring, in 2020, the university carried out bench-learning related to auditing with the University Pedagogy Center of the University of Helsinki, which focused on the student feedback system. This bench-learning group included, among others, the experts we are interviewing today. As one of the pearls of bench-learning, the perspective arose that the feedback system should support both the development of teaching and the progress of students in their studies and the identification of their own ways of learning. This involves, for example, how the student reflects on his or her own learning and how, on the other hand, the teacher reflects on his or her own teaching and thus re-develops his or her skills. The university has a newly established feedback group, which includes experts from various faculties and teaching units, but also a student advocate from the student union. The task of this working group is, for example, to take into account the areas of development that have risen in bench-learning, a more reflective perspective and the role of counter-feedback in providing feedback, as well as checking and updating the functionality of the processes of the current feedback system.

From the student's point of view, the feedback is extremely important and a big part of our own studies, and with feedback we are able to develop ourselves. We learn from our mistakes what we may have done. But then there is this other side, which is the feedback we can give to these teachers. After all, we students play a really central role in the fact that the feedback we give on our studies and our experiences is a really big and really impressive thing. And based on our experience, changes and developments can actually be made.

At least based on my own experiences, I could say that in some situations you would like more of that feedback, because every now and then there are situations where you have received a lot and like really different feedback, so it feels like it has taken itself and that own studies forward a lot, so you would definitely want more of it. What and how feedback is properly requested from students and how it is implemented in practice? How is feedback handled and reported? And how do you give counter-feedback? These questions are answered today by university experts Merija Timonen, Hanna Vuojärvi and Juha Himanka. Would you like to begin briefly introducing yourself?

Merija Timonen: I am Merija Timonen, here at the university as Director of Teaching and Learning Services.

Hanna Vuojärvi: Hanna Vuojärvi, University Lecturer in Adult Education Pedagogy from the Faculty of Education.

Juha Himanka: Juha Himanka, University Lecturer in Philosophy and at the same time Vice-Dean for Education at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Saija Halminen: Thank you. In today's episode, we have a slightly different concept. So we don't have any questions, we have some claims for you. We have six claims, two for each of you on this subject. And let's start with Merija and the first claim is like this: Spark, a new feedback service, will soon be introduced at the university. Sprak brings a new dimension to feedback, or does it?

Merija Timonen: Good claim. It immediately occurs to me as an objection; Of course it will when we know what we want to change. Do we know what we want to change? This Spark feedback system is related to course feedback. However, the feedback system as a whole is a broad concept, but this one system now aims to solve the way of collecting course feedback. Use of this will bring good things, if we know how to use it correctly. We currently have a system that is connected to that student administration system for collecting course feedback, but its use has almost ceased altogether. And perhaps the history that has led to it is that a lot of feedback was collected from every course. Students never received a response to the feedback that is counter-feedback, so the enthusiasm of the students' waned to provide feedback through this system.

Now, in a way, we would have a new start-up and opportunity to introduce a new course feedback into the new student administration system, and even the flying name Spark may be able to inspire students to give course feedback. This Spark system is, of course — when it is connected to a new system and perhaps meets today's IT requirements — a new and more user-friendly system, so it can, of course, make students happy to respond to that course feedback.

But the challenge for us, as is the case here on the university side, is how can we get that Spark system and the questions there, how can we cover them in our diverse education? We have education in many fields. If we have 10 questions available there, are these questions something that can be used in all education, in all the studies? Technically, Spark also brings more features such as continuous feedback. Throughout the course of its studies, the student can provide feedback on that course. It is a new feature and perhaps a counter-feedback can be seen as a new feature, even though it has been there in the past. But this launch of Spark could well give the impression that the student has the right to give feedback on the course. There is no obligation to provide feedback.

Saija Halminen: Yes, thank you. At least from the student's point of view, this sounds very good and competent. The following claim reads as follows: student feedback is utilized far too little in relation to how much it is collected.

Merija Timonen: Here too, it came to mind in this argument that I would gladly step in there for a student to boots. Are students asked to give far too much feedback? Do you get some kind of survey every week, and I'm sure they will. There are various questionnaires sent by our university that students are asked to answer, all types of research and questionnaire all the time. So how do we, as a university, ensure that in this quality system and feedback system, those queries that are relevant to us are also emphasized at the students' side? So this course feedback, which I mentioned just now, but also the surveys we do for students in their first year, at bachelor's and master's studies. How do we bring them out that they are relevant to universities, and hopefully they are also relevant to students. So, I think we get feedback a lot in university.

