

## Chapter 6

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# Trust and its role in facilitating dialogic feedback

*David Carless*

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In this chapter, I seek to elaborate on new ways of thinking about feedback by exploring the role of trust in developing dialogic forms of feedback. Trust is an important but underexplored factor impacting on teaching, learning and assessment. Trust is of great relevance to feedback processes because of the relational, affective and emotional sides of feedback. Assessment and feedback experiences can arouse negative (e.g. anxiety or anger) or positive (e.g. pride or satisfaction) reactions. Trusting virtues such as empathy, tact and a genuine willingness to listen are ways in which positive feedback messages can flourish and more critical ones be softened. Trust needs to be accounted for because when it is absent, the prospects for learners' uptake of feedback are seriously constrained.

Three of the main limitations of existing feedback practice within modularized university systems are that feedback often comes relatively late in the process, is sometimes unidirectional transmission of information, and students find it difficult to act on the feedback they receive (Carless, 2006). A promising development elaborated in recent literature (e.g. Beaumont et al., 2011; Nicol, 2010), and underpinning the current chapter, is the notion of dialogic approaches to feedback. I define dialogic feedback as: interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified. Impacting on the extent to which such processes may be embedded in courses are relationships of trust between teachers and students, and between students themselves. Dialogic feedback is facilitated when teachers and students enter into trusting relationships in which there are ample opportunities for interaction about learning and around notions of quality.

The chapter is based on a case study of teaching at undergraduate level by a purposively selected award-winning teacher, chosen on the basis of his capacities to stimulate dialogic feedback processes. Practices in the teacher's repertoire which encouraged dialogic feedback included: a challenging interactive style of teaching which relied on extensive participation from all members of his classes; and peer feedback and self-evaluation of student oral presentations, one of the key learning activities in his classes. These practices were facilitated by the development of open and trusting course climates.

A single case is sufficient for current purposes because the aim is to theorize about practice and generate issues for further exploration. Although the case occurs within a university setting, it may also carry implications for other forms

of professional education in which trust is likely to be a relevant dimension of feedback interactions. The focus of the chapter is mainly on the teacher as facilitator of dialogue. Other sources of feedback (see, for example, Chapters 10, 11 and 12 this volume) are, of course, equally worthwhile, but they were not the main focus of this particular case study.

A central element in the chapter is to show how trust facilitates dialogic feedback. Uptake of feedback is likely to be enhanced in a dialogic classroom in which all participants have sufficient confidence and faith in others to contribute ideas freely in an open, supportive atmosphere. The contribution to this volume lies in exploring key facets of trust; documenting how an award-winning teacher developed trust with participants; identifying key features facilitating dialogic feedback within trusting relationships; and charting some future directions for trust research.

### **Framework of trust, communication and feedback**

The framework for the chapter is developed in three strands: the nature of trust; competence and communication trust; trust and feedback.

#### *The nature of trust*

For the purposes of this chapter, I use the definition of trust proposed by Tschannen-Moran (2004): one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on an investment of faith that the other is open, reliable, honest, benevolent and competent. All these five features relate in some way to assessment and feedback in higher and professional education: openness and transparency in assessment procedures; reliability of judgments; honest feedback which identifies weaknesses as well as strengths; goodwill and generosity of spirit from the feedback provider; and the competence of others to provide useful feedback.

Trust is an important dynamic in various fields, including sociology, management, organizational theory and education. It is insufficiently discussed in relation to teaching, learning and assessment in higher and professional education; and when it is analyzed it is often a minor sub-theme rather than a topic of extended discussion. Developing relationships and trust with students impacts on student engagement with the learning process (Bryson and Hand, 2007). Trust is an important element of teacher-student relationships because it can prepare the ground for a transformative, dialogic learning environment (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). In a steadily expanding higher education sector, with limited time and space for the development of interpersonal relationships, trust may, however, be in short supply. Without trust, students may be unwilling to involve themselves fully in learning activities which may reveal their vulnerabilities, for example, when they open themselves to peer or teacher critique.

