

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING OUTCOMES: 3RD SEMINAR
Feedback and Formative Assessment in the Workplace¹
Professor Michael Eraut, University of Sussex

Feedback is now accepted as a key factor affecting learning and a key feature of interpersonal communication. The term is absent from the older dictionaries, because it first began in electronics and then became a basic concept in the broader field of cybernetics, before it filtered through into psychology to attain the wider significance it carries today. In cybernetics feedback was first associated with self-regulatory systems; then systems theory raised the level of complexity to include the input of information from outside the system that was relevant to its performance. From there it filtered through into both behavioural and cognitive theories of learning from experience. Feedback from experience is not necessarily dependent on interpersonal communication. People can try things out, make mistakes, celebrate success and learn without any witnesses. Such feedback is largely determined by what is noticed, what is regarded as significant, how it is interpreted and whether it is stored in long term memory and/or contributes to current or future actions. When other people are involved in giving feedback, the same factors apply to the recipient of the feedback; but the perspective of the giver of feedback or of any observers may be very different. The feedback given is not the same as the feedback received.

In education and workplace settings the term “feedback” is now mainly used in the context of formative assessment, where its main purpose is intended to be the provision of guidance on the quality of a person’s understanding and/or performance. This could apply either to a specific situation, decision or event, or to an ongoing process of learning or working in a particular context. Although feedback ranges from the broad and global to the narrow and very precise, it has a strong emotional dimension, which may lead to feedback intended to be narrow being interpreted as being broad. Moreover, even when the provider of feedback stresses that it is the action or performance that is the subject of the feedback, many recipients interpret it as being a comment on their person. Thus messages intended for guidance may be interpreted as judgemental.

Another problem arising from too close a link between feedback and formative assessment is that formative assessment is usually conceived in quasi-formal terms and provided by people with some authority. Whereas much feedback is informal and provided by a wider range of people, including senior people not having authority over the learner. Sometimes important feedback messages can be indirect. For example the allocation of work is often perceived as indicating a judgement of a person’s capability, and personal agency in seeking such work may lead to more rapid learning, or even earlier promotion. At the other end of the scale is the undue importance attributed to second hand reports of conversations and chance remarks by insecure learners who feel starved of feedback.

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper for an AERA symposium on formative assessment in professional education

The relationship between the cognitive content of feedback and its emotional dimension was explored by Trope et al (2001), who interpreted responses to negative feedback as posing a self-control dilemma:

“Individuals may want ... to know what skills they need to improve, what kinds of tasks to choose or avoid, and how much effort and preparation to invest in those tasks they choose. At the same time, individuals may be deterred by the emotional costs of negative feedback. These costs involve negative esteem-related feelings such as shame, dejection and disappointment. Indeed, research on task choice has found that people expect diagnostic failure to improve the accuracy of their self-knowledge, but also to make them shameful and dejected. In contrast, people expect diagnostic success to promote their self-knowledge as well as feelings of pride and gratification. Thus, the decision to accept negative feedback that is diagnostic of self-relevant attributes entails a trade-off between long-term information gain and immediate emotional costs.” (pp. 257-8)

Their own research indicated that the individuals’ mood and sense of priority may also influence how this conflict is resolved:

“When the feedback was diagnostic of an important ability, participants who were in a positive mood preferentially solicited and extensively processed feedback regarding their weaknesses. However, ...when he offered feedback that was non-diagnostic or when it pertained to an unimportant ability, participants who were in a positive mood preferred to receive feedback regarding their strengths rather than their weaknesses.” (p.271)

In one experiment they showed that people in a positive mood not only seek but also better remember and accept arguments that specify the health risks associated with caffeine consumption. This diminished their positive mood, but enhanced their willingness to give up unhealthy habits.

I have three suggestions regarding the context that might affect the mood in which health and social care practitioners and students receive negative feedback. The first occurs when there is an ongoing relationship of mutual interaction, which entails positive feedback at a global level. The second is when the feedback is followed by discussions about, and support or suggestions for, specific improvements. The third is when the recipient is known to be formally engaged in relevant learning, either through having student status or through being engaged in a recognised ‘learning project’ at work. Improving the mood by choosing or creating a setting that indicates concern for the learner may also have a positive effect.

A related area of laboratory research, which has been followed through into ethnographic research in classroom settings concerns the relationship between achievement and motivation, and how it is affected by feedback. Two theories of particular interest are Attribution Theory and Goal Theory. Weiner (1998) argued that a key factor affecting learners’ motivation lies in how they attribute their perceived success or failure. He uses four constructs for this purpose:

Locus of responsibility¹: Does this lie with the learner or is it attributed to other factors?

Scope¹: Does it relate to a specific event, a class of events or a wider range of contexts?

Control: Can the factors be controlled by themselves or by others?

Stability: Are the factors relatively stable or unstable?

Where the responsibility is seen as personal, the scope is regarded as significant, and the factors are viewed as stable and controllable, success will raise motivation and failure will lower motivation. Although it is the learners' attribution that is deemed to affect motivation, this attribution is significantly affected by teachers and significant others in the work environment.

Dweck's Goal Theory (1989) is based on a distinction between two kinds of achievement goal:

Learning Goals, in which individuals strive to increase their competence to understand or master something new; and

Performance Goals, in which individuals strive to document, or gain favourable judgements of, their competence or to avoid negative judgements of their competence.

Dweck analysed research on children's approaches to schooling to show the main characteristics of these two orientations. Torrance and Pryor (1998) summarise her research as indicating that children with learning goals:

- *Choose challenging tasks regardless of whether they think they have high or low ability relative to other children;*
- *Optimise their chances of success;*
- *Tend to have an 'incremental theory of intelligence';*
- *Go more directly to generating possible strategies for mastering the task;*
- *Attribute difficulty to unstable factors, e.g. insufficient effort, even if they perceive themselves as having low ability;*
- *Persist;*
- *Retain their self esteem, and are relatively unaffected by failure. (p85)*

These characteristics are developed through cooperative work and encouraging personal (ipsative) standards of success. In contrast, children with performance goals:

¹ The terminology has been changed to clarify the text

- *Avoid challenge when they have doubts about their ability compared with others;*
- *Tend to self-handicap so as to have an excuse for failure;*
- *Tend to see ability as a stable entity;*
- *Concentrate much of their task analysis on gauging the difficulty of the task and calculating their chances of gaining favourable ability judgements;*
- *Attribute difficulty to low ability;*
- *Give up in the face of difficulty;*
- Become upset when faced with difficulty or failure². (ibid, p85)

Torrance and Pryor's ethnographic studies in several primary school classrooms revealed how both the general classroom discourse and separate conversations with individual children demonstrated teachers' encouragement of performance goals rather than learning goals, with often unintended consequences for the long-term motivation of their pupils. Their conclusion is that: *approaches to formative assessment where the complexity of the situation is minimised and interaction is seen in purely cognitive terms* (p. 105) help the teaching to 'move on' but provide little real help to the learner as to what to do next. Any attempt to understand the learners' needs "must involve a critical combination and coordination of insights derived from a number of psychological and sociological standpoints, none of which by themselves provide a sufficient basis for analysis", and be "contextualised in the actual social setting of the classroom." (p. 105).

If we return to consider the determinants of individual feedback listed in my opening paragraph -- what is noticed, what is seen as significant and how it is interpreted and used – we can now see how dependent these factors are on the social context in which the feedback is given. The feedback perceived by learners in education settings is hugely influenced by the classroom culture, and that in turn is influenced by the wider culture of the organisation and the state structure for professional formation.

When we move to workplace contexts, there are similar, if not identical, factors affecting learning. Much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities; and this requires **confidence**. Moreover, confidence arises from successfully meeting **challenges** in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depends on the extent to which learners felt **supported** in that endeavour. Thus there is a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence (Eraut et al. 2000). The contextual significance of the word "confidence" depends on which aspects of this triangular relationship are most significant at any particular time. Often, it comes close to Bandura's (1997) concept of **self-efficacy**, relating to their self-perceived ability to execute a particular task or successfully perform a role. But, especially in the early

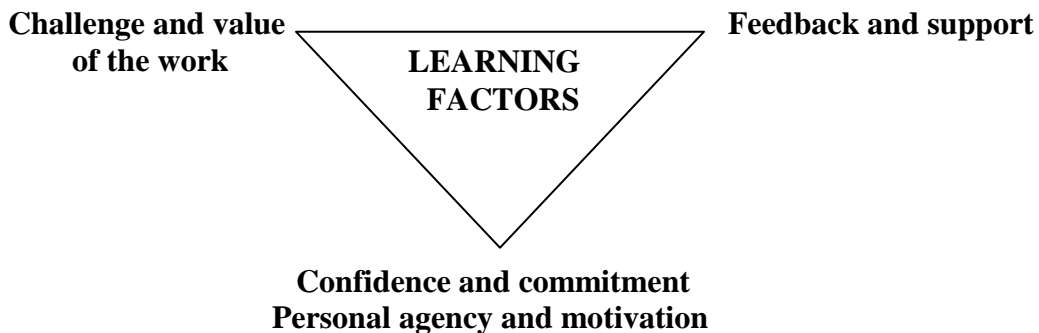
² The wording has been changed to clarify the text

career stage or when the stakes are high, it can also refer to their confidence in their colleagues' support.

Further research led us to add further elements to each apex of this triangle (Figure 1) to reflect other factors found to be significant for the learning of early career professionals (Eraut et al 2005b):

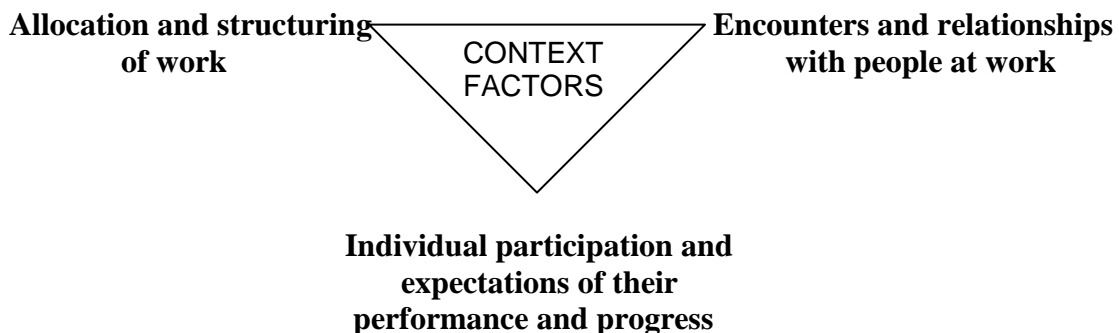
- **Feedback** has a huge effect on **performance** and **motivation**
- **Commitment** to work and colleagues is generated through **participation** in teams and appreciation of the **value of the work**
- **Personal agency** recognises participants' own sense of choice, meaningfulness, competence and progress (Thomas 2000), which is not necessarily aligned with their employer's priorities.

Figure 1: Learning Factors



Adding an observational dimension to our research (Eraut et al, 2005b) enabled us to give greater attention to the nature of participants' work, and their **relationships at work**, and hence to a second triangle, which mirrors the first triangle but focuses on the contextual variables that influence the learning factors depicted in the first triangle.

Figure 2: Context Factors



The **allocation and structuring of work** was central to our participants' progress, because it affected (1) the difficulty or challenge of the work, (2) the extent to which it was individual or collaborative, and (3) the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who had more or different expertise, and for forming **relationships** that might provide feedback and support. Concerns about meeting their employers' and their own **expectations** of their **performance** and career **progress** arose from inadequate **feedback** of a normative kind, and weakened novices' **motivation** and **commitment** to their organisation. **Learners' expectations** are critical to their views on the kind of feedback they need, and **relationships** are critical for the manner in which the communication of feedback is given and received.

Given the various perspectives on interpersonal feedback discussed above, it is important to include informal and indirect feedback in any definition. So for the purposes of this editorial I define feedback as:

Any communication that gives some access to other people's opinions, feelings, thoughts or judgements about one's own performance.

Early research into workplace learning

The first evidence I gathered about assessment of professionals in the workplace came from a qualitative study of doctors' learning in their first year of full time employment after graduating from medical school. In the UK this year concluded with their registration as a doctor, so their workplace learning should have had special significance. We found that only a minority of 33 Pre-Registration House Officers in three hospitals received formal feedback from the consultant appointed as their supervisor; and that even informal feedback was totally absent from important areas such as communication with patients. Negative informal comments were still delivered in public, while positive comments were usually as scarce as gold-dust. The effect on the learning and confidence of these young doctors was considerable. Yet resolving this problem did not require additional resources, nor was it a matter of accidental neglect, it was embedded in the culture (Eraut et al, 1997).

This was followed by a largely quantitative study of the learning of health scientists, whose training was largely laboratory based and gave better opportunities for regular feedback than more mobile health professionals. Not one of them thought that they had been given too much feedback; but the number wanting more feedback varied greatly between the science professions (Eraut et al, 1998), as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Feedback in the vocational training of health scientists

	Biomedical Scientists	Clinical Biochemists	Cytogeneticists	Microbiologists
% wanting a lot more formal feedback	43	23	12	62
% wanting a little more formal feedback	29	35	25	15
% wanting a lot more informal feedback	23	31	6	62
% wanting a little more informal feedback	34	27	18	8

These differences are considerable and appear to reflect the amount of attention given by the Professional Associations to the organisation and quality of their training. This is born out by the high correlation between the reported frequency of feedback and the overall quality ratings of their training by our large sample of 705 biomedical scientists. The ‘good feedback’ group received both formal and informal feedback at the end of each rotation, is contrasted in Table 2 below with the ‘no feedback group.

Table 2: Links between Feedback and overall judgements of Quality of Training

Overall quality	Very good	Good	Adequate	Poor/very poor
Good feedback	22%	48%	26%	4%
No feedback	7%	14%	41%	39%

Having established the significance of feedback and used a rather crude distinction between formal and informal settings for feedback, we embarked upon a series of research projects to investigate the factors affecting learning in greater depth and with greater attention to the types of setting involved (Eraut et al 2000, Eraut et al 2005ab).

Settings for Feedback

We find it useful to distinguish four types of setting in which feedback may occur:

- 1) **Immediate comment on aspects of a task or role given on-the-spot or soon after the event by a co-participant or witness.** This has the greatest chance of being more specific and taking into account situational factors that may later be forgotten.
- 2) **Informal conversations away from the job.** These often convey indirect and/or unintended messages as well as intended advice. Their role is particularly dependent on the local learning climate.
- 3) **Formal roles such as mentor or supervisor,** which involve some responsibility for a learner's short to medium term progress and an obligation to provide formative feedback on a regular basis. The quantity and quality of such feedback varies widely not only with the skills of the providers but also with their opportunities for witnessing the work of those they are meant to support, and the priority accorded to that role in that particular work context.
- 4) **Appraisal** is a more formal and less frequent process, through which a more senior worker is expected to give normative feedback on personal strengths and weaknesses, ascertain their views on their learning opportunities and discuss whether they were meeting their own and their employers' expectations. This process also depends on the appraiser's skill, their relationship with their appraisee and the quality of the information available to them about their appraisee's performance.

The first two types of setting are informal and embedded in the local learning culture. They also depend on the specific affordances for learning provided by the learning factors and context factors depicted in the Two Triangle Model depicted in Figures 1 and 2 above. I will now present and discuss examples of each these potential feedback settings, before discussing the role of indirect feedback in those situations where there is no direct feedback.

Immediate on-the-spot feedback

One important finding of our research was that the majority of workplace learning takes place as a by-product of working processes, for which we developed the following typology (Eraut et al 2005a, Eraut 2007):

Participation in group processes
Problem solving
Tackling challenging tasks and roles
Consolidating, extending and refining skills

Working alongside others
Consultation
Trying things out
Working with clients

Several of these learning categories involve working closely with other people in a manner that creates opportunities for on-the-spot feedback to be given immediately or very quickly, and this has four important advantages. The first is that, in most situations of this kind, colleagues have a vested interest in the quality and quantity of each other's work. Secondly both direct and indirect feedback are often a spontaneous part of the working relationship and given without stopping to think. Sometimes this can also be a disadvantage. Thirdly, when there is a shared work setting, many things do not need to be explained; so it is easier and quicker to give feedback. Fourthly, there is a greater possibility of incorporating tacit knowledge into the learning and the feedback. Working alongside a colleague for a period of time enables one not only to learn by asking questions and receiving feedback about shared activities and events as and when they happen, but also to pick up aspects of their situational understanding and ongoing monitoring and decision making that are largely tacit and beyond their powers of explanation (Eraut 2000, 2004). Moreover, comparing one's own work with that of a more experienced colleague often engenders formative self-evaluation.

The most effective settings we encountered were in accountancy, where the learning affordances offered by working in audit teams were exceptionally good and learning was closely aligned with high productivity. Most of the audit work was conducted on visits to client premises lasting from two days to a month, within which tasks of gradually increasing complexity were first observed and then assigned. Supporting learning was seen as a good investment, because it increased the capabilities of novice professionals very quickly, made them more useful and gave a good return for intensive early support. The cost of trainees' time was included in audit contracts, so they were expected to pay their way within a few months. This both added to their sense of inclusion and created clear expectations for their seniors to provide the necessary support. Other reasons why feedback was most readily available in accountancy were that:

1. Senior trainees were close at hand and often worked alongside the novice
2. Teams were quite small, sometimes very small, and their objective was a jointly constructed product - an audit report for a specific client
3. There were clear, usually non-negotiable, deadlines; and valuable time would be wasted if trainees got stuck and caused delays, however small their tasks
4. It was normally possible for more experienced trainees to pause or find a convenient stopping point in their own task to answer a question or advise on a problem
5. Their seniors knew from their own recent experience that such help would be needed; and providing it was a taken for granted part of the organisational culture
6. There was a strong community of practice that provided continuity across audit teams. (Eraut et al 2005c)

The overt nature, legal status and clear structure of audit documents give them an important role as mediating artefacts, around which both work and learning revolve. Thus the work patterns of audit teams, continuity of practice across different audits of gradually increasing length and difficulty, and the structure of the audit documents themselves provide strong scaffolding for learning. Newcomers can usually envisage the intended product by looking at the previous year's audit and self-evaluate their progress

by examining the latest version of the current audit file. Most of their feedback is provided by more experienced trainees, who were themselves novices only a few months earlier; so they feel able to ask them silly questions in the safe knowledge that they had faced the same problems themselves in the very recent past. Those giving the feedback occupy the space between their peers and junior managers.

Newly qualified nurses had a great need for formative on-the-spot feedback. They needed to acquire complex clinical and communication skills to a high level and to learn how to prioritise their workload; and both these competencies require on-the-spot rather than distant or delayed feedback. But learning cultures could often differ greatly between wards, even in the same hospital. In many wards they were more likely to get negative feedback on one mistake, than positive feedback on everything they did well. Constructive feedback in areas where their performance was adequate but capable of being improved was most likely to occur when membership of a ward community provided access to significant social and emotional support. Hence strong learning support and leadership from senior nurses was also necessary. Some ward managers understood that the best way to improve their skill mix and the quality of their collective care was for novices and E grade nurses to develop their capabilities as rapidly as possible. Others did not see this as a form of investment or were just too daunted by the problem of trying to implement it.

We concluded (Eraut et al 2004) that on-the-spot feedback is best provided through a system of de-centred support (Nielsen and Kvale 1997), where all professionals present regard supporting other people's learning as part of their role.

Informal conversations away from the job

Most early career professionals receive some informal feedback from their colleagues; but this does not necessarily provide much support for learning. The status of casual feedback, such as informal chats or passing comments at the end of the day, is uncertain. It enhances collegiality, but does not often seem like a considered piece of advice. The nature of the feedback, its timing and the way it is given are all important, especially after emotionally draining situations when sympathetic support is vital for sustaining practitioners' morale and commitment. More reflective discussions may follow later, ideally with a mentor or clinical supervisor.

There are also occasions when informal consultations or encounters in the space around a formal meeting, in a corridor or during a break for coffee or lunch give rise to focussed discussions in which views are exchanged in a more deliberative manner. These are a constant source of advice to those who take the opportunity. Now and again useful feedback gets woven into these conversations, and even when that does not occur, relationships are developed that enable feedback to be actively sought on future occasions.

The recently graduated engineers we researched were usually working near other more experienced team members in an open plan office. Tasks were usually part of a medium

to long- term project, so there was more opportunity to wait for a convenient time to ask a question and to find the best person to approach. Within a few months, graduate engineers had become aware of who had what expertise, how well disposed they were to answering questions and how well they explained the key aspects of the problem; and this extended beyond their own team and sometimes, through the intranet, beyond their own site. It was up to them to hunt down and use the most appropriate sources of support, which might or might not include their manager or their mentor. However, although most of the engineers we researched soon became excellent hunter-gatherers of knowledge and resources, they often received very little formative feedback.

Electronic engineers working on small pieces of very large, long term projects had insufficient awareness of the role of their own contribution to be able to self-evaluate their progress; but civil or mechanical engineers with a lot of site-work got feedback from colleagues doing related work who relied on their contribution. These comments exchanged on site, in team meetings or on the telephone were a natural part of their working relationship, which needed to be kept on a positive footing if their work was to be finished on time and in good order; but they would not necessarily include formative advice, especially if they came from a different specialty or company.

Nurses generally received informal feedback from their mentors, seniors and colleagues, mainly by way of informal chats or passing comments at the end of the day. While welcomed as a sign of interest, concern and encouragement, its status was uncertain and it certainly did not seem like a considered judgement on their progress,

I get feedback from the 'E' grades and...the coordinators...sometimes after a shift they'll make a comment and say, "You've done very well" or "Thanks for your help". About twice formally sat down...we do talk about things but they're just general conversations over coffee...Sometimes I've actually asked, "Did that go okay and did I do that right?" ... Most of it's just been sitting down and people have said, "Oh how do you think you've been getting on?"

Both the nature of the feedback and the way it was given were important. Feedback needed to be constructive and to help the nurses to reflect on their practice and thus improve patient care,

'I do find myself getting feedback from people...both kind of positive ... "I thought you handled that situation really well". ...I've also had some negative feedback from one of the senior nurses...for something that I did wrong...It wasn't a criticism, it was like "Next time you could probably do it better if you did it this way" ...and so I found that really useful and I didn't feel I was getting a telling off.'

Formal roles such as mentor or supervisor

Official mentors or supervisors are appointed for all students and most newly qualified health and social care professionals in most countries; but both their official role and their actual role can differ widely. Where the distributed apprenticeship system or support from those immediately available works well, mentors may be friendly back ups rather

than active helpers; and this is no cause for concern. However, in the absence of distributed support, the role of the mentor becomes crucial. The important role of providing on-the-spot feedback is either ignored or delegated to mentors, who may have neither the opportunity nor the disposition to pursue it. Managers who do not appreciate the importance of learning through working alongside more experienced practitioners may disregard it when allocating work to mentors and mentees; and mentors may not develop supportive ways of working with their mentees. The situation can also be complicated by mentors or supervisors of trainees on placements being given additional assessment roles. Mentor training often fails to address these important practicalities.

Official mentors hardly figured in accountancy, where decentred support from those immediately available worked very well. In engineering we found up to five different types of mentor, but few of them worked closely enough with their trainees to give them feedback on their performance and none appeared to take their advisory roles very seriously. As mentioned above, the graduate engineers were very capable at getting advice when they wanted it, but had great difficulty in getting any useful feedback.

35 newly qualified nurses had mentors allocated when they started work. However, seven never actually worked with their mentors, and a further two had limited access to them in clinical areas (n=9). Helping roles that are not implemented can be worse than doing nothing, because it dissuades nurses working near those novices from offering them support. Only 19 novices, just below a half of our respondents, felt that their mentors had fulfilled their needs. For example,

I was given a mentor straight away and she was excellent, she showed me around, she would help me with my patients and everyone has just been really helpful. If you don't know anything they'll help you, if you're feeling that you're not doing something right, they'll help you, they're just really good here.

Less successful experiences included (1) a delay of six months in getting any time together, followed by a “supernumerary” day when her mentor paid occasional visits that felt more like being policed than helped; and (2) a mentor who denied her role:

I said to her in the first wee k... “How does this work? Do ... we set up meetings ...”; and ... I always remember her reply, she said “Oh ... I'm not actually here to teach you, I'm here in case you get a problem ... it's not like when you were a student ... I'm not actually here to teach you thing s...”. So I never asked after that ... I don't know what she thinks the role of the mentor is’.

Thus in nursing some official mentors provided a lifeline for their novices, while others were conspicuously absent (bad staff and/or shift allocation) or silent (not willing to take the role seriously).

In another ward a novice reported receiving good feedback and supervision from a very supportive **manager and senior nurses**, who had a policy of “growing their own” senior ‘in house’ rather than suffer from a failure to recruit at senior level. She also got significant peer support, both socially and at work, from a group who joined the unit at

the same time as her and had 'gelled'. Her manager was also well aware of the pressures faced by novices, and was frequently urging them to ask for help. She inducted new nurses through all the ward areas to give them experience of working for a variety of patients with different dependencies.

Another manager had regular supervisions with her novice D grade nurses in which she discussed their problems with them. For example, many of them wrote too much on their handover sheets and relied on them too much; so she showed them how to improve what they wrote and transform their handover information into usable tick lists, which help them not to miss things. She combined this with organising the ward so that they all worked regularly with the same E Grade nurses, even on night duty; and briefed the E grade nurses on how to help them:

"The philosophy of the 'E' grades is that they are there to help them, they are there to help them move on and to go through their patients with them so that they understand what they are doing and it's just so worthwhile if you do that, if you just go through things with them and they know where they are, they understand what you know about the patient so far and if anything's different you'll come and tell me and then we'll go through things, it just makes life so much easier and they remain calm for the day without getting anxious and worried and not taking their breaks and that sort of thing ..."

This philosophy not only sets up the E Grades as on-the-spot-providers of feedback (see above), but also addresses the confidence and emotional needs of the novices during a period, which our research has shown to cause a crisis of confidence in at least a half of each new cohort. This enhances not only learning but also retention.

Appraisal

Some nurses had regular appraisals, quite frequent in the first year, others had none. Appraisals were most valued when they provided an opportunity to take a longer term view of progress in addition to regular supervision sessions or ongoing conversations about learning and performance with managers and mentors.

Although accountants got excellent short term feedback on audit teams, they found it more difficult to get medium to long-term feedback in their first two years because they had no continuity of contact with more senior staff. Nurses received varying amounts of short-term feedback, depending on the culture of their ward; but tended not to get much medium-term feedback, because most senior nurses were very busy, and inclined to think that feedback was superfluous once the novices had been integrated into the ward. Thus progress tended to be taken for granted, rather than openly discussed in a formative manner. The engineers' experience was similar to that of the nurses, except that they had fewer informal cues if they were not engaged in challenging work. Very few of the people they encountered seemed to be concerned about feedback, and those without a discernable learning trajectory were left feeling rather rudderless. Thus access to feedback could be a problem for novices in all three professions.

While a sense of progression is closely linked to recognition of learning, it is possible to know that one is learning without knowing that one is making good progress. All our respondents in every project we conducted wanted longer-term normative feedback, as well as short-term on-the-spot feedback to enhance their ongoing learning. How did their progress and their quality of performance compare with that of other trainees, present and past? Were they meeting the expectations of significant others in the organisation? What were their main strengths and weaknesses? This required someone more senior and experienced who knew them but had also consulted other people about their progress. One of the most telling lessons of our research is that even when novice, and also mid-career, professionals appeared confident and were working competently, they still needed to have a discussion about their own and their employer's views of their progress. For example, we found that nurses who were contemplating leaving their jobs often doubted their capabilities or had other problems associated with their employment which, if acknowledged, might have been rectified.

Giving medium to long-term feedback is usually associated with appraisal; but we encountered relatively few examples of appraisal, if it happened at all, being valued by either early career or mid-career professional workers (Eraut et al, 1999) There were a few positive examples, but most regarded appraisal as a wasted opportunity. Indeed, many of our partner organisations in the mid-career project confessed that appraisal was not working as intended and said that they were trying to reformulate it. We have the most detailed evidence on this from accountancy.

Both accountancy organisations had a 'feedback process' with the same three features:

- 1) On-the-job monitoring and feedback from the person² 'in-charge' of each audit
- 2) An individual job appraisal after each substantial audit³. This is best described as a trainee self-evaluation of their contribution to the audit, with added comments by the 'in-charge'. The completed form is then sent on to the trainee's manager.
- 3) A 6 monthly appraisal by a senior manager who has access to all the job appraisals and may also be expected to speak to people who have been in charge of the trainee.

There was a difference between the monitoring of managers and that of the in-charges. Managers tended to be in the office, and not in immediate contact with the trainee. However, they would have an overview, often of several trainees. In-charges were in day-to-day management of the trainees, and gave them feedback on the job as they went along, mainly 'on the hoof' but sometimes during a short 'time out'. However, unless they had recently worked together, they were not in a position to assess their progress: they saw that as the manager's responsibility. Managers, on the other hand, were dependent on feedback from the in-charges and from the trainees themselves, either

² This person was often a final year trainee

³ Substantial is interpreted by one organisation as lasting at least 5 days, and by the other organisation as lasting a minimum of 2 weeks.

through the job appraisal forms or through informal meetings in the office. There was a general view that new trainees should be doing repeat work more quickly, and learn to estimate how long it takes to do a test. They should not be asking questions on issues that they should have already learned, nor keep going to the client nor stare at their computer screen rather than ask the in-charge. As they progressed, the complexity and quality of their work were judged, as well as how they resolved issues and contributed to the audit team. . In-charges expected to interact with trainees during their work, and judged whether they were asking sensible questions, taking the initiative, anticipating work, taking responsibility and keeping the in-charge informed. One mentioned not having to push the trainee.

Managers explained that they discussed performance with trainees on a regular basis. The job appraisals gave them feedback on the job as they went along; and the number of review points was an indicator of how well the trainee was doing. Where there were an excessive number, the manager would generally discuss the trainee's performance with them, and suggest how improvements might be made. Trainees were discussed in managers' meetings, where managers were free to exchange views. Managers also considered whether trainees were becoming more confident and asking for more complex work.

The major problem from the trainees' perspective was that job appraisals were often completed too long after the audit to be reliable, and too late for the person evaluated to remember enough about the job to understand the feedback. *'I'm not sure the appraisal system is particularly good here at the moment ... One problem is it never gets done on time. So you fill the form in and then it gets back to you two months later and by that time people have done two or three other different jobs, and you ... forget what you've done, the relevance.'* He thought the system could be improved, *'to get it done quicker ... How exactly you get that done because everyone's so busy is another matter.'* Another had similar concerns, *'They ... never really get done for months after ... you've finished working. So each time [they're] just forgotten, [they] haven't got time to do them.'*

Sometimes the effect of these delays were serious:

'I had an appraisal in May and I was really annoyed beyond belief because I got back several appraisals telling me that my work was quite weak in some areas and that I needed to improve, but these appraisals were talking about jobs that I'd done eight months prior to that. And I just thought if ... my work wasn't good enough they could have said something eight or nine months ago so that I could have done something about it ... You're supposed to send an appraisal to your senior for every job you work on which I always do the week after, and they never get back to you even if you email them every week chasing for it ... I got my appraisals back twenty minutes before my six-month review with the manager. My six-monthly review was about three months late.' Moreover, the appraiser himself was *'the worst person for not getting my appraisals back to me and dishing out criticism. He agreed with what I said, that it wasn't fair that I'd waited nine months, that the system needed updating, needed improving ... He says it is [going to be improved] but I don't think it will. I think the problem is time and people don't have time to pull in the appraisals.'*

It was particularly interesting to get the views of trainees, who found themselves in the position of providing feedback, and recognised that speed was of the essence for both parties: *'It's so much easier to do it straight after the job, but I think they've got so many time constraints on them it's a bit difficult to make that happen. I think ... there should probably be ... a policy to return it ... within the week after the job finishes across the board ... The same for students, for seniors and for managers, because I just don't see how you can remember ... I've tried ... doing appraisals ... a month or longer after the job's been done and you just don't remember what happened, so that might be an idea.'* When providing feedback, *'I try and do them quite quickly because ... I find it easy to do if you do it straightaway, but ... the problem comes when you leave it ... you can't really remember ... I've been quite good at it so far ... what seems to happen is that the further up you go the more lax you get.'* It takes about twenty minutes to complete the form, *'but if people are really time pressured then that's something that slips.'* Another said *'I try to do them as quickly as possible. The sooner you do them the better the feedback you can give, the quicker it is for you to do them. So if you do them straight away they take fifteen to twenty minutes. So I've only done, I think, two people's job appraisals and I did them straight away. But whether I'll be able to say that in six months time I don't know.'*

The reliability of these 'job evaluations' was also seen as problematic. One trainee admitted, *'I didn't realise that it actually is quite difficult to think of points specifically for them ... without being too harsh ... It is quite difficult to actually appraise somebody.'* While another said that, *'people ... don't really want to make too many comments on you because they don't want to criticise ... I feel that's the cultural thing.'*

The quality and timing of these job evaluations was not the only factor affecting the subsequent six monthly appraisals. Another was when the appraiser was not closely involved with the trainee's work: *'I can understand that it is very difficult after six months and the person that did my appraisal had never worked with me, they were just the manager in the office, [but] there must be some way that they can give us some sort of feedback ... and how we could do better because I find it really frustrating ... I don't know what I can do better or if I am doing okay.'*

A similar situation occurred in our other partner organisation:

My last six-monthly appraisal I thought was terrible ... I had it with the manager and he ... asked me how do you feel you're progressing, and I said I felt a bit static and that I hadn't really been progressing as much as I wanted to. And I felt [that] rather than making it into a ... constructive thing he ... made it very much a negative thing ... well, it's your fault, you have to come and ask the managers ... to say I want to work on this job, I want to do this, I want to do this. But the [Work Allocation] is months in advance ... and it's not up to me really. So a couple of weeks after that I went to speak to the manager about it, my boss ... he was really helpful ... [I said that] it wasn't a proper appraisal, I was not very happy about going again, and he said yes okay we'll have a look at it ... Because I didn't want to ... make out that I didn't think my appraisal had been very good, I just wanted to say ... I'm not really very happy with what I'm doing on the [Work Allocation], can I do something about it. Because I just didn't want to ... criticise my

managers or anything. And that worked out quite well... I got put on some little ... jobs that were coming in.'

Another issue affecting appraisal was performance related pay. Some saw it as conflicting with accurate feedback from senior staff, who might not want to affect a trainee's pay: *'[seniors] don't even like to say stuff like 'well, you can improve', because it would be taken that you're not up to scratch and they don't want to be the person responsible for you not getting your pay rise.'* However, another trainee suggested that *'we have performance related pay now, so it's up to you and the people that want to work to stand out.'* Yet another was more sceptical:

'I ought to like the ... new appraisal system, I did very well out of it ... I found it all rather pointless to tell you the truth ... It's a big political game, so there's a lot of jockeying for position ... I don't think the appraisal system really does look terribly closely at what people have done ... Perhaps ... it's an effective measure of people's personal relationship with ... people in the office, in particular their managers. I think if you can treat the managers nicely then I think you stand the best chance of getting a good appraisal ... That's not necessarily entirely connected with the quality of the work that you do.' In his following interview he added that the *'people ... that are appraising you are people that you also have to be able to spend time away with when you're going away on audit. So it's not as if you'll ever get a proper objective reply. If you knew that you'd have to go and stay in a hotel with someone for three weeks you're not going to tell them that they're completely bloody useless ... I mean that might be very good for helping the appraisal system work but in terms of normal human relations that would be a very foolish thing to do.'*

In our other partner organisation one trainee explained his concern that it was not always clear precisely how appraisals were linked with performance pay: *'In theory it's a good idea: in practice ... it's done very poorly ... For example ... you just get a letter through your post that says your new pay is this ... and your pay is based on performance. However it doesn't give you any indication whether you're performing well or performing poorly ... I could theoretically get the highest and think I was doing really badly ... Actually ... this is quite a close year [group], we all ... say oh what did you get, so we do know. However ... from the top down level it's stupid, it doesn't make any sense. And as well ... there's ... four things that they appraise you on, and we don't actually have a concrete knowledge of what those four things are ... I can't see ... the motivational effect of appraising people on things that you're not telling them what they're appraising them on. It could be you have to wear yellow socks every day to work ... Presumably it's not that, that would be stupid, but again it's ... something that HR have obviously been on a course or something and thought, 'oh, this is a good idea we'll try that,' and haven't actually executed it properly. And in some respects it probably ... demotivate[s] you because it's so poorly executed.'*

We suggest that the problem of inadequate feedback on general progress reported by many trainees is created by the way the appraisal system works rather than the dispositions and capabilities of trainees' official appraisers. An important link between performance on audits and trainees' six-monthly appraisals is the evaluation form (confusingly called an appraisal) expected after all the longer audits. This starts with the

trainee's self-report (which may need prompting), and is then followed up with comments by the in-charge, and passed on to the trainee and his/her appraiser. It provides useful written feedback on performance when completed soon after the audit, but loses value if the time lag is too long for the feedback to still seem relevant. What is less clear is how useful the completed forms are to the appraisers.

Unless there is a persistent trail of similar comments, appraisers are expected by trainees to give some normative feedback on their general progress with regard to strengths and weaknesses, comparison with other trainees and meeting employer's expectations. Whether the appraiser uses the forms, consults the audit managers or both, they need reliable comparative information that is difficult for an audit manager to provide. The audit manager may not have observed a large or representative sample of the trainee's behaviour if the audit team was fairly large, as is more likely for the longer audits; and in order to make valid comparative judgements, the manager needs to know not only for how long the trainee had been working at the time of the audit (which is easy to check), but also for how long the trainees being used as a reference group had been working at the time that particular manager most vividly remembered their performance. This is asking a lot of busy managers.

In conclusion, we think it might be helpful if the system for providing trainees with feedback on their medium term progress were to be reviewed in the light of our evidence, taking account of both the information needed by appraisers and that which is readily available. Are there other methods of collecting evidence and providing feedback that have not yet been considered? In particular we have to explore the following factors, which seem to influence the gap between both participants' aspirations for appraisal and what happens on the day itself:

1. The continuity of relationship between appraiser and appraisee;
2. Whether appraisers have the information to enable them to have the kind of informed discussion that novices are seeking;
3. The appraisers' ability to give constructive feedback in a manner that is both challenging and reassuring; and
4. The frequency of appraisals: they may need to be conducted more frequently in the first year of a new job, perhaps every three months.

Indirect feedback

The most common form of indirect feedback is the allocation of work. The trainee accountants can assess their progress by the particular tasks they can do, their speed and their mistakes. Their confidence is important to their ability to tackle tasks they know will be difficult, and their ability to quickly get the necessary help and use it makes it easier for them to get that help. Difficulty is determined both by the nature of the task and the complexity of the client's data in that section of the audit. Allocation to more difficult tasks or more challenging audits indicates other people's confidence in them; and this whole process is repeated when they begin to be given 'in charge' roles in client premises. Being consulted by others and participation in pre audit planning are yet other

indicators. To some extent indirect normative self-evaluation is possible through peer group comparisons, but other staffing issues can confuse this picture. If an unusually large number of people leave the organisation causes and it recruits more trainees, those ahead of the new bulge will get more responsibility. Nursing has a few indicators, such as the level of responsibility and the illness level of the patients they are allocated; but this can be deceptive because newly qualified nurses are so frequently given roles beyond their competence. Moreover, continually having to seek help damaged their confidence, especially in their first six months. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a significant number of early career engineers lacked useful feedback from any source, because they were not allocated sufficiently challenging tasks, and thus had no opportunity to learn what they were capable of or to show what they could do.

Some of the mid-career professionals we studied used invitations to join task groups as a positive indicator; or even, sadly, the identity of the person recruited to replace them after they left the organisation! Some got better feedback from clients than from their own managers, while others had to rely on reported second hand comments.

The scope of the feedback

This is a problem area for many organisations. If some areas of work come to be perceived as more important than others, because they appear to be better routes to promotion or better paid, this indirect evidence will trump any official policies or appraisal schemes. Similarly, if some more observable or measurable aspects of a job are weighted more highly, other possibly more important aspects will suffer and the development of less appreciated but crucial skills will be neglected. If the only route to promotion is through management, then professional skills may suffer.

Less obvious, perhaps, are job assessment or appraisal schemes that neglect some of the more complex aspects of a job, because the people that design them do not recognise the nature of the expertise involved. There is usually an overemphasis on actions rather than the situational understandings that are needed to inform those actions and on short-term outcomes rather than longer-term consequences. In some professions the importance of the more complex communication skills is also under-rated. In general, one major tension in health and social care is that between accountability and complexity. Until we find modes of accountability which recognise complexity, the scope of both professional and managerial work will continue to be over-simplified.

People are quite good at creating new sets of competences, promotion criteria or job descriptions but not so good at evaluating their implications. Improving feedback could be disastrous if it turned out to be the wrong feedback. What attributes do current appraisal and feedback systems reward, what attributes most influence promotion and pay, what attributes are most needed for the envisaged future of the organisation, and what attributes are most important for its clients and customers? If the answers to these questions are unknown, then finding them should be a high priority. If the answers conflict, rapid action is necessary. Which members of the organisation or external advisers are best equipped to judge these issues?

Communication of feedback

This needs to be both constructive and emotionally sensitive. The evidence base for judgements has to be specific and open to discussion, and followed by suggestions for improvement or, better still, ideas elicited from the learner that are practical and clear. The normative implications of the conversation need to be discussed with care and sensitivity, checking that the appropriate message has been understood and appreciated and the implications properly contextualised and not exaggerated. If there is concern about misinterpretation or a strong emotional response, then a quick follow up may be important. Indirect feedback also needs to be carefully monitored and discussed rather than denied. The givers of feedback are probably those who most need it, because their role is very important but undervalued in most organisations, yet another example of informal messages outflanking the formal messages.

When students enter higher education or qualified professionals enter the workplace, the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense professional identity is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on the impact of feedback.

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