And it is sure to provide, when feedback is processed, areas for development that are quick to handle immediately. As an example that some teaching is taking place in a teaching space that is not suitable for it. Like we're here surrounded by musical equipment. This might not be suitable for all kinds of teaching. So very small things that can be corrected when they come up and are noticed.

But perhaps more of what we want out of the feedback is perhaps the broader areas for development, and promoting and taking it forward is, of course, a big process. And the results of their development projects may not be visible at all to the student who now gave feedback today. Those fruits of development can only be on display in perhaps three years. But more systematic nature for the feedback system. Perhaps I am in favor of it being an entity that deals with those feedbacks at university level and perhaps with the reassurance to students that their feedback is handled in exactly the same way in all education. And the interaction. So reporting feedback and accessing feedback data, then if they are only treated as paper or text, then maybe that's where we'll lose something. Interaction in the processing of feedback is needed, interactions with representatives of education, student representatives and, of course, representatives of services. So the interaction is moving forward in that development. And in our current quality system, this feedback table or feedback table in this feedback system is certainly just one good way to promote interaction.

Saija Halminen: Thank you. Hanna, the next claim comes to you. The competence orientation model used by the university also adequately answers the resource question from the point of view of developing the feedback system.

Hanna Vuojärvi: A really big claim and it may be difficult to answer it unequivocally yes or no. I am, of course, looking at this from the point of view of teachers and from the point of view of the teaching staff, and it is important to keep the idea clearly in the sense that what this development of the feedback system is aimed at. That is, to develop the university's activities, especially teaching, and to find the best possible ways to support studying. Both the feedback system and the competence orientation model serve as operational guidance tools at different levels of operation, and in this way they also have a common interface. The competence orientation model is a tool for planning the working time of teaching and research staff and it describes the whole work and its different aspects; resource needed by the aspects during a certain planning period that we have in the calendar year. The important question about this planning is how that feedback and the development of its use and related work are then taken into account in that planning.

So, planning is always based on objectives, for example what kind of goals are set for the activities at different levels at the university as a whole, in different units, in competence orientation groups and then finally at the individual level. And how these goals are ultimately taken there in working time plans and finally concretized there in practical work. In other words, if the development of the feedback system is included in the objectives of the activities as part of the development of teaching, it will also be brought therefor working time planning and then for work planners and everyday work.

The challenge here may be that the model of competence orientation is based on the university's quantitative performance indicators, and now we are talking partly about a matter that is difficult to describe with numbers, because this is a qualitative setting of a goal. From the perspective of an individual teacher, the development of the feedback system and related goals can be considered for

example at a working time plan at the course level. If the development work related to the feedback system has been set as the goal of the operations, then it should also be possible to resource time in the work plan to develop the courses, especially from the point of view of feedback practices and related pedagogical solutions. If the development objectives related to feedback, and then the interactivity and dialogue mentioned by Merja, in that feedback are included on a broad front in individual-level planning, then at the same time we will take the development of the entire university-level feedback system forward.

Saija Halminen: Yes, thank you. Then the following argument is that voice feedback challenges the traditional way of providing and collecting feedback.

Hanna Vuojärvi: Well, I think that sound is one tool among others. In studies related to e-learning, it has been shown to have certain advantages and compared to, for example, simply using text feedback or in addition to text feedback. But the choice of a suitable feedback channel always depends on what it aims to achieve and what kind of pedagogical entity the tool will become part of. But I think that in the future these feedback channels and the role of feedback in study and teaching will be very diverse. In that sense, I do support multichannel feedback and especially that dialogue.

Saija Halminen: Thank you Hanna. Then Juha's first claim goes like this: the more satisfied the student is the more he or she learns or has learned.

Juha Himanka: That's an interesting question and it's quite exciting from the point of view of research in fact. The fact that student's satisfaction correlates with student's learning. The quality of teaching is that the student learns, it is quite simple in that regard. And that was then studied in the 80s there were Cohen[1] and these meta-analyses, which went through a lot of this and found out that there would be a correlation that the more satisfied student, the more he or she learns. Then, ten years later, in the 21st century, these began to be studied perhaps empirically better, with a better experimental setting and, at the more genuine blind arrangements. Then Carrell and West[2] at the Academy of Air Force of the United States of America did a really thorough empirical study and it came to a rather strange conclusion; that in fact they do not correlate or rather correlate a little negatively that the more satisfied the student the worse he or she learns. And this is a rather shocking result, which is then rather difficult to deal with or what to do with this. Then, to the dismay of everything, a very thorough analysis was made in Italy a little later by Braga[3], and the same results were obtained, making it quite unusually convincing. In addition, then Uttl[4] and her friends or research partners found that these Cohen's and these older studies not only had poor empirical data but were also statistically poor.