*Competence trust and communication trust*

There are a number of dimensions of trust and here I highlight the two most relevant to the current discussion: competence trust and communication trust. Competence trust or 'trust of capability' is an important aspect of trust (Reina and Reina, 2006) and denotes a person's ability to carry out a task efficiently and effectively. Trust in a party's competence creates an atmosphere conducive to the sharing of information and ideas. In relation to feedback, students need quality input from competent trustworthy sources, as well as potentially less refined feedback from peers.

Competence trust is mainly a facilitator for a further feature which is probably even more central to the current discussion of dialogic feedback: communication trust or the confidence that an interlocutor is sharing information transparently, and has one's best interests at heart. Communication trust, according to Reina and Reina (2006), includes willingness to share information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, maintain confidentiality, give and receive feedback, and speak with good purpose. Frequency of communication is also important in that trust is developed between participants through repeated interactions (Seligman, 1997).

Characteristics such as empathy and respect underpin communication trust. To build trust interlocutors listen to and empathize with others, as seeking to understand is one of the most important trust-builders because it communicates that you value the other person (Costa and Kallick, 1995). Empathy involves listening attentively and responding sensitively to the thoughts of others. Empathy is highly relevant for trust because it helps us to attribute motives, sympathize with them and perhaps tolerate deviations from expectations (Nooteboom, 2002). Students need to feel that their views are taken seriously if trust is to develop, thereby making risk-taking possible (Shady and Larson, 2010). Risk-taking for students may involve taking more responsibility and self-initiative than they are accustomed to contributing; and for teachers surrendering some control of content and process by opening up spaces in the curriculum for students to grow (Barnett, 2007a). My position is that such a pedagogy can most effectively be achieved within course climates in which there is mutual trust between participants. In this pedagogy of trust, teachers need to invest trust in students. When teachers lack trust in students they may rely mainly on an information-transmission mode of instruction because of a lack of confidence in the competence and willingness of students to make the most of opportunities afforded by more open-ended learning tasks. It takes trust to open up the learning environment to student initiative.

*Trust and feedback*

What does the literature on feedback in higher education say about issues related to trust? For formative feedback to flourish within a dialogic environment, it is

necessary for students to be willing to reveal their own conceptions which may not be fully formed: in other words, to invest trust in the teacher. Conversely, 'faking good' (Gibbs, 2006, p. 26) occurs when students present themselves as knowing more than they actually do, as revealing their weaknesses or attempting something challenging may be perceived as risking lower grades or threats to self-esteem. Dialogue has most potential when students feel comfortable in being open about any partial understandings and do not try to conceal ignorance or hide mistakes.

Student response to feedback is also influenced by the relational aspect of their perceptions of the tutor giving the feedback (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2005): for example, informants spoke of feeling comfortable with tutors who appeared approachable, but wary of those who they perceived as threatening, not open to alternative interpretations of assignment questions, or not to be trusted because of marks deemed to be awarded without adequate justification. Negative feedback experiences can threaten student self-esteem and identity (Crossman, 2007) and become a source of distrust and defensiveness. Empathetic feedback depends on relationships which are not easy to develop in conditions of large classes and heavy teacher workloads.

A useful strategy in the pedagogy of dialogic feedback is to involve students as assessors so that they develop an awareness of making judgments about quality, deepening their understanding of alternative ways of tackling a task, developing a more critical perspective on their own work and potentially learning from the work of their peers. For these potentials to be realized, students need to invest faith in their peers and allow their own work to be critiqued, i.e. placing themselves in a vulnerable state. A recent study by Beaumont et al. (2011) reports that some students saw peer feedback processes as constructive and motivational, whilst others were concerned about trust, competency and possible plagiarizing of their ideas. If students do not trust either the integrity or the competence of their classmates, they are less likely to commit themselves to the kind of peer interactions which have potential to develop their ability to self-assess and refine their notions of quality. Ways forward include the creation of course climates in which the giving and receiving of peer feedback is a regular aspect of teaching and learning processes (Boud, 2000; Liu and Carless, 2006).

