

Feeding back Feedback – Towards a Cyclical Model for Learner Support

Geraldine Brosnan

Anne O'Keeffe

James Binchy

Mary Immaculate College

1.0 Introduction

The Learner Support Unit (LSU) was established in 1997 with the aim of providing academic support for students taking a degree at MIC. The centre aims to improve the quality of learning by supporting students in the transition to third-level study. Initially the unit focused specifically on the needs of mature students. It then emerged that many of these needs were generic to the whole student cohort. Consequently services were mainstreamed. The unit is also examining the issue of access and is looking at ways of increasing participation rates of a range of socio-economic groups currently underrepresented in tertiary education. The work of the LSU divides into three specific strands: services, products and projects. Influenced by development studies and concepts of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) as outlined by Chambers (1994), participation of the target groups in the development planning process is an important aspect of the work.

This paper will examine a practical application of this methodology by exploring how the quality of student learning can be enhanced at third level.

Based on undergraduate and workshop participant feedback, this paper aims to address:

- Lectures and tutorials as learning environments from a student perspective.
- Student transition academic needs
- Performance assessment – strategies for optimising learning through feedback.

2.0 Background

Over the last fifty years there has been a dramatic shift in the theoretical framework of the methodology used in development education. The modernisation theory, popular in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasises economic growth along the lines of the development of the western world. Central is the belief that 'third world countries were poor because they were backward and they needed to catch up with the industrialised and developed west' (Tormey & O'Connell, 2002: 4). This belief was echoed in the traditional didactic pedagogic methodology with its notion of western or first world educative philosophical expertise. Despite large-scale financial and personnel investment, progress was small.

The emergence of Freire's Theory of Learning in the 1970s brought a fresh philosophy and novel methodology to the constructs of development education. Freire's theory criticises didactic traditional teaching approaches believing the inequality in the teacher-student relationship mirrors oppression found in society (Elias, 1994: 115). Freire summarises this approach by calling it the 'banking concept

of education wherein teacher make deposits of information into the passive minds of students' (Elias, 1994: 132).

Freire's approach explores a new dialogical methodology, arguing there is 'middle ground between what he sees as total free discovery by individuals and direct impartation of knowledge to individuals' which he considers 'domesticating and manipulative' (Elias, 1994:133). He believes free dialogue allows learners and educators to participate as equals. This hypothetical construct brings an increased understanding to the active process of learning. Freire's methodology has considerable relevance for all involved in the education process.

Development studies have, in the last five years, focused increasingly on this idea of dialogue. This methodological participation of target groups in the education planning process is now viewed as crucial to the development education model. It stems from the belief that 'much of the best learning is through self-critical commitment to action, to engagement with the world, to learn by doing' (Chambers, 1994: 100). This approach, which has been induced from effective practice, has become fashionable and is now practised across many disciplines. Within development education theory it is termed Participation Approaches to Learning or Action (PLA). Mascarenhas et al. (1991) cited in Chambers (1994: 104) outlines its three foundations:

The behaviour and attitudes of those, who facilitate, not dominate.
The methods which shift balance from closed to open, from individual to group, from verbal to visual and from measuring to comparing. Partnership and sharing of information between insiders and outsiders and between organisations

Chambers (1994: 102) explains how these foundations translate into the application of this model by defining PLA as 'a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge and to act, plan, monitor and evaluate'.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Phase One of Data Collection: Description of Survey

Since the aims of the study are: to explore lectures and tutorials as learning environments from a student perspective; student transition academic support needs and strategies for optimising learning through feedback, data was collected by administering a questionnaire to 225 informants randomly selected from a cohort of undergraduate students. Female and male respondents aged between 17-23 all completed the questionnaire. These data were then analysed and collated under a number of reoccurring themes (see results, section 3.4).