Well, what are we going to do in this situation, do we raise our paws, thinking that we do not have to follow student satisfaction or something like that. Not like that, but taking into account this research development and background now that we are wondering what we are asking students. We don't have to ask if it was very nice, whether you enjoyed yourself so much, did you had a nice time in that lecture or something like that. But we can think about what we are asking, and now we have a good opportunity to think about it. And then that means that we will consider those questions then take into account where that research has developed. On the other hand, these earlier or these early 21st century studies actually show that if students — in these cases since this was a fact — value a teaching where they do not learn. Is it somehow possible for us to influence students throughout teaching so that they begin to appreciate and that they are satisfied with the

teaching where they learn. And even those surveys with the right kind of reflective questions, about what we have been thinking about here, would perhaps guide the student to think about that teaching event in terms of their own learning. And this is good for everyone, if a student learns to better understand where he or she is learning and learns from his or her own learning, then that is perhaps the most essential factor in this rapidly changing society today. If the student will learn to learn, no matter what happens, that there will be new languages that have never been there or something. Then the student who has learned to learn so it is good for him or her. So I would see that it is important to ask the student many questions. It helps to develop teaching further. It is then good to consider and then take the background study into account. This is how I'd see it.

Saija Halminen: Thank you. Lastly, we have really classic one that you learn the most from mistakes or do you.

Juha Himanka: Oops. This is what smells so much of a trap on the philosopher's side. Here we are now trying to trick on this person by saying that if it is claimed that one learns from mistakes and then within one's own statement the error is noticed and corrected then a paradox follows and then neither can be true. I'm not falling into that trap. I think about it from some other point of view and I think that then you have to answer so that sometimes you learn from mistakes and sometimes you don't. Isn't that right? We have — in relation to the previous speech — then we can learn to learn and it may be that we learn from mistakes. It can be that one person makes mistakes and you don't learn from them, and the other person makes mistakes and learns from them. And the latter is what we are trying to encourage here at the university.

And then what does it mean for teaching? Well, it means that, first of all, it would be really good, — and that is pretty difficult to do, but what is the main objective for the teacher — that atmosphere would be where it is allowed to make mistakes. It is in many pedagogical premises, that a learning atmosphere is created that does not actually encourage intentional mistakes, but allows for such risk-taking, experimentation and even a bit of playfulness. And off course, there will be mistakes done. And when you learn from mistakes, then it is better in terms of learning. And we have different things, you learn in different ways, but there are many things where learning through mistakes is essential. I would say that it is learning from experience. We have more than one of what we understand to be experience. I am not going there, it would be a little too long, my favorite subjects, but let's not go for it. But if you think about it from the point of view of job advertisements, then you want to have an experienced forklift driver or something like this. And well, what does this experienced mean? It means that he or she has already made those mistakes. He or she has gone through the wall a few times with forklift spikes, and so on. And then you want someone to do the job who doesn't make those mistakes again because he or she has already learned from those mistakes.

On the experimental aspect of learning, where then there this learning through errors is essential. Then I think it's good for everyone to be able to create that kind of learning atmosphere where you can make mistakes and it's also more comfortable for the teacher. It is much more exciting to pull such a teaching event where students take risks, still make mistakes and all kinds of things like this. I would appreciate that. And then, if you think about what means teachers have to act in that situation, start to reflect and observe how to act in such close meetings or perhaps even online meetings. So, how the things that students do are received at the first time. The students are very sensitive to the fact that if a student makes a mistake and then the host or teacher laughs mockingly

at it, then no one takes any more risks. In that way, when the teacher sees and notices that the student is making an unintended mistake — where he or she has tried the very best — then in some way to catch it and support it and making it a learning process and, in a way, also to take it in such a way that it is perfectly allowed to do. That's how the atmosphere kind of develops into the good for learning. And besides, a much funnier teacher and hopefully funnier for the student. That's a little bit of this.

Saija Halminen: Thank you all very much for your answers.

[1]Cohen, Peter (1981) Student Ratings of Instructions and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of Multisection Validity Studies. Review of Educational Research 51, 281–309.

[2]Carrell, Scott E. & West, James E. (2010). Does Professor Quality Matter? Evidence from Random Assignment of Student to Professors. Journal of Political Economy 118 (3), 409–432.

[3]Braga, Michela & Paccagnella, Marco & Pellizzari, Michele (2014) Evaluating students' evaluations of professors. Economics of Education Review 41, 71–88.

[4]Uttl, Bob & White, Carmela & Gonzalez, Daniela (2017) Meta-analysis of faculty's teaching effectiveness: Student evaluation of teaching rating and student learning are not related. Studies in Educational Evaluation 54, 22–42.