A further relevant aspect to the interplay between feedback and trust is assessment task design. The possibilities for productive feedback provision are deeply affected by the number, timing and sequence of assessment tasks which students undertake. Task design is affected by trust and distrust (Carless, 2009). Sometimes more traditional assessment tasks, such as essays and examinations, are more readily trusted. An environment in which mistrust is prevalent may lead to more 'defensive' assessment, i.e. a task which protects the teacher from challenge or criticism. Conversely, space for the development of student authentic being is opened up when summative assessment is characterized by experiment and innovation, allowing students to embrace the challenge of risk, uncertainty and emotional response (Barnett, 2007b).

### *Summary of framework*

To sum up, I have highlighted the relationship between various facets of trust and dialogic feedback. Competence trust and communication trust are viewed as facilitating factors for effective feedback processes. Recurring opportunities for communication characterized by openness and empathy create spaces for participants to demonstrate their trustworthiness. The interplay between trust and dialogic feedback represents a key aspect of an idealized view of learning as being risk-taking transformative adventure. Dialogic feedback is supported by openness, empathy, sensitivity and the development of course climates which support interactive teaching and learning environments. The challenge of developing trusting relationships in mass higher education underpins the need for a discussion of a pedagogy of trust.

### **The case study**

The case study is now presented through three sub-sections which introduce the teacher, his courses and selected aspects of the student response. At the outset, I should acknowledge that the case represents something of an 'ideal' example involving a popular award-winner, teaching relatively small classes of elective students. I make no apology for that because the discussion of the case seeks to express possibilities and potentials, even hopefully to inspire.

#### *The teacher*

The teacher whose practice is discussed in this chapter is an award-winning teacher in the Faculty of Business, University of Hong Kong. He was one of the interviewees in a study on the feedback practices of ten distinguished teachers reported in Carless et al. (2011). From these ten interviews, he seemed to be most prepared to 'push the boundaries' of teaching, learning and assessment. A follow-up case study was subsequently undertaken, involving classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Fifteen hours of classroom observations were conducted across two elective courses: Creativity and Business Innovation (class size: 20 students) and e-Business Transformation (class size: 35 students). Individual semi-structured interviews were also carried out with eleven students focusing on issues arising from the observations and the interviews with the teacher.

The teacher's philosophy of teaching is expressed as follows:

*My basic philosophy is to motivate students to shift emphasis from memorizing and remembering to reflecting and understanding, as I believe that real education should entail a thoughtful understanding of why things happen as they do ... My reflections have led me to the belief that we need to shift our primary responsibility as educators from teaching content to generating knowledge and facilitating student learning through introspection and cognitive engagement with what they aim to learn ... Through such engagement, they would reach the*

*requisite mental flow amenable to long-lasting predilection for learning as a process and not as an end in itself.*

#### The courses and their assessments

The course outlines for both courses indicate a key requirement is for students to demonstrate effective skills in communicating their thoughts. Students are expected to communicate in writing through individual assignments and verbally by delivering oral presentations, and less formally through interaction in class and/or through the course blog.

The assignment tasks of a course are a critical factor influencing student learning habits and also the prospects for feedback which students can use while the course is in progress. The design of the assessment for both courses involved participation grades, individual written work and group projects. The weighting of the assessment is summarized in Figure 6.1.

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#### Creativity and Business Innovation course

1. Case, Class and Blog Discussion	40%
2. Individual Written Case Assignment	30%
3. Term Project	30%

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#### E-business transformation course

1. Class Contribution	30%
2. Case Presentation	20%
3. Written Case Analyses	20%
4. Design Project	30%

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Figure 6.1 Course assessment types and weighting

The teacher is somewhat elusive about how participation or class contribution is measured and how the related marks are awarded. The teacher does have an educational rationale for this open-endedness in terms of the self-evaluative capacities he is seeking to develop:

*It is important to put students in an assessing position because by doing that you let them understand the meaning of quality and you pass the responsibility to them to decide what is good and what is bad. Self-evaluation is about knowing the notion of quality. I intentionally leave it vague and don't put exact wording on its meaning, because quality is at the beginning of self-discovery.*

It seems that the teacher wants students to identify for themselves what quality participation should look like, and so refrains from prescribing tightly what

students should achieve. Whilst this position is debatable, his expressed viewpoint is to challenge students to perform 'outside the box' and exceed expectations, rather than to conform to pre-set standards.

