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Innovative Assessment Feedback Practices in Higher Education: A Path Towards Building Learning Circles or Just Closing the Feedback Gap?

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ABSTRACT

Considered a vital aspect of learning, feedback is usually a common element in instructional practice. In higher education, assessment feedback has been found to lack the ability to impact student learning. Therefore, recent feedback literature has stressed a change in practice to address this issue. This review examines the extent to which innovative assessment feedback practices succeed in engaging undergraduate students to use the feedback they receive. Findings indicate that making assessment feedback a dialogic, reiterative process that provides opportunities for reflection and interaction with peers can enable adaptive engagement and promote mastery learning. However, most of these affordances revolve around designing effective learning-oriented assessment tasks. Further research is needed to provide evidence of any long-term impact of learner-centered feedback practices.

Keywords

Assessment feedback, Higher education, Feedback agency

INTRODUCTION

Pursuing a college degree is a matter of choice as tertiary education is entirely optional. With this choice, students take the responsibility of controlling their personal life so that the associated costs of attending college pay off by achieving mastery of the skills and competencies necessary to fulfill their potential in a 21st century professional environment. Since the main aim of higher education (HE) is to prepare students for a successful professional life, tertiary institutions must strive to create learning environments where students can continue to exert their agency while participating in learning. Although assessment feedback is meant to provide learners with the performance information needed to inform their learning process and promote their agency, these practices have been deficient in fulfilling their potential because they have largely failed to engage learners actively and effectively (Black & William, 1998; Sadler, 1989.)

When undergraduates have been given a voice, their dissatisfaction with feedback has surfaced in national surveys, and research has shown that the undergraduate curricula actually provides few opportunities to use feedback (Evans, 2013; Taras, 2006). A reexamination of assessment practices in HE has further revealed a focus on traditional assessment emphasizing knowledge acquisition over knowledge construction; feedback as a unidirectional, instructor-centered occurrence, often concerned with justifying grades; misalignments between instructors' and students' perceptions

and interpretations of assessment feedback; and issues with instructors' and students' assessment and feedback literacies (Carless, 2015). Finally, the massification of HE along with increasing student diversity, the rise of digital learning environments, and use of multidimensional feedback have added further challenges for providing effective feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Gumpert et al., 1997).

Within the assessment for and as learning movement, feedback has reclaimed its critical role in facilitating learning within a socio-constructivist framework that supports self-regulation and emphasizes lifelong learning (Black & William, 2009; Carless, 2015; Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2007). Therefore, models of effective feedback practice proposed in the last decade focus on feedback as a dialogic, ongoing process revolving around sustainable assessment tasks that provide opportunities for implementation and development of students' feedback literacies and evaluative judgment (Boud, 2000; Carless, 2015). These models also stress the role of peers and reflection in creating assessment feedback processes that support learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Therefore, this literature review seeks to examine the impact that extant student-centered assessment feedback practices have on undergraduate students' agentic engagement by reviewing innovative student-centered feedback practices, exploring their theoretical underpinnings, and noting possible directions for future research needed to further support a paradigm shift in assessment feedback practices in HE.

RELATED LITERATURE

Feedback Literacy

Sutton (2012) has postulated that students must first develop the necessary academic skills needed to enable their engagement with feedback as many embark on their college career with little or no previous experience interpreting or using feedback. His framework for developing students' feedback literacy focuses on capabilities for understanding and interpreting feedback to facilitate its effective utilization and was later enhanced by Carless & Boud (2018) to also include a focus on students' ability to manage feedback-related emotions effectively. In practice, Winstone and Nash (2016) have developed, in collaboration with students, a toolkit to support students' development of skills and strategies associated with understanding and implementing feedback.

Some recent research supports the positive effect of feedback literacy on students' agentic engagement when students understand their role in the feedback process (Ducasse & Hill, 2019). Also, interventions where students can develop their feedback literacy early in the course are more effective at enabling students' sustained engagement with feedback (Hoo et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2019). In addition to its seemingly short-term application, feedback literacy has also demonstrated potential to develop evaluative practice that in the long-term would transfer to discipline-specific and professional contexts (Carless, 2015). Although equipping

students with skills and strategies needed to navigate the feedback process has shown potential in developing adaptive engagement behaviors, this approach does not fully address the social and affective aspects of using assessment feedback.

Dialogic Feedback

When viewed as a socially-mediated practice, assessment feedback must include opportunities for dialogue that can contribute to shaping students' engagement and use of feedback (Nicol, 2010). An approach based on two-way communication adds further layers of complexity as a dialogic model must address a variety of individual and contextual factors in building the positive relationships and supportive environments needed for successfully engaging learners (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). Access to dialogue with the course instructor has been found to support learners' adaptive engagement with feedback as dialogue provides a means to clarify task criteria, decode written comments, and reduce misalignment between instructor and student conceptions and perceptions of feedback (Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019; Hill & West, 2020; Vattøy et al., 2020).

Empirical research also provides evidence of a lack of or even maladaptive engagement when the interventions do not successfully assist in regulating students' emotional responses to feedback or recognize different culturally-oriented expectations (Hill & West, 2020; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Vattøy et al., 2020). As much as it desired by learners, a shift to more face-to-face dialogue is largely impractical given instructors' workload/time constraints; however, affordances for interaction created by Web 2.0 technologies and the provision of multimodal feedback have proven to be sustainable methods of significantly facilitating engagement with feedback and increasing achievement (William et al., 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2020; Zimbardi et al., 2017). Finally, dialogue can successfully enable adaptive engagement with assessment feedback when learners are prompted and guided to engage in reflection and inner dialogue processes about their learning and progress whether feedback dialogue involves teachers, peers, or students themselves (Hill & West, 2020; Nestel et al., 2013; Vattøy et al., 2020).

Peer- and Self-Feedback

Since the communication process about student performance extends to sources other than the instructor, self- and peer-evaluation have been identified as viable models for not only activating students' engagement in the feedback process but also for providing opportunities to generate and seek feedback, which are considered key aspects of demonstrating an active role in managing use of feedback and developing self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). While issues of expertise and social-affective challenges arise with this approach, with appropriate guidance and support, participating in peer and self-review has been demonstrated to enhance students' cognitive engagement, support reflection, improve self-regulation, and reduce dependence merely on instructor

feedback (Hill & West, 2020; Hoo et al., 2021; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

The empirical research on the use of self-assessment and self-generated feedback is emergent and inconclusive at this time; however, the interplay between guided self-reflection and engaging in the process of giving and/or receiving feedback has been studied more extensively (Andrade, 2019). Some of the research into the role of reflection in peer review interventions demonstrates that when students deliberately capitalize on internal feedback, they become engaged in the feedback cycle of evaluating task criteria, assessing their work quality, generating rich, specific, and personalized feedback for themselves and peers which in turn develops their metacognitive skills and capacity for monitoring and regulating learning (Nicol & McCallum, 2021; Nicol & Selvaretnam, 2021; Nicol et al., 2014).

Sustainable Feedback Design

The new paradigm of sustainable assessment feedback is based on the notion that in order to engage and enact the feedback received, students should have opportunities to do so within the course or module rather than operate under the assumption that feedback will be used in a future or subsequent course (Carless, 2015). This approach requires that feedback is integrated in the curriculum through carefully designed pedagogical interventions involving iterative assessment tasks that avoid overreliance on rubrics in promoting student engagement and development of evaluative judgment to ultimately serve the goal of developing effective lifelong learners (Boud; 2010; Sadler, 2010; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

Some impactful feedback design interventions include orientation tasks where students can receive guidance and assistance understanding assessment task criteria and expectations as well as exemplar assignments for illustrating best or different levels of performance (Nicol & McCallum, 2021; Zimbardi et al., 2017). Research also demonstrates the crucial role of designing interlinked or overlapping tasks in creating iterative opportunities for enabling recurring dialogue around feedback and its implementation as well as for monitoring progress (Ajjawi et al., 2021; Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019; Zimbardi et al., 2017). A cyclical, iterative, sequential feedback process not only engages students but also develops feedback literacy, fosters motivation and self-regulation, and improves achievement (Ajjawi et al., 2021; Hoo et al., 2021).

LEARNING THEORY ASSOCIATION

Feedback plays a role in all major learning theories; however, conceptualizing it around the learner recognizes that the locus of knowledge construction is within the student and constitutes a highly subjective process that is influenced by the social interaction within the learning environment, as postulated by Vygotsky (Schunk, 2020). These assumptions ground contemporary learner-centered feedback in social constructivist theory although some are also shared with social cognitive

theory, such as those related to the role of cognitive and environmental elements. As learners' cognitive development can be facilitated through interactions that go beyond simple input of information to create opportunities that allow individual factors to shape one's learning experience, feedback becomes a vehicle for the social interaction needed to mediate learning and facilitate self-regulation (Schunk, 2020). Involving students in self-assessment and self-feedback through verbalizing task-related criteria and procedures further assists with developing self-regulation and engages students in the task as both constructivism and social cognitive theories emphasize the important role of private speech in learning (Schunk, 2020).

Contemporary learner-centered assessment feedback is predicated on using authentic assessment tasks designed to incorporate recurring opportunities to implement feedback and engage in reflection that promotes self-regulation and internalizing meaning, so this feature of extant feedback practice reflects constructivist assessment principles that require continuous assessment situated in the teaching context (Schunk, 2020). Sequenced, interrelated assessment task designs also place learners in the zone of proximal development where they can make progress with the appropriate guidance or scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986, as cited in Schunk, 2020). Moreover, task orientation interventions where the instructor clarifies assessment criteria and models feedback procedures before students take turns practicing as well as the sustained dialogue throughout task performance reflect the social-constructivist application of reciprocal teaching (Schunk, 2020). Peer review approaches to feedback also acknowledge peers as active agents in constructivist learning environments although task design must account for possible issues relating to competency as it is also mandated by the social cognitive concept of modelling (Schunk, 2020).

Congruent with constructivist views of prompting student feedback about assessment and learning, when learners have the opportunity to share their feedback-related experiences through institutional surveys or research studies, the results have highlighted their stated need for effectively engaging with feedback. Findings indicate that, from the students' perspective, effective feedback should be not only timely and cumulative but also comprehensible, specific, facilitative, and relevant to the task in order to enable uptake and facilitate meaningful engagement (Carless, 2015; Vattøy et al., 2020). Students appreciating the value of feedback demonstrates their perceived active role in the process. Since assessment tends to drive learning, assessment and feedback are perceived by students to be important events in their academic life, so, as hypothesized by Bandura (1986), they will seek to take control by becoming active agents in the process (as cited in Schunk, 2020). As a result, students act intentionally by regulating the behaviors as well as the affective and cognitive processes needed to achieve their goals. Corrective feedback provided to students as they practice skills plays a crucial role here as it can affect self-efficacy which in turn affects agency; goal progress feedback is also as valuable for raising self-efficacy (Schunk, 2020).

As a communicative process, feedback must also be understood in order to be useful to learners, as the feedback literacy approach proposes. Beyond its conceptualization as a tool for mediating learning in constructivist theory, language also plays an important role in information processing theory as language comprehension is presented as a challenging process that can overload working memory (Paas et al., 2010; Sweler, 2010, as cited in Schunk, 2020). Whether orally or in writing, relating feedback information to students should account for the possibility that students might misunderstand or misconstrue the message given that decoding it involves both domain-specific and procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1990, as cited in Schunk, 2020).

Anchoring feedback practices in socio-constructivist theory further reveals the complexity of the process and multitude of factors that must be successfully addressed in creating effective learner-oriented assessment feedback designs. Student engagement with feedback goes beyond perceptions of its value as learners must have the motivation to engage in the process, and this can be influenced by individual and environmental variables. Dialogical, sequenced, and scaffolded aspects of learner-centered assessment feedback designs has been found to promote student needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy leading to increased motivation to engage, as proposed by Deci and colleagues' (2000, 2005, 2009, 2016) theory of self-determination (as cited in Schunk, 2020; Ajjawi et al., 2021).

DEFINITIONS

Identified in the work of Sadler (1989) with the critical role of closing the gap between students' actual and desired performance level and in the research of Hattie and Timperley (2007) with providing the performance and process information needed to develop students' self-regulation skills, a new paradigm of assessment feedback emerged to serve multiple functions in attempting to empower learners to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning and even develop independent evaluative judgment and problem-solving skills as capacities of lifelong learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2010). By linking feedback to sustainable assessment practices, Boud (2000) further identified principles for designing incrementally challenging tasks that enable feedback practices to shift towards a reiterative process in which learners must play an active role.

Placed within a socio-constructivist framework, assessment feedback is currently conceptualized as a dialogic, sustainable, learner-centered process that allows clarification of expectations and negotiation of meanings and interpretations of feedback information received from different sources: instructors, peers, and self (Carless, 2015; Winstone & Carless, 2020). Learner-focused assessment feedback is only considered effective if learners actually use it to improve their work and abilities which underscores the need for feedback processes to enable student uptake and engagement (Carless, 2015). The

concept of student agency or "agentic engagement" with feedback has only received attention in the past five years and has, until very recently, focused mainly on the psychological aspects of students' active engagement in the process, or what Winstone and colleagues (2017) have termed "proactive reciprocity."

As active agents in the process, learners are expected to make contributions and share responsibility in enabling effective feedback processes; however, barriers have been identified that interfere with students' feedback agency (Winstone et al., 2017). Of these barriers, feedback literacy has been postulated by Sutton (2012) as the academic language and skills needed to interpret and enact feedback; however, Carless and Boud (2018) have extended the term to address four distinct aspects: appreciating feedback, generating evaluative judgments, managing emotions, and enacting feedback (p. 1316). Currently, the interplay between feedback seeking behavior and feedback literacy as well as an exploration of feedback agency as framed within a socio-cultural and political context are examined to further a deeper understanding of learner agentic engagement with feedback (Joughin et al., 2021; Leenknecht et al., 2019; Nieminen et al., 2021).

GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

To date, learning-focused assessment feedback research has provided useful data on the effectiveness of using these innovative feedback practices to motivate students, enable uptake and engagement, and impact learning. However, with a few notable exceptions, these results come from small scale studies, are based on self-reported use of feedback, or were conducted in the context of research-based universities within courses taught, in many cases, by award-winning instructors with sufficient, much-needed, and highly valued academic freedom to make curricular design decisions about assessment in their respective courses. Also with few exceptions, the research on this topic has not addressed the role and influence of demographic and ethnic/cultural variables on students' engagement with learner-centered assessment feedback interventions.

These limitations call for replicating this research with larger populations that better reflect the challenges and diversity created by the massification and globalization evident in HE and to collect and interpret data of actual student engagement with learner-centered feedback. More longitudinal studies are needed to demonstrate the extent to which students can indeed develop evaluative judgment that can extend beyond single courses and into their professional life. Further research is also needed on the impact of technology-enhanced feedback and the use of learning analytics as technology has been demonstrated to have a strong potential for scalability by allowing personalization and timely delivery, and learning analytics is currently envisioned to further enhance feedback processes by facilitating student synthesis of multiple-source and multiple-instance feedback and by guiding instructors in designing impactful interventions that support learners on their

educational journey (Ryan, et al., 2019; Winstone, 2019; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

Although identified as a crucial component in shifting to a new paradigm in assessment feedback practice, teacher assessment feedback literacy has been under researched, with a framework for the concept only recently published (Carless & Winstone, 2020). Issues of power and bias and their relationship to students' perceptions and emotions while unpacking instructor-generated feedback must be explored as these issues have been identified to play an essential role in students' engagement with feedback (Carless, 2015). Moreover, while the current literature provides some evidence of student perceptions, characteristics, and behaviors and their interplay with using learner-focused feedback, more research is needed on the impact of the newly proposed features of learner-centered feedback messages (Ryan et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Worldwide, the number of those seeking a HE experience is projected to reach 400 million by 2040 (ICEF Monitor, 2018). While more people now have access to tertiary education, a college graduation rate of only 46% in the U.S. indicates that the choice to attend does not necessarily equate a universally successful college experience (Hanson, 2021). Therefore, creating supportive educational environments which can successfully engage students in all aspects of their learning journey becomes imperative for their success. Students should have access to academic information that would facilitate choices that improve their learning and performance. Since active learning strategies based on constructivist principles have already been more prevalent in contemporary HE contexts, another way to actively engage students in their learning is by involving them actively in assessment processes through sustainable feedback. This could extend equity in access to education to equity in successful participation and graduation (Jankowski et al., 2021).

When students have opportunities for interaction and for becoming valued members of their learning communities, they are more apt to engage with feedback actively and adaptively thus also potentially addressing issues with maladaptive engagement in using authentic assessment. A reconceptualization of assessment practice in HE to allow effective student-focused feedback processes that facilitate development of self-regulatory skills and create more personalized learning paths that have an impact on student learning could also facilitate the long-term practice needed to hone discipline-specific competencies and evaluative judgment skills needed for success in a 21st century workplace (Carless, 2019; Dawson et al., 2021).

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