3.2 Phase Two of data collection: workshops

Two facilitated workshops were organised. Participants were self-selected and were either third level lecturers and/or development workers. These were practical and followed a task-based format. To address our aims, participants reflected in a 'pyramid' fashion, that is, first individually, then in pair groupings, and eventually in

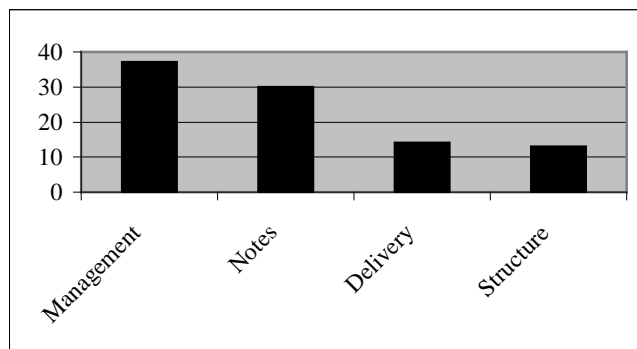
plenary. In line with the PLA model, facilitation techniques were used to maximise participants input and generate discussion.

3.4 Results - phase 1 data collection

3.4.1 Lectures

225 undergraduates were asked: *what advise would you give your lectures about how lectures could be improved?*. The following broad themes emerged. For each one we provide a more detailed breakdown below.

Table 1 – Broad themes in response to : ‘what advise would you give your lectures about how lectures could be improved?’



3.4.1.1 Management

Almost 39% of the responds under this heading referred to the pace of delivery of lectures. Students felt the pace was too fast. An example of one comment: *'speak clearer, don't rush, give time for students to listen + understand + also to take notes down'*. Related to this, almost 22% mentioned that the density of lecture content should be reduced, as one informant puts it: *'don't cover an insane amount in one lecture'*. Other more minor concerns were that the lectures begin and end on time and that pre-exam study week should no be used to recoup lost classes or uncovered course topics etc.

3.4.1.2 Notes

50% of responds in this area advocated the provision of notes to supplement the lecture, as one student states: *'put notes on handout - we can't write and listen at the same time!'* The remaining 50% suggested that all lecturers should make their lectures available on the Local Area Network: *'all lectures should be put on the LAN so that we can listen in class'*.

3.4.1.3 Delivery

Here one clear theme prevails – that lectures should be supplemented by ample visual aids. Some students suggest using PowerPoint or overheads. A typical response: *'try to use visual aids/overhead/PowerPoint as often as possible - it helps to hold our attention'*. Other students advise lecturers to use these visual aids appropriately for example: *'do not run too quickly through the PowerPoint give us time to take them*

down and listen to what you are saying' and *'use better slides and get colour photographs'*. However, some students would like to see less PowerPoint, or more accurately less cost for printing: *'don't use PowerPoint because it costs me a fortune, downloading them and printing them off'*.

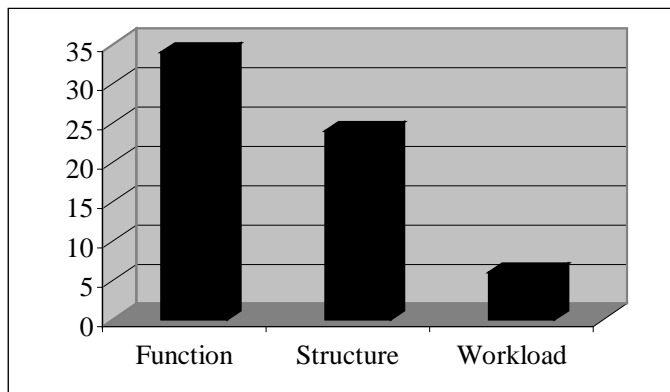
3.4.1.4 Structure

In this area, around 7.5% of the total cohort recommended that lectures be structured in a more interactive manner. As one informant puts it in concise terms: *'interaction with students needs to improve. More questions directed at us'*. Furthermore, some students point to the structure of the information presented *'please summarise lecture at the end'*).

3.4.2 Tutorials

The overall results for informant responses to the question: *what advice would you give your lectures as to how tutorials could be improved?* are provided in table 2 and these are explained in greater detail below.

Table 2 –Broad results for: : *what advice would you give your lectures as to how tutorials could be improved?*



3.4.2.1 Function

All of the responses under this thematic heading, (53% of all responses relating to *tutorials*) refer to the function of tutorials, suggesting that they should relate directly to themes covered in the plenary lectures. An example of a comment in this regard: *'should be more relevant to lectures, help us understand + discuss lectures not be a totally different topic'*.

3.4.2.2 Structure

Almost 45% of responses on the question of *tutorials* relate to issues of structure: The tutorial sessions *'should be smaller, more personal'*, they should involve more interaction: *'allow students to input more'*, and they should evince more communication between course lecturers and course tutors. One informant deduces that: *'sometimes I get the impression that the tutors and lecturers do not discuss the layout of the material and therefore they don't link up properly'*.

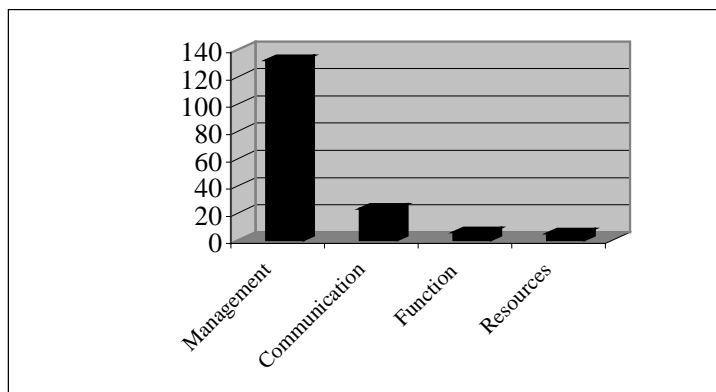
3.4.2.3 Workload

9% of responses on this topic advocate that the pre-tutorial workload for the student should be reduced (it is normal in many disciplines that students are required to read, for example, a journal article in advance of a tutorial). The workload includes prior reading but some felt that '*extra readings for tutorials should be shortened*' and in relation to tutorial assignments: '*too much week-to-week assignments given*' (sic).

3.4.3 Assignments

The broad distribution of responses to the question: *what advice would you give your lectures as to how assignment could be improved?* are clustered under four headings in table 3. Each one is elaborated below.

Table 3 – Broad results for the question: : *what advice would you give your lectures as to how assignments could be improved?*



3.4.3.1 Management

80% of all comments in this area relate to issues of how the assignments are managed. Almost 44% of these refer to the timing of the assignments whereby students are required to submit up to five essays or assignments around the same week of the semester: '*consult with other lecturers regarding hand-in date*'. 17% of these comments refer to the need for clear guidelines for each assignment: '*give more specific directions as to what is required*'. 9% of all comments under this thematic heading say that there should be fewer assignments while 9% of comments say that modules should be either exam or assignment based as opposed to being a combination of both. 4.5% in this area say that there should be more assignments and 4.5% also say that workload involved in the assignment should be reflected more in the marks allotted within the module. Below 4% said that there should be less group work, but interestingly, all of these responses came from one class cohort, which suggests an issue more at the level of 'class culture or dynamic'.

3.4.3.2 Communication

Here respondents raised two clear issues: 1) that there should be a feedback mechanism, for example, '*tell you where you went wrong*' and 2) that models or samples should be made available: '*give us some samples*'.

3.5 Results *phase two of data collected from workshops*

As described in the methodology section above (section 3), workshops were designed so as to bring the student comments back to faculty. This cyclical process aimed to provide a context for professional reflection on the part of lectures. Each workshop was structured in the following way:

3.5.1 Stage one

Participants asked individually to identify the salient issues they had with lectures, tutorials and assignments. They were then asked to share these in dyads. In relation to lectures, faculty listed the following:

- Difficulties with definition of a *lecture* as it was seen to relate to student group size. Some lecturers were teaching to very large groups (more than 400) while for others 30 was a typical class size.
- Smaller class size would be helpful to all
- Difficult to hold students' attention
- Lack of involvement on the part of the students
- Lack of feedback and interaction for faculty
- Layout/physical space was limiting
- Pace of lectures took no account of individual student needs and no account taken of differing learning styles
- Students were, in the main, receptive and passive
- Providing lecture notes in advance of lectures, whether on the LAN or on handouts runs the risk of students not attending.

Faculty listed the following for tutorials:

- Positive learning experience
- Presence should be obligatory
- Tutorial attendance can be irregular if tutorial work is not assessed
- No account of different learning styles
- Physical layout of room can be limiting
- Success depended on the teaching skill and knowledge of tutors
- Success also depended on the relationship between the lecturer and tutor
- Lack of student preparation
- Status of tutorials not considered as important by students and/ or lecturers
- Poor understanding of role of tutorial

The following were identified for assignments:

- Essays are a very good assessment instrument
- Originality of work, specifically with Internet plagiarism is a rising problem
- Students tend to be result focused and complete for grades. This can lead to an over focus on the essay as a product, as opposed to its value as a process
- Correcting very is time-consuming
- No framework for feedback
- Do we support learning process? We have a responsibility to ensure that students can understand the purpose of assignments as a learning tool.