#### **Selected student perspectives**

The interviews with a range of students indicated a unanimously positive response to his teaching. Two examples of student comments:

*It's interesting and I learned a lot of things. The course is about creativity and innovation and it is quite different from the other courses we've taken at the university. Because most of the other courses are based on textbooks or fixed content, all you need to do is to memorize what you have learned, understand the concepts and then you can get good marks. But in this course, he focuses on our self-improvement. So the most difficult thing is that he always challenges you and pushes you to think. It is good because as a university student you need to upgrade your thinking.*

*It's just wonderful. This course might be one of the courses that will benefit my whole life. It will have that kind of life-long enrichment. He is very good at engaging students in thinking. I have never met any teacher that can spark my curiosity and just keep it going like he does.*

The assessment methods drew more mixed comments. Overall, the main positive elements were the variety of meaningful assessment tasks which prompted extended study over a period of time, and the focus on the process of learning which could generate critical thinking. Concerns were expressed about how participation was measured, fairness (some assigned cases or tasks were perceived as more difficult than others), and potential subjectivity in the teacher award of grades. Competence trust or confidence in the teacher seemed to be a factor in increasing student acceptance or tolerance of some of the ambiguities in the grading of the assessment task. In other words, the positive student response to the teacher seems to be a factor in supporting student acquiescence in the assessment processes (despite having some misgivings). I infer that innovative assessment is more likely to be accepted by students when they have confidence and faith in their teacher. Teachers may also find it useful to communicate with students the rationale for innovative assessment and how it can benefit their learning.

#### **Key themes**

I now analyze on the basis of the observational and interview data two key themes, the first focusing on the classroom atmosphere of the courses and how it helps to develop a climate conducive to dialogic feedback; and secondly, a discussion of a specific activity which promotes interactive dialogue. Within each theme, I bring out issues relevant to the interplay of trust and dialogic feedback.

### Classroom atmosphere

Classroom atmosphere was a key theme in the data and below are two examples which provide a flavour of students' responses:

*He is very successful in building an interactive relationship between himself and the students. He encourages you or even forces you to speak, so you build a kind of conversational dependency. I always have a better relationship with teachers whose class is more interactive. To build a relationship you have to have time and you have to have interaction. For some other classes, there is just a teacher standing and speaking, and students sitting there listening. At the end of the semester you don't know the teacher and the teacher doesn't know you, then how can you build trust or dependency on each other?*

*An environment and atmosphere has been created, so we seem to be more active in this class than in other courses. You just think you can make mistakes when you are talking in this course ... In this class, everyone is very active and you won't think yourself strange if you are speaking out. Even if you don't say a lot at first, he will find ways to let you talk. He seldom says that something is right or wrong; he usually says it is interesting and it seems that your opinion will be appreciated. ... You can really feel he is paying attention to what you are saying to him, it's a kind of respect. I think in this kind of course I am not afraid of losing face.*

The first quotation emphasizes the importance of interaction in building trust. The student informant also mentions dependency, which relates to the idea of trust involving the mutual investment of faith. The second quotation also reiterates two themes alluded to earlier in the chapter: first, the perception that making mistakes or risk-taking is accepted; and second, the feeling that the teacher is really paying attention to what you are saying is an example of empathetic communication trust. By listening attentively and respectfully to an interlocutor one builds a relationship of trust and encourages the communication of ideas and thoughts. These ideas are not just limited responses which sometimes characterize classroom interaction, but more elaborated and possibly 'risky' forms of interaction.

