Title

Using reflection to increase student engagement with feedback

Abstract

There is a plethora of research into effective forms of feedback in higher education, yet student engagement with feedback remains low. This could be partly explained by the low levels of feedback literacy among students. The purpose of the project is therefore to engage students in critical reflection through dialogue with academic staff in a structured environment, thereby increasing feedback literacy and student engagement with feedback.

Keywords

feedback literacy, reflection, higher education, student engagement

Introduction

The provision of feedback is widely practiced in higher education, however, student engagement with it remains an issue (Boud & Malloy, 2013). We define student engagement with feedback in terms of feedback literacy. Student feedback literacy has recently received considerable attention in academic literature starting with the seminal work of Sutton (2012) who conceptualized feedback literacy as having three dimensions:

> An epistemological dimension, i.e. an engagement of learners in knowing (acquiring academic knowledge); an ontological dimension, i.e. an engagement of the self of the learner (investment of identity in academic work) a practical dimension, i.e. an engagement of learners in acting (reading, thinking about, and feeding forward feedback) (p. 33).

The present paper focuses on the third dimension of feedback literacy as students often find reading and interpreting feedback problematic (Steen-Utheim & Hopfenbeck, 2018). Rather than

working from a perspective of student deficit, or one that was rooted in a cultural discourse of individualism, in which students are given uni-directional feedback from teacher to student, we chose to draw on the work of Bakhtin (1981) and develop a dialogical approach, working together with students to develop a critical-dialogic model of education that centers on communication processes as an avenue toward feedback literacy. Dialogic education has become increasingly appealing due to the recognized value of dialogue for the development of students' thinking, yet despite its recognized role in the development of students' knowledge and understanding, dialogic education is not observed in many classrooms (Haneda, 2017) nor utilised as a method of feedback. Often this is due to time constraints, staff workload, or the practicalities of course delivery, and sometimes it is because less value is attached to talk than to writing. Often studies do not show what dialogic education looks like in practical terms, or they focus upon the impact of feedback from a teacher perspective, focusing upon how or why they provide feedback, as opposed to the notion of developing feedback literacy within students. However, feedback literacy does not happen through passive reading of feedback provided, but instead feedback engagement requires active critical engagement on behalf of the students (Nicol, 2010). We posit that such construction of information is possible through reflective practice and dialogic exchange between the teacher and the student.

Reflective practice is closely related to the idea of learning from experience and is rooted in the works of Dewey and Schön. In educational contexts, formal and informal reflective practices aim to help students question their deeply held beliefs about reality, to assess their professional values and their impact on practice. The purpose of engaging in reflective practice is to become a reflective practitioner who seeks to initiate positive change in the context of study or work. To that end, we engaged students in a structured reflective exercise, based upon Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and informed by collaborative and dialogic models of education. Working from a feminist position, seeking to break down any potential asymmetrical power

relationship between teachers and students, we specifically focused upon the student's role as active participant in the teaching and learning process. We were guided by the following research question in our inquiry,

How does a structured reflective exercise informed by collaborative and dialogic models of education enhance student engagement with feedback in higher education?

The reflective task

This section will firstly outline the structured reflective exercise, which consists of Part 1: Participating in a reflective conversation using Kolb's experiential learning cycle, and Part 2: Continuing the discussion in class and applying what was learned via reflection. The analysis of reflections will next be conducted utilising a reflexive thematic analysis approach.

The reflective conversation began by inviting level 3 students to participate in a structured reflective exercise that consisted of two parts. In Part 1, students were asked to engage in reflective discussion with a lecturer following Kolb's (1984) four-stage model of experiential learning, which is rooted in the works of John Dewey. The four stages are: a concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Even though the learning cycle could be entered at any point, students started at the first stage by accessing and reading their feedback carefully in-class, thus focusing on a concrete experience. At the second stage of the cycle, the students were asked to reflect on how feedback made them feel and if it triggered an emotional response. To facilitate the engagement with the abstract conceptualization stage of the cycle, the students were given a blank action plan with prompts adapted from Cottrell (2013) that included assignment strengths, the areas to improve and current priorities as a way of facilitating better conversations in Part 2. Part 2 consisted of a follow-up in class discussion that concluded the reflective task through asking students about their experience of active experimentation, i.e. applying the knowledge gained from the

reflective process to further assessments. The reflections were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach.

Results and discussion

This section reports the results obtained from the reflective exercise conducted with level 3 undergraduate students. Students began by exploring a shared concrete experience – reaction to written feedback on a formative assessment task. Students responded to the question 'What has happened?' with comments such as "I need to expand", "Pointless sentences" and "I've been told I need to work on linking." Whilst all the comments from students focused upon what they needed to improve upon to achieve a higher mark, thus suggesting that the feedback had achieved its aim of supporting the development of academic skills, the final comment reveals the power relations imbued within the feedback process. Upon receiving feedback, students took a passive position as subjects that feedback had been done 'to', rather than as active participants in the process.

During the next phase of the cycle, a student observed "I'd be lost without feedback", whilst another commented "I read 'This is a pointless sentence' but then oh yes, I am repeating myself". One student stated "I feel so bad, but after then I read it, I leave it a day, and then it makes sense". Emotional responses to feedback can inhibit the ability to process the information and learn from it (Carless, 2006), thus teaching students to recognise the role of feelings in the cycle and, crucially, how to progress onwards, is salient to feedback literacy.

The next question students were requested to answer was 'What can I do to improve?', aligned with the abstract conceptualisation stage of the cycle. Having detailed their emotional responses to the feedback, students were able to discuss specific strategies to enhance their learning in future. These responses included:

"Any time I'm writing, I have a dictionary around me."

"I can think beyond this assignment or this module. When I got my feedback on linking I thought, oh, I should go back to that assignment and work on that as well"

Upon advancing through the phases of Kolb's cycle, students appeared more autonomous and empowered, discussing their own actions and the centrality of these to the feedback process. Furthermore, there was recognition of the value of a learning community and the social practices of learning, with students considering how to involve others such as peers and the Study Support team within their learning, as demonstrated by the following comments:

"For next semester, I will go to academic writing support."

"I give parts of my work to a peer to read."

The use of the cycle alongside dialogic feedback appeared to provide students with a tool to contemplate their own power and position within the process, but also to consider the importance of involving others. In line with hooks (1994), paying close attention to teacher-student power dynamics, who in turn drew upon Friere's critical pedagogy, we also aimed to position the students as active participants, and co-creators of knowledge, as opposed to a system of education in which they could perceive themselves as passive recipients into which knowledge is deposited. They were encouraged to re-consider their role in the community of learning that constitutes the University.

Finally, students were asked to reflect upon using the learning cycle to respond to feedback. One asserted "It gives a clear path to learning", commenting on the usefulness of the structure. Another stated "If you're being emotional about feedback, you can't learn from it", suggesting that recognising the emotional response to feedback enabled them to 'manage affect' (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Findings and Implications

Infused with a feminist ethic and grounding our work in critical -dialogic pedagogical theory, we have presented field notes that approach teaching and learning aimed at engaging students in classroom dialogues permeated with equality, collectivity, reciprocity and accountability. We have weaved both collaborative and dialogical theory and practice into the fabric of our work on feedback literacy and found that students responded in an overwhelmingly positive way to collaborative dialogical feedback practice in the classroom.

Lecturers may also find that students' responses trigger reflections upon their own teaching and feedback practices. In the activity outlined above, almost all students identified academic writing skills as the main area for them to develop, rather than other strands of the assessment such as analysis or criticality. Many students discussed secretarial aspects of writing, surface features such as spelling and grammar, as an area to be improved, with a minority stating that authorial features, or the way in which ideas were conveyed to the reader, needed development. This provoked a reaction in the authors, who began to question; is the feedback I provide centred solely around academic writing skills? How can I improve feedback to support the progression of critical thinking in students? The model therefore supports a feminist approach to education in which the entire learning community engages in the feedback, not only the student.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted several implications for enhancing student engagement with feedback in higher education, as well as future directions for research and potential applications of the reflective and dialogic approach.

We propose that the use of dialogic feedback presents feedback as a two-way process that promotes students as active and autonomous learners in the process, rather than as passive recipients. Utilising Kolb's (1984) cycle alongside dialogic feedback allows students to approach the process within a structured framework, and reflect upon the emotional response, which can

otherwise inhibit feedback literacy. The process outlined may also support students in feeling connected to a learning community in which they can depend upon peers and wider university services to support them. Furthermore, the cycle can be employed by educators to consider their own role within feedback, furthering the collaborative aspect of the process.

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