3.5.2 Stage two

Participants were asked to imagine what students would say if asked the same set of questions:

In relation to lectures, faculty predicted that students would have the following issues:

- More handouts
- Pace too fast
- Relevance of material
- Course notes should be provided on LAN
- Variation in presentation
- Clarity of content
- Level of interest

With regard to tutorials, staff speculated that students might have the following suggestions:

- More focus on generating discussion
- Raise teaching standards
- Content better co-ordinated between lecture and tutor
- Tutors more available and approachable

Lecturers predicted the following for assignments:

- Lack of feedback
- Clear guidelines
- Competition for library and other resources
- Unclear relationship of assignments to course
- Fewer assignments required
- Co-ordination of timing
- Group assignments not liked

3.5.3 Stage three

Participants were presented with the jumbled up results of student survey and asked to predict the ranking.

3.5.4 Stage four

- Faculty were presented with a list of areas which students had described as 'issues' for them. They were asked to work in dyads or triads to propose solutions, even if these were sometimes aspirational. Various ideas were proposed and then discussed in plenary.

4.0 Discussion

Overall this process brought to light a number of mismatches between lecturer and student respectively. For example, although teaching staff feel that students may find the pace of lectures too fast at times, they were more concerned about holding students' attention for the duration of the lecture. On the other hand lecturers had not anticipated students' desire for more visual aids during lecture presentation. Also, lecturers identified a need to accommodate different learning styles. In many of these mismatches, there is a common thread – the need to address how the presentation of information can be provided at 1) a reasonable pace; 2) in an interesting format and 3) in such a way as to accommodate different learning styles. One of the main mismatches was between the students' concern about the clustering of assignment deadlines. Not surprisingly this was not anticipated by the lectures as they are the 'givers' of one assignment rather than the 'receiver' of four or five assignments. Here, there were interesting 'local' solutions proposed at the workshops and most of all attention was raised to the hitherto largely unnoticed cause of student anxiety.

Interestingly, there were also many points of commonality between the two cohorts. This sometimes surprised the lecturers involved in the workshops. For example, many students referred to the need for a more interactive teaching structures and most of all there were uniform calls for a need to define the function of tutorials. Lecturers identified the need to clarify this within each course and then to communicate this to the students. Communication was another area of common reference. As mentioned above, communication of the pedagogic function of tutorials, but also in terms of feedback on student performance, especially in terms of assignments. Both lecturers and students identified a need to have frameworks for feedback.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper reports the findings from a study using a practical application of the methodology of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) within a university environment. The objective of the survey and workshop was to explore how the quality of undergraduate learning can be enhanced at third level. Our analysis suggests that this methodological approach can be successful in bringing the views of students to faculty in an unthreatening fashion. Many of the issues raised in this process are for local negotiation of solutions and the main point to be abstracted is that it is both useful and necessary to set up this cyclical process. Faculty found this exercise very helpful as it offered a forum for focused reflection on their immediate work practices, it also allowed for self-evaluation and sharing of personal experience

in a supportive environment. In structuring this process care was taken to design workshops so as to be solution- rather than problem-focused. Future research and development in this area could involve using some of the alternative PLA methodologies such as mapping or diagramming.

By way of final caveat from our informants which sums up very well the need to make feedback cyclical: '*please do not waste our time with surveys unless you plan to act on them*'.

References

Chambers, R., 1997. *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Elias, J.L., 1994. *Paulo Friere: Pedagogy of Liberation*. Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.

Friere, P., 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Group.

McLaren, P., and P. Leonard. (eds.) 1993. *Paulo Friere: A Critical Encounter*. London: Routledge.

Tormey, R., and H. O'Connell (2002) "...Many Struggles have led us to come and find land for our children...", popular participation in development' in Regan, C (ed.) *80:20 Development in an Unequal World* Bray and Birmingham: 80:20 and TIDE.