Students were also asked about the teacher's feedback strategies and their perceived effectiveness. Students highlighted the verbal dialogic interaction in the class, for example:

*Sometimes his feedback is like a catalyst to promote the process, to direct the discussion from one student to another. Often he was challenging people to think more. He will ask the same student many 'why' questions. It is feedback showing that the teacher is interested in your answer and wants to explore your answer more.*



A salient point is that questioning is probably less threatening than evaluating.

Another student commented on how the atmosphere in class facilitated feedback between all class participants:

*The whole intimacy of the course gives you an environment where you can give feedback more easily. One thing which creates intimacy is the interactive teaching in which every single person really gives something during the class.*

Several students also talked about the need to be alert and the need to prepare for the class, so that you would be ready to participate in the extended dialogues, for example:

*Everyone is very active in the class which actually gives me motivation to participate. I would try to perform better. I would spend some time preparing before his class what questions he might ask. He has very high expectations, so I don't want to let him down. This is a kind of motivation to make me more hard-working because I want to live up to his expectations.*

These high expectations were not, of course, without drawbacks or challenges. Classroom observations did evidence occasional signs of student discomfort at presenting in front of the class, and opening oneself up to critique. One of the student informants commented on some feelings of stress, although she seemed to view them positively:

*I feel stressful in class. I have to be awake every minute, every second, because he will seize every opportunity to ask why. Stressful in a good way, not in a bad way ... Being stressful in a good way pushes you further, you participate more and you push yourself to understand more what he is talking about.*

What she calls stressful might also be viewed as emotionally engaged. I interpret her words as carrying some resonance with Barnett's (2007a) vision of a higher education in which the student ventures into 'new places, strange places, anxiety-producing places' (p. 147).

I leave the final words of the section to the teacher himself:

*I am a provocateur, bringing them into the arena ... and involving them cognitively and emotionally. It takes a while for them to get to know what you're doing and why, and then they're going to become more and more trusting.*

#### **Dialogue through oral presentations**

A particular feature of the teacher's practice is a large number of both formal (for assessment) and informal (as part of dialogic participation) oral presentations carried out by students in groups. These range from brief sharing lasting only

a few minutes to more extended assessed presentations of projects. An example of the latter is an oral presentation activity which involves video-taped presentations. A major part of the teacher's stated rationale for the activity is that clear and effective oral presentations are an important part of success in the business field.

The activity is arranged as follows. First, students present on a self-selected topic within a general theme (e.g. a business innovation or a new product idea). Immediately at the end of the presentation, two short extracts lasting a few minutes are shown and presenters are invited to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their presentations. After the student has had the opportunity to share their own perceptions, other students and the teacher share ideas on how the presentation could be improved.

The teacher expressed the view that the video part of the activity is particularly useful because 'pictures don't lie' and students are able to focus on what they can see on the screen and reflect on it. He believes it is a useful process in getting students to analyze their presentation style and content. He also talked about the emotional impact of the challenge of reflecting on one's performance in front of a group of peers. He asserts that it is better for students to discover weaknesses in their presentation style in class rather than later in the workplace.

The majority of student informants were positive about the experience of participation in the video activity. A selection of student views:

*I think it is very useful because it was the first time that I could actually see myself presenting, and I could get useful feedback from my friends and the teacher. I saw myself on the video and I saw my mistakes, what I did well and what I must improve. I think it's good because it's like putting your mistakes right in front of your face.*

*I think his purpose is to help us find a way to be convincing business presenters. By filming us, he got us to reflect on how to sell an idea or product. It's funny because trying to improve the way you present is not really related to innovation or creativity, but it's his way of doing things and it's really good.*

*It is quite valuable. Basically I can see from other persons' perspective things about my presentation. I know that last time I did my presentation I was basically like a sales person. I kept pushing my ideas out, I spoke too fast, both in terms of the number of sentences and the quantity of ideas ... My presentation is focused on content, that means the analytical logic of the case, but I think my peers focus too much on the presentation style rather than the content. Sometimes their comments are quite superficial.*

Most informants spoke positively about the peer feedback from their classmates, and the classroom atmosphere was a facilitating factor in this. In terms of limitations of the processes, some students referred to the superficiality of comments (as mentioned in the final quotation above) and a further stated drawback was that the activity consumes quite a lot of classroom time.

