The challenges of feedback in higher education. A brief discussion paper based on a review of selected literature

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Abstract

Feedback is integral to the process of education but is not a simple process and in mass education and global systems presents numerous additional challenges. This paper, which is intended as an informative awareness-raising paper, provides a review of recent literature on the challenges that educators and students face when feedback is given and received. It conceptualizes feedback as a process that requires multiple inputs and should support the partnership between educators and students through dialogue and engagement. Feedback literacy that incorporates the role of emotion is seen as a key aspect of professional and student development to motivate and engage students.

Introduction

Good teachers are often characterized by their expert knowledge, their ability to deliver that knowledge in an engaging and often entertaining manner and their capacity to evaluate and provide feedback in a way that encourages and motivates. Good students are often characterized by their ability to demonstrate their knowledge based on key assessment criteria, their participation and contributions, their willingness to seek clarification and their capacity to use the feedback received to improve aspects of their learning. There is an interplay between the teacher and the students based on knowledge, application of that knowledge, feedback and growth. Educators have a responsibility to maintain high standards of teaching and learning. This is often termed 'academic rigour' although the concept is often poorly defined and understood. Further, it does not seem to have narrative resonance in the current higher education context where fluidity and adaptability are the norm given we face unprecedented change. This also applies to the idea of best practices which have been increasingly questioned when the environments are unfamiliar and unpredictable. We are walking in uncharted territory. In my own experience in higher education, the role of the teacher is to provide broad direction and guidance and be in a partnership with the students, so they can focus on their learning and apply their existing knowledge and grow. The provision of student feedback is essential in this process and in this context some

principles can be established based on things that work. In this paper I present a brief review of recent literature on education feedback and identify some key themes. Based on this review and the themes the paper supports, the concept of training in feedback literacy for both educators and students with consideration to the role of emotion and shared responsibility to ensure the process achieves the desired results.

A brief review of selected literature

Feedback is often not properly understood and can be challenging - Henderson et al. (2019). Boud and Molloy (2013) discuss extensively the idea of feedback. They summarize important aspects of effective feedback such as the move from monologue to dialogue and more collective approaches to the provision of feedback, for example, peer feedback. They also consider the role of feedback in growth and development.

The need for developing 'feedback literacy' which I define not only as the ability to receive and successfully use the feedback provided but also as the capacity to give effective, timely and meaningful feedback is a concern for both educators and students (Bowen et al., 2017; Molloy et al., 2020; Philippakos, 2017). Feedback is essential for the learning process and can be extremely powerful and rewarding for both educators and learners. It is also a time-consuming and laborious process as noted by Winstone and Carless (2019). They discuss models of feedback that include fostering engagement with feedback and 'feedback literacy' in students as well as promoting dialogue. Standardization is one of the responses to workload but O'Donnovan et al. (2021) point out that the rapport with the teacher and its impact also needs to be considered.

Weaver (2006) says that, to improve student learning, feedback needs to provide clear messages, be timely and to focus on the desired learning outcomes. Essentially giving specific comments that provide guidance rather than just focussing on the negative aspects or failures. This does not mean avoiding criticism, but the criticism must be supported

by comments that, when processed and acted on, lead to clear improvements. So, feedback needs to allow sufficient time for the student to process, re-focus and improve. Comments should be aligned to the assessment requirements and marking rubrics. Dawson et al.'s (2019) analysis supports Weaver in relation to students' perceptions of feedback and the importance of providing quality comments that are clear and consider affect. Saplacan et al. (2018) also discuss the importance of emotions in their study of feedback in digital systems. They recommend feedback in digital systems that creates positive emotions. So, the role of emotion is also a consideration in the feedback process which is ultimately about communication.

Boud and Carless (2018) considered students' responses to feedback and their capacity to understand and process feedback and propose a feedback framework that considers students' feelings and ability to act in addition to their ability to interpret and process. Sofoklis and Megalokonomou (2021) identified gender variations in the receipt of feedback as well as differences in short and long-term outcomes based on the students' perception of their own abilities. Ali et al. (2017) suggest further studies are needed into students' characteristics to identify potential predictors of engagement with feedback.

Robert and Winstone (2017) argue that, for feedback to be effective and achieve the desired result, the process must be one shared responsibility between students and educators. They conclude that the impact of feedback resides not only in the abilities of educators to provide well-constructed input but also in the capacity of students to use it to make improvements. Ossenberg et al. (2019) extensively reviewed feedback attributes and provide a useful and comprehensive categorization which includes, in addition to process, timing, criteria and multiple inputs, the learner openness to receive it and its response to the feedback received.

Therefore, to work the responsibility must be shared between giver and recipient. Sheppard et al. (2018) support the idea of formative assessment favouