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'You should not be that good in week three:' what can Strictly Come Dancing tell us about feedback and performativity in UK education policy?

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Abstract

The past decades have seen a plethora of TV reality talent shows emerge. The viewing population likes nothing more than seeing a 'class' of bakers, sewers, potters or dancers develop their skills and face the scrutiny of judges before being whittled down to a winner. The popularity of these shows says something about the national psyche but, aside from the entertainment value, may also carry conceptions of teaching, learning, assessment and feedback. By applying a metalinguistic thematic analysis to judges' feedback, this paper seeks to examine how one UK show in particular, 'Strictly Come Dancing,' presents feedback and, using a feedback framework, how this is understood. This feedback framework is notable for the links made to self-regulation, an area that continues to influence UK education policy. This paper will argue that when popular TV shows such as Strictly Come Dancing are viewed through a pedagogical lens, they reveal models of feedback which are not necessarily valued. Furthermore, analysis reveals the spectacle of normalised and broader educational neoliberalism policy reflected back at us.

Keywords

Feedback, reality talent shows, self-regulation, assessment, policy

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years, reality television has become somewhat of a ratings winner for television networks. As a sub-genre, talent-based reality shows have been particularly popular. Barton (2013) provides a useful definition of talent based reality shows: 'as any show featuring non-actors or non-professionals competing against each other for some prize, where the primary means of advancing is based on the contestants' specific skills or talents' (Barton, 2013: 220). In the UK, *Dancing on Ice*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *The Sewing Bee* and *Strictly Come Dancing* all fall within this category successfully combining the characteristics of an entertainment show, multi generation television, interactive audience components (Enli, 2009) and individual growth and development. *Strictly Come Dancing* has now been on British TV screens for over 20 years with the basic format licensed across the world (Nørreklit and Trenca, 2021). International versions include: Dancing with the Stars (US, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and many more) and Let's Dance (Germany, Slovenia, Sweden). Each series begins with a group of well-known celebrities who are paired with professional dancers to learn to dance. Each pairing effectively competes with one another by performing a new dance once a week during a live show. A panel of judges score each dance and provide feedback before viewers are able to choose their own winners thereby potentially altering the decision of the judges as well as securing viewer engagement and 'buy in' to the series. The casting of the celebrities tends to have its own formula and 'feature interesting characters (i.e., 'princesses,' 'princes,' 'jesters,' and 'fools') that are whittled down each week until a winner is crowned (Nørreklit and Trenca, 2021: 2). The role of the audience is part of the rhetoric of such shows, one that posits a democratic community with power to influence the development of the series and ultimately the winner. However, as Butler (2019: 405) argues, this is at odds with the overt and powerful judgement of the judges that is 'intertwined inextricably' throughout the programmes.

Given its worldwide popularity, reality television has resulted in academic scrutiny from a media, socio-cultural and linguistic perspective (Lin, 2020) but not a pedagogical one. However, as the programme is essentially about learning a new skill, it also has something to say regarding how we learn effectively, what makes good teaching, how our progress is assessed, how we might improve and what constitutes feedback. Within reality talent shows, the term 'feedback' tends to be used interchangeably with 'judging' which is interesting in itself. Such comments may represent a new understanding of feedback by the viewing public given that reality programming has 'become an ubiquitous component of popular culture with an impact well beyond television as a medium' (Geraghty, 2017: 631). There are also messages, either explicit or implicit, in how feedback should be delivered, how the learner should respond and who holds the power between the donor and recipient of feedback. Furthermore, beyond the analysis of feedback, there are broader parallels to education policy per se, in particular the influence of neoliberalism and the performativity agenda on teaching, learning and assessment (Redden, 2018). For example, the presence of national comparative scores such as UK league tables or the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which make comparisons internationally. There is also the prioritising of statutory summative assessments, the finality of

judgement by an hierarchical assessor (or inspector such as Ofsted[1]) and the message that 'anyone can make it…they just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps' (Redden, 2018: 408). Similar worldwide policy reforms tell the same story (Verger et al., 2019). As such *Strictly Come Dancing* may not only relate to our judgement and critical understanding of feedback but also provide an interesting mirror to neoliberal education policy.

Literature review

Reality talent shows

The worldwide increase of reality talent shows has been reflected in the literature with the subject providing a useful context for media, linguistic and psychological analysis. Culpeper and Holmes (2013) examined the use of impolite language in such programmes highlighting that the unscripted and personal nature of talk contributed to the exciting nature of programme. The use of judges' language was also examined by Lin in 2020 who found that the use of scorn, ridicule and condescension were prevalent in the feedback given. Furthermore these types of comments were often associated with particular categories of judge: 'the authoritative judge, the cruel but honest judge and the witty executioner' (Lin, 2020: 46).

Media literature argues that such programmes are focused on transformation of novice to expert and that this journey is another aspect of the appeal. Here we see the parallels to pedagogy and education given the narrative of the learning journey, the meritocratic assumption that hard work pays off and the role of feedback in effectively mapping out the journey of transformation for the participant (Bonner, 2013). The frequent media outrage when participants are found to have had previous dance experience illustrates how important the 'journey' is – previous experience is seen as cheating the meritocratic illusion. Of course, as with meritocracy, learning is not so simple, and the fact is that it is more often than not the participants who started the process with high scores that find their way to the final. Given this, one would have expected literature to have also examined how such shows conceive learning, teaching, assessment and feedback. However, the literature that does exist tends to use the programme as a metaphor for classroom practice, distilling rather technocratic 'top tips' type messages on how to give feedback (Standfield, 2017; uonhistoryteachertraining, 2021).

Esterhazy states that 'feedback is … influenced by social structures and discourses that shape the socio-cultural practices of our educational institutions' (Esterhazy, 2018: 1303). Indeed my earlier work has argued that the socio-cultural context has significant influence how student teachers understand feedback (Elbra-Ramsay, 2019). Largely this is in reference to our educational experiences or the educational policy climate we teach and learn in, all of which can alter our conceptions of feedback (Elbra-Ramsay, 2019). However, we are living in a world where media (social or otherwise) has just as much influence on our thinking and therefore it may be the television programmes we watch will also influence our understanding of many things, including feedback. Fairclough's (1992) broad definition of social-cultural is relevant, that is 'local or global, micro or macro' (p 286). Given the audience, reality talent shows could be categorised as both global and

macro influences which could alter understanding of dancing, learning, assessment and feedback. Indeed, cultural studies have examined the influence of television. Lotz argues that

> *television's storytelling power derives from its vast reach and selective ability to tell particular stories about particular types of people and plays a role in constituting dominant ideology and in the operation of hegemonic power* (Lotz, 2021: 888).

Turner agrees stating that 'the kinds of realities they [programming] offer as forms of identity within their programming must have a powerful social and cultural impact' (Turner, 2006: 161). There are links here to the Marxist philosopher Althusser's work on media as an ideological state apparatus' normalising particular views on behalf of the state (Althusser, 2006), for example 'the imperative for values supportive of neoliberalism as an economic, political, and cultural ideology' (Wright and Roberts, 2013: 571). Similarly Debord (1967) uses the term 'the society of spectre' as a multifaceted term to describe the 'gaze of contemporary society' (Debord, 1967: V) where 'everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (Debord, 1967: 2) . The spectacle is the 'everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena' (Morgan and Purje, 2016) that is the images of a political economy where power is produced and maintained; Debord's society of spectre is often used to explore how capitalism and neoliberalism reflect themselves in cultural creations and, as such, uphold them (Fall, 2021; Johanssen, 2017). Johanssen (2017) goes further drawing direct links between Debord's ideas and reality television stating:

> *Our experience and way of living have been downgraded from 'having' to 'appearing.' Everything is about appearances. The society of the spectacle is, for Debord, a society of atomized and isolated individuals who are only united through a common exposure to the same images. The spectacle means that reality is replaced by images* (Debord, 1967). *Contemporary reality television may be regarded as a logical continuum of such spectacle* (Johanssen, 2017: 200).

In other words, the spectacle of Strictly Come Dancing may indeed be a reflection of society's pedagogical economy in relation to both feedback and the neoliberal education context feedback exists within. As such this paper does not argue that Strictly Come Dancing has necessarily influenced educational practice but rather that, by applying a pedagogical lens, the spectacle of neoliberal policy context is revealed.

The neoliberal policy context

Tracking back through the last 20 years of educational policy presents a clear reminder of how pervasive the neoliberal framing of UK education has become. From as early as 1997 (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) the Excellence in Schools white paper discussed using performance comparisons. By 2001, the green paper 'Building on Success' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001) was explicit about the need

for school accountability: 'more perhaps than any other, the teaching profession accepts accountability, is open to the contributions that others can make and is keen to seek out best practice' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001: 65). Increased accountability was sold as an empowering measure of success for parents, teachers, school leaders and crucially inspectors. Alternatively, it was as a form of panoptical surveillance (Webb et al., 2009). Neoliberalism and accountability provided the tools for the policy framework to be observed, judged and also to assist the preparation for judgment. Accountability continued to be a central part of further policy reform (Department for Children and Schools, 2009; Department for Education, 2010; Department for Education and Skills, 2005) with a developing narrative around judgment and performance. For example, 'It is vital that schools should be accountable to parents for how well pupils do, and how taxpayers' money is spent… Comparisons between different schools and local authority areas will drive higher performance and better value for money' (Department for Education 2010: 13). The language of 'higher performance and better value for money' (Department for Education 2010: 13) became synonymous with the assertion that 'fair, robust, ambitious accountability is vital to monitor … standards' (Department of Education, 2016: 104). For the UK policy context, performance is reliant on targets, statistics and other data. Of course, this also means that somebody or something needs to monitor, compare, attribute value to and crucially judge these data sets (Ball, 2003). As Broadfoot neatly summarises, UK educational policy has been overtaken by the 'rampant growth of a forest of assessment procedures' [and] 'a dense canopy of externally-imposed performance indicators' (Broadfoot, 1999: 3). Running alongside is a meritocratic view that quality and success can be quantified, tracked and counted and that standards can continually rise.

As assessment data is often key performative evidence, policy reference to assessment is nearly always within the context of monitoring standards and promoting improvement. The introduction of UK national league tables in 1992 and the many versions of assessment measures that followed (value added in 2002, contextual value added in 2006, expected progress in 2011 and progress 8 scores in 2016), combined with increasingly high stakes judgement, resulted in assessment (and feedback to some extent) becoming the key tool for quantifying performance and comparing success. The parallels to the scoring, comparison and judgment of Strictly performances are already evident.

Feedback

Clearly the policy context has influenced the way assessment is understood and valued in education. Feedback is part of this given that it is a form of assessment, and if we are to analyse the nature of feedback in reality talent shows, we need to define what we mean by the term feedback. Brummer and Koston offer a definition that relates to the comments provided by the *Strictly Come Dancing* judges: feedback is 'information regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding, provided by an agent' (2018, p. 1258). Whether 'judges' comments,' 'notes' or 'feedback' are terms used within the programme itself, Brummer and Koston's definition certainly describes what happens at this stage of the show.

In the world of education, feedback is frequently viewed as one of the most effective ways to bring about learner progress (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Education Endowment Foundation, 2020, 2021; Hattie and Clarke, 2018; Jers and Wärnsby, 2018; Kahu, 2008; Panadero and Lipnevich, 2022). Studies repeatedly show that this is the case but also that the potential impact is far from certain with feedback often ignored or misunderstood (Boud and Molloy, 2013b; Clarke, 2003; Elbra-Ramsay, 2021; Johnson et al., 2016; Panadero and Lipnevich, 2022; Wiliam, 2011). Alongside this discrepancy, there are also multiple views of what feedback is, and crucially what good feedback is. Feedback can be a gift (Askew and Lodge, 2000), a dialogue (Carless et al., 2011) or, particularly pertinent for this paper, an intricate dance between feedback giver and receiver influenced by emotion (Dennis et al., 2018). Feedback can make learners feel invincible or hopeless. It can create long lasting emotional associations and also inform our sense of self and identity (Elbra-Ramsay, 2019).

Given the potential of feedback, it is not surprising that the subject has attracted a lot of attention in literature as we try to make sense of what good feedback is and why feedback does, or does not, lead to progress. There have been numerous suggested versions of feedback models. One of the most significant was Ramaprasad's 1983 formative model which suggested that feedback was 'information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (Ramaprasad, 1983: 4), i.e. it led to consequence or change in terms of learning. Indeed Sadler (1989: 121) suggests that without consequence, feedback is merely 'dangling data.' Many argue that it is the consequence that actually makes feedback feedback (Boud and Molloy, 2013b; Esterhazy, 2018; Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989). In other words, feedback is positioned as formative rather than summative and should be 'attended to' (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004: 192).

In addition to the distinction between summative and formative, feedback is also conceived in two other opposing ways. Winstone (2018) calls these the old and the new feedback paradigms with the old reflecting a 'teacher-centric' and largely transmissive model and the new 'learner-centric' where they are viewed as the 'active agent' (Espasa and Martinez-Melo, 2019: 111), 'drive [ing] feedback for themselves' (Evans, 2016: 5). Within this learner centric model, increasingly feedback is seen as a mechanism to develop learners' self-regulation a prized way of being for independent and autonomous learners. Self -regulation is focused on how learners regulate their own thinking, learning goals, next steps and strategies (Altun and Erden, 2013; Butler and Winne, 1995; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Zumbrunn et al., 2011) and, as such, provide their own internal feedback and also seek out and act on external feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007: 94). Therefore, not only can effective feedback encourage self-regulation, self-regulation can also result in external feedback being listened to and acted upon. One supports the other.

It is with this understanding that Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) proposed seven principles of feedback practice, practice that would ultimately enourage this 'new paradigm' where learners are self-regulatory. Using a model of self-regulation and by extending the characteriscs identified by Sadler (1989) alongside other formative literature,

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick argued that effective feedback practice is also self-regulatory and consists of seven features:

1. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching

Intitally contextualised within Higher Education, the principles have influenced all education sectors and there are strong associations with more recent publications such as the feedback recomendations within the EEF literature (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Given this, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's 2006 paper titled 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice' has informed the methodology of this paper as a mode of analysis. Additionally this model has acted as a lens for further discussion around UK education policy.

Methodology

A thematic analysis was used as the methodological approach for this project. 12 Episodes of *Strictly Come Dancing* were transcribed from those readily available in the public domain either on youtube or BBC Iplayer. These episodes were generally chosen from the mid-section of each series where feedback tended to be more significant in terms of moving contestants on. However, given that transcriptions do not necessarily capture all the meanings associated with the spoken word, for example intonation, emphasis, action, facial expression (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), the original videoed episodes were frequently returned to so additional information could be noted alongside the transcripts. These included observations of demonstration, facial expression or audience reaction allowing for a richer set of data.

A top-down deductive approach was used to analyse the transcripts using themes drawn from the literature (Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022), principally the seven principles of good feedback practice listed by Nicol and Macfarlane- Dick's (2006) work. The frequency of these themes were also considered although examples referred to within this paper are not exclusively the most frequently occurring.

Although coding was not used as such, 'principle' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) based themes were identified iteratively across the data. However, although the focus of analysis was linked to these identified principles, the iterative nature of moving back and forth to the data (re-reading and re-analysing) allowed some additional broader themes to be identified in relation to education policy (see section further analysis); these could be viewed as following a more inductive process. A deductive/inductive hybrid approach is seen as valuable to researchers 'exploring layered and complex

problems' (Proudfoot, 2022: 2). Feedback is layered and complex (Henderson et al., 2019) and necessitates a more flexible approach to analysis.

Ethical guidance was followed at all times and ethical clearance was provided through university processes. This included considerations around the consent and/or anonymisation of data freely available online and the storage of data. It is also worth noting at this point that the author has previous experience of, and research interest in, educational feedback which will have influenced the motivation (and perspective) of this study.

Discussion

Each of the seven principles of feedback practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) were analysed in turn in reference to the judges' comments.

Principle 1: good feedback practice helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)

The first principle highlights the need for clear learning goals and criteria. This is generally reflected in the feedback literature as necessary to close the 'learning gap' (Sadler, 1989). Nicol and MacFarlane Dick argue however that it is not enough to tell the learner what the goal is; the learner needs to fully understand and 'assume some ownership of them' in order that both learner and teacher can assess progress. Without this shared understanding, feedback is likely to be ignored (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006: 206).

When we turn to the feedback presented in *Strictly Come Dancing*, there is certainly variation. Some comments lack any real clarity about the intended criteria with comments rather generalised and lacking in specific improvements.

> Judge: No guys I think the opening was so good. You stayed in character. ...And I just love your development. A little bit more action. A little bit more understanding like, but I loved it. (Series 20, Week 5)

However, we also find comments which are specific about what changes are needed to improve, and some use of modelling of these changes to aid the learner understanding.

> Judge: It was almost almost perfect. There's one thing…. I can sit here for 20 min and tell you all the things I liked. I'm going to talk to you about the one thing I didn't like…. your head. Now if you sort this out, you got 12 from me every time. Now you go left with your head, ...if there's too much the more you go left, the more it tips to the right …. What I want is to look slightly to the left and lean to the left and then you won't go right' [action explicitly modelled to the learner]. (Series 19 Week 4)

The format of the show also brings into question who the learner is. The comment below illustrates how the audience also have a role whereby the judge models the criteria explicitly with a prop directed at the camera.

Judge: When you rise on two toes, got my shoes again, for example, I just want to show it for the viewers at home. Toe, toe, you come out toe flat. And too many times it went toe, toe, clonk on the heel. It wasn't once, it wasn't twice, it was three or four times. So just everybody, when you rise you have to come toe, toe, toe flat. Any time that you're up on two toes, you don't want to come out with a clonk, particularly in the waltz. (Series 20 Week 5)

In essence, *Strictly Come Dancing* feedback sometimes clarifies specifically what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards) but this is inconsistent. Furthermore, the feedback is not always directed to the obvious learner but more for the audience who are also effectively learning about dancing. The audience act as stakeholders in the process of judgment and performance comparison.

Principle 2: good feedback practice facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning

Given the movement towards more self-regulatory forms of assessment and feedback, self-assessment is considered valuable in that it can provide 'opportunities to practise regulating aspects of their own learning and to reflect on that practice' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006: 207). In *Strictly Come Dancing* we do not see any self-assessment. However, that does not mean there is any; the week that precedes the live show when contestants are learning the dance could include many opportunities to reflect, self-assess, set targets etc. This points to one of the difficulties with the format of the show; it does not fully represent the teaching, learning and feedback that occurs through learning to dance, focusing instead on the judgement in each live show. There are parallels here to neoliberal education assessment in UK which is largely summative, end point and exam/test centered. Given that the judges are chosen for largely entertainment purposes, it is also unclear whether the feedback can be trusted given the uncertain motivation of the judges.

The judges certainly occupy a position of power. During the live show, feedback is monologic, a gift from teacher (judge) to learner and one that does not include the self-assessment of the learner. Indeed, not only is it not included, self-assessment is actively discouraged. The judges are viewed as the bearers of universal wisdom or the single truth; once more there are parallels to the UK's preoccupation with summative assessments (judged by the assessor, or inspector) (Broadfoot and Black, 2004). Generally, the only comment made by the learner during the feedback is to thank the judges for their comments (the gift of feedback), no matter how positive or indeed constructive the feedback.

Judge: And it wasn't your best. The frame had gone. You did start to rise and fall. The hand was a bit open, and I don't really mind about the hand, but you brought it up and it was a bit open. And sadly it wasn't all that good….

Contestant: Thank you. (Series 19 Week 11)

Arguably then the show does not present a model of feedback that is linked to self-regulation. However Foucauldian thinking would suggest that rather than being prized, notions of self-regulation are really about learners becoming better disciples of the assessment regime, essentially self-policing themselves against the prevailing criteria. In schools we see how the use of summative assessment data as a tool of performativity results in teachers using the data to in effect discipline themselves (Perryman et al., 2018). So although self-regulation is often perceived as the ultimate goal of feedback, and indeed a common feature of UK education policy (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b), it could equally be viewed as self-policing in the service of broader societal control and discipline.

Given the format of the reality talent shows, there is an alternative argument that they have the potential to develop self-efficacy within the audience that is the belief of 'being able to deal effectively with a task' (Kunkel, 2012) and that success is possible. Gaskill and Woolfolk Hoy (2002: 192) describe self-efficacy and self-regulation as a 'dynamic duo' that are co-dependent on one another. In order to self-regulate, a learner needs to have the belief that they can succeed (Altun and Erden, 2013) and the ability to self-regulate supports learner's self-efficacy (Zumbrunn et al., 2011).

As in educational policy, *Strictly Come Dancing* presents the narrative that everyone can become a dancer, no matter what their background and, given enough practise, anyone can succeed. This feeds into the neoliberal discourse; a discourse where learners should focus on outcomes and performance (not on the equality of expectations) and one where they will ultimately be held accountable and responsible for these outcomes (Redden, 2018). Irrespective of the message, the reality is that everyone does not have an equal chance of success. As Digon states 'the key message transmitted by these programmes is that 'everyone can make it,' regardless of their socioeconomic condition.' (2019: 234–5).

Principle 3: good feedback practice delivers high quality information to students about their learning

For the third principle, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) explore the notion of quality concluding that it is defined 'quite broadly' in the literature, for example, when feedback is delivered, when /how it is acted upon. So, in terms of classroom practice, recommendations include ensuring feedback is close to the act of learning,' focuses on 'strengths and weaknesses,' includes 'corrective advice' rather being too critical or authoritative. *Strictly Come Dancing* certainly provides feedback close to the act of performance but does not always give corrective advice which identifies not only what to improve but how to go about it. In addition, the style of the feedback often says more about the format of such shows than the format of effective feedback: impolite (Culpeper and Holmes, 2013), judgmental (Butler, 2019), full of emotional expression (Nørreklit and Trenca, 2021) and 'condescension, scorn and ridicule' (Lin, 2020). This is well illustrated by the feedback below.

Judge: It was flat footed, stompy and for me didn't work at all. (Series 19 Week 6)

The format of the show also means that the formative nature of feedback could be compromised. If, as Wiliam suggests, 'there needs to be 'a mechanism within the feedback loop to bring the current state closer to the desired state' (2011: 121) for feedback to be formative, any feedback given by the judges needs to be applied to future learning. However specific dances are not returned to in future weeks (aside from the final) but instead a new dance with new criteria is presented each time. This results in a contradiction between the value of giving specific feedback on the dance itself and also giving feedback that can be applied to other dances. There are links here to the modular approach to education where learning is compartmentalised. In schools feedback can be tightly focused on the specific criteria of an assessment rather than identifying advice which would be more of a long term improvement; Broadfoot and Black refer to this as 'frequent summative' rather than formative (2004: 17). The ongoing UK policy focus on end of unit summative exams reduces opportunity for formative feedback in the same way that the judges on *Strictly Come Dancing* tend to only focus on the specific dance they are assessing.

However, some judges are able to feedback more formatively by highlighting generic improvements that would impact on more than one dance style.

> *Judge: I also would like you to work a little bit for next time on your spotting. Do you know what spotting is my darling? You do. That means I'm going to, you're going to be the first thing I see, I'm going to keep looking at you, I will whip my head around, my body will keep turning. (Series 20 Week 8)*

For other judges their feedback is so specific to that particular dance style that it is largely summative that is summarises current learning (dance), rather than informs the next dance (stage in learning). Below is an example where the feedback comments were specific to the Argentine Tango and would not be applicable to the following dance. The learner would need to distil any generic, and applicable, information in order to make use of it.

> *Judge: I've got to say, the ganchos were hard, sharp, fast. It had all the drama that this dance requires which was absolutely fantastic. Your grapevines got a little bit out of sync here together. Just towards the end which is a real shame. (Series 19 Week 11)*

Principle 4: good feedback practice encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning

The value of dialogue in feedback is well documented (Ajjawi and Boud, 2018; Carless and Boud, 2018; Walker et al., 2006; Yang and Carless, 2013). Not only does a true feedback dialogue enable learners to clarify understanding, ask further questions about what or how to improve and immediately correct misunderstandings (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006: 217), it also enables the emotional impact of feedback to be softened by picking up on cues from the learner (Elbra-Ramsay, 2021). Furthermore, there

is a degree of equity in a dialogic relationship where both feedback donor and recipient are able to explore ideas.

Although the feedback in *Strictly Come Dancing* is verbal, it is not dialogic. The judge holds a position of power (Butler, 2019) and feedback is essentially gifted from the expert to the passive novice (Evans, 2013) through telling or correction. We see this in the example below where the message is clear that the learners have no voice in the feedback, other than to thank the judges for their 'gift.' The contestant is completely voiceless and although the professional partner attempts to speak, they are reminded of their 'place.'

> *Judge: I'm from a ballroom background and I'm afraid I was bitterly disappointed with it. The first half I loved, because it was proper jive, but you got caught up in the story of the time warp and the last three quarters of it was all the time warp…*
>
> *Professional Dancer: No that's unfair…it was the last twenty seconds…I made sure of it…No I made sure we did proper…no I made sure…. (arguing)*
>
> *Judge: I can only tell you what I saw and what I felt*
>
> *Professional Dancer: Then you need to go to specsavers……. (arguing continues) …*
>
> *Judge: want you want to do … is turn up. keep up and shut up (Series 8 Week 5)*

Although true dialogue with equity between teacher and learner is to be aspired to, in any learning environment, including the *Strictly Come Dancing* studio, there will always be a degree of inequity, so perhaps it is ultimately unobtainable. Just as in the school classroom, there are prescribed standards or criteria to be met and the person with the perceived expertise is the one who ultimately makes the judgement. But to disregard the voice of the learner altogether is to dismiss the fact that it is the learner who needs to make sense of, and construct their own understanding, of the feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). 'Telling' does not mean the same as understanding. Having said that, we do need to acknowledge that the relationship is not as clear cut on shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* as there is also a professional dancer who works with the learner during the week – perhaps this is where true dialogue takes place. Given the purpose and audience of the show, this is not the type of feedback represented to the viewing population where entertainment is the focus rather than education. The focus of the show is the end point, the performance to be judged. Contestants (and their partners) will make decisions that are informed by what the judges will be looking for in the end of week performance. Similarly UK education policy consistently prioritises educational summative outcomes over the formative learning process and progress; summative assessment appears to be much more valued by the system (DeLuca et al., 2012). Given the power of summative assessment as an accountability tool, it will continue to influence through implicit, and subsequently normalised behaviours (Danaher et al., 2000; Danaher et al., 2000). The consequence will be the further prioritising of summative forms of assessment measures and practices. As Armstrong states, formal educational structures in England are grounded in systems, structures, processes and curricula based on the division, assessment and categorisation of learners (2009: 4 cited in Ball, 2013: 85).

Principle 5: good feedback practice encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

Despite the apparent harshness of some of the feedback, there are indications of at least some attempt to soften the judges' feedback messages. Notably this is often through the rather formulaic strategy of the 'feedback sandwich,' This is a fairly well known metaphor that describes two 'positive' comments (in this case the bread) with a 'negative' comment (the filling) in between (Boud and Molloy, 2013a). The use of the word 'negative' to categorise something that could be useful or constructive does not support a self-regulatory view whereby all feedback is potentially useful. The idea is that the positive, or 'affirmatory' (Jers and Wärnsby, 2018: 592) comments outweigh the negative or improvement (deficit) focused comment. Boud and Molly (2012) call the feedback sandwich a 'formulaic response' (2012: 4) and could be viewed as a response to the reductionist strategized approach to learning that is often seen. It certainly demonstrates a degree of naivety, not only in the purpose of feedback but also that that two positives would soften the 'negative' and make it less memorable when arguably it is the 'negative' which is the more significant when moving the learning on. Research suggests that the impact of this as an approach is minimal (Bottini and Gillis, 2021; Henley and DiGennaro Reed, 2015; Procházka et al., 2020) with questions around the clarity and type of the constructive feedback sandwiched and the trustworthiness of the positive.

On *Strictly Come Dancing*, the feedback sandwich is used frequently by the majority of judges

> Judge: Well, I think you are competitor extraordinaire. I think you come out week after week. You look determined and you look on a mission. There are so many things that have improved in there. But I want to give you a small tip that if you continue in the competition, you must get right, and that is your derriere darling. You must take your derriere and put it right underneath your body, right over your feet. Get your nice little engine moving and going and then you'll be able to swing and stride and move. Other than that, you were marvellous. (Series 19 week 6)

However, one judge tends to use an adapted version. This judge always begins with a critical comment and often ends with a positive. There is usually an imbalance between the two.

> Judge: it did look like you had just come out of a double hip replacement operation. very clunky and especially through the hip circles. Technically really quite bad…I'm trying to find something… I loved the shirt …I love the smile… (Series 19 Week 4)

The role of this judge is to act as 'witty executioner'; his comments are characterised by 'verbal wit and impolite criticisms' (Lin, 2020: 46), for example, 'I thought you were wriggling around like a slug in salt' (Percival, 2015). The aim of such comments is not to encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem but to provide entertainment value to the suitably outraged and booing audience in the style of a pantomime villain.

Principle 6: good feedback practice provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance

Principle 6 references closing a gap, a metaphor (Ramaprasad, 1983) based on a mechanical procedure where feedback is 'the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state,' (Wiliam, 2011: 121). Although useful, there is as assumption that feedback is simple and once the feedback gap is provided, the learning step is completed. Furthermore, although literature emphasises the role of the learner in identifying the gap (Hattie and Clarke, 2018; Savvidou, 2018), on *Strictly Come Dancing*, the gaps are identified only by the judges thus reinforcing a teacher-centric view of feedback. Literature suggests that the more credible the giver of feedback is, the more likely the feedback is to be taken up (Dennis et al., 2018). The judges in *Strictly Come Dancing* are perceived to have expertise from their professional lives but also arguably from their hierarchical position on the show and the celebrity status they hold. As such, it could be seen that the judges hold greater power in the gap being listened to and closed. The same is true in the UK school system. Given the highly institutionalised nature of education, the teacher and/or assessor will always hold the position of knowledge and power as they are the ones that ultimately pass judgement (Higgins et al., 2001).

Identifying the gap is not enough though. Learners need to know what the gap is and how to close it. We see examples of the 'how' in the use of modelling discussed earlier under Principle 1 but largely the judges merely identify what the gap is. In addition, Wiliam (2011: 150) states fixable gaps or goals need to be 'within reach' but also with a 'degree of challenge.' Some of the gaps identified by the judges would be more appropriate for a professional dancer than a relative novice. Not only do gaps need to be within reach, and cover how to close them, there also needs to be opportunities for the gap to be closed through future action (Wiliam, 2011). Here again, we see the difficulties with the format of the show as if the gap is too specific to that particular dance, it will not be revisited and therefore given opportunity to be closed. As Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) point out, there is value in recognising when a learning gap has been closed and this is dependent on the learner having opportunity to apply the feedback. Teachers (and learners) also need to recognise when this has occured and essentially confirm the gap has been closed effectively. Very occasioanlly there is evidence of the judges acknowledging when a previously identified gap has been closed.

> *Judge: I spoke to you a few weeks ago about your left [arm], well your hold in general actually. Your left arm is amazing now, please don't change that anymore. You've got a great left arm, well done you. (Series 19 Week 6)*

> *Judge: Well first of all I'm going to say thank you for taking the note that you got last week.*

> *Contestant: I listened. I listened to you.*

> *Judge: I said ... and what you did- I said well done. It was gorgeous. (Series 19 Week 10)*

In essence, the judges on *Strictly Come Dancing* do identify learning gaps but these are often not within the reach of the learner, not revisited and do not support the learner in closing the gap either.

Principle 7: good feedback practice provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching

Lastly, we come to principle seven Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note that feedback is not only information for the learner. It also provides direction for the teacher in future lessons. They write that 'in order to produce feedback that is relevant and informative and meets students' needs, teachers themselves need good data about how students are progressing' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006: 214). At first glance, *Strictly Come Dancing* does not model this principle. The judges do not teach, they merely assess. The separation of the two as two discrete and unconnected processes is unhelpful and in opposition to what is understood by the teaching/assessment cycle where both co-exist.

To conclude this section, it is possible to only see some evidence of effective feedback in *Strictly Come Dancing* using Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's seven principles (2006) and even so, these principles are rather inconsistent.

Further analysis and conclusion

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles provide a useful model to analyse the feedback within *Strictly Come Dancing*. Moreover, the process of analysis outlined within this paper has revealed broader themes which reveal more about education policy and practice than just feedback.

It is important to acknowledge, however, a real difficulty with looking at reality talent shows as some kind of indicator of pedagogical understanding; *Strictly Come Dancing* does not reflect a typical teacher / learner relationship. In truth the teacher is the professional dancer who teaches, coaches, mentors the learner throughout the week and prepares them for the final performance; the audience sees very little of these rich interactions. The role of the teacher and learner is distorted by the format of the show with all power squarely at the judge's door presumably because these are entertaining characters which draw the audience in and, of course, their role of passing judgement carries with it innate power. Arguably the real learner from the judge's comments are the professional partners of the contestants who can then distil and use the feedback provided by the judges in the week that follows. Maybe it is this person who is the true recipient of the judges' feedback, and it is this person who can support nuanced and considered formative feedback that meets the principles outlined within this paper?

The summative focused performance model presented by the format of the show reduces feedback to a simplistic, technical (but also entertaining) exercise. Again, the parallels to education are clear. Ball (2003) argues that performativity is a technology and, as a result, performativity can also encourage a technical or mechanistic approach to teaching (Ball, 2003; Clarke and Moore, 2013; Clarke and Sheridan, 2017). In *Strictly Come Dancing* we see a performance focused, summative centric view of feedback within

the formula (or mechanistic) structure of the show. Mass entertainment shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* could be viewed as a 'society of spectre' (Debord, 1967) ;and act as a 'gaze of contemporary society' (Debord, 1967: V). The 'spectacle' (Debord, 1967) of Strictly Come Dancing is, in essence, revealing the business of education and the business revealed is neoliberal. The format of learning presented in *Strictly Come Dancing* is a technocratic view of learning that encompasses education policy in England where learning neatly fits into assessments, modules, mark schemes and curricular. English schools have to close the gap between learners and are judged (by Ofsted[1]) on their ability to do so. Ofsted only assess and schools need to distil and apply anything constructive that can be gleaned from Ofsted's judgement who occupy a position of ultimate power. Indeed, when Ofsted visit educational settings, teachers and leaders are expected to 'attend,' 'hear' (Ofsted, 2022) and receive feedback (during feedback meetings,) but not to contribute.

Using Debord's (1967) work, *Strictly Come Dancing* exemplifies how neoliberalism reflects itself through cultural creations. The 'spectacle' (Debord, 1967) of Strictly shows us that neoliberalism pervades; the metrics are all that count, you are only 'worth what your last performance is judged to be' and to achieve you simply reproduce what you have been told to do (Redden, 2018: 409) by those in power. The parallels to the relentless focus on standardised assessment and examinations in England are not difficult to see alongside the ongoing fascination with scores, grades and league tables (surely a version of the weekly *Strictly Come Dancing* scoreboard). Such programmes contribute to the dominant neoliberal values of consumerism and meritocracy (Olivia, 2009 cited in Digon, 2019) where we only value what we can count and ignore the nuanced, complex nature of learning and teaching. These are the pedagogical economies and power dynamics that are mass produced through the 'spectacle' (Debord, 1967); the spectacle is effectively maintaining the neoliberal status quo.

Redden agrees stating,

> [in reference to reality shows] *Everything that can be said to articulate neoliberal ratio-nalities around work, welfare, and fate in those subgenres applies, but in a heightened form that emphasizes opportunity and overcoming* (Redden, 2018: 236)

Learning is far from a technocratic exercise; A plus B does not always equal C. And feedback is not always useful, actioned or effective. We need to take care when mass audience programming presents feedback (and indeed learning) in a way that suites the formatting narrative but not pedagogical principles particularly when they represent a performative and neoliberal view of learning. For if the culture we operate in is known to influence conceptions of feedback, and indeed teaching and learning, it is perfectly reasonable to be concerned that, without critical debate, the spectacle of Strictly *Come Dancing* will also bring the neoliberal views of feedback and learning itself to a mass audience. Rather than dismissing the value of reality talent shows, as educationalists, we should use them as instigators of critical discussions around conceptions of learning, teaching and feedback and indeed the neoliberal under-standing of education per se.

This paper has argued that mass entertainment shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* offer an interesting pedagogical reflection on the nature of feedback. Using Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback, it is possible to see how *Strictly Come Dancing* presents a feedback model that both supports and contradicts these principles which is perhaps not surprising given that its core purpose is to entertain. Further analysis also reveals an underlying performative and neoliberal view of learning. As such, far from merely entertaining the public, shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* act as a 'society of the spectre' (Debord, 1967), acting as a cultural conduit for broader ideologies.

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