To sum up, students found the video activity useful in that it enabled them to reflect productively on their presentation style and performance. The interactive atmosphere of the classroom facilitated the sharing of honest peer and teacher feedback, and this was largely a product of the trusting relationships which had been developed. An important element of the activity is that through the interplay of student self-evaluation, peer feedback and teacher input it sharpens students' understanding of the notion of quality performance. In Carless (2013), I discuss how this activity enhances sustainable feedback – the ability of students to improve the quality of their work independently of the teacher.

### **Implications**

The first implication is represented by a key theme of this volume, the desirability of feedback being dialogic rather than one-way transmission of information. Dialogic feedback refocuses largely unidirectional teacher comments at the end of a course towards feedback from teacher, peers and self-embedded within the curriculum. Through such processes, feedback has the potential to be more efficient and taken up more widely. Dialogic feedback is facilitated by relationships of trust in which classroom participants value the views of others, respond empathetically and co-construct classroom atmospheres in which students can feel free to take risks.

One of the contributions of the chapter is to analyze in detail the role of trust in the implementation of these dialogic feedback processes. Communication trust is a facilitating factor for the development of an atmosphere that fosters engagement, risk-taking and a willingness to take part in sustained and challenging dialogues around both subject matter and the learning process. In the case study, dialogic feedback was facilitated by expectations and enactment of a high degree of student participation, and an empathetic teacher response which made clear that student views were valued and would be addressed. Communication trust reinforces the message that feedback is a social and relational process in which classroom atmosphere, expectations and social dynamics between participants are paramount.

Competence trust relates to the confidence that the students developed in the teacher to arrange both classroom activities and the course assessment. His skilful handling of interaction in the classroom facilitated learning activities, such as the oral presentations with embedded self and peer critique. The innovative assessment task design focused on maximizing productive student learning, rather than a more traditional focus on reliability of grades. Competence trust in the teacher seemed to be a factor in student tolerance of limitations to the reliability and fairness of the assessment procedures.

Table 6.1 summarizes some features of the case which supported the development of dialogic feedback and trusting relationships. These features represent ways in which teachers can develop an interactive atmosphere in which sustained dialogue can occur.

Table 6.1 Features facilitating dialogic feedback within trusting relationships

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Evidence from the case</i>
Classroom atmosphere	Intimate class environment; speaking out is normalized.
Relationship building	Frequent interaction as path to co-dependency.
Establishing dialogue	All students are required to contribute; every individual gives something.
Promoting student self-evaluation	Sharing of responsibility of evaluation. Student reflections on oral presentations; use of peer feedback.
Establishing high expectations	Expectations are high and students are pushed to fulfil their potential. 'I don't want to let him down'.
Inviting elaboration	'He will ask the same student many "why" questions'.
Responding positively and non-judgmentally	Students feel they can take risks or make mistakes. 'He seldom says that something is right or wrong, he usually says it is interesting'.
Showing empathy	Opinions are valued and appreciated (although some critique was robust).
Listening attentively and valuing the ideas of others	'You can really feel he is paying attention to what you are saying'.
Student faith in the teacher	Competence of teacher established. Students have faith in his handling of teaching, learning and assessment.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the role of trust as an important but under-explored dimension of feedback. Trust is an important dimension of feedback because without it, students may not want to confront threats to face or the emotions implicit in peer and teacher critique. I have emphasized the role of

open communication in trust and illustrated it through a discussion of the classroom atmosphere and a specific pedagogic activity in a case study of an award-winning teacher.

This chapter has focused on the role of trust in relation to feedback, whilst in an earlier publication (Carless, 2009) I focused on trust in relation to assessment reform. In terms of future directions, I intend to review the impact on trust relationships from a wider perspective of a pedagogy of trust. Issues to be addressed include: caring relationships between participants; empowerment and risk-taking; pedagogic tact; collaborative learning and student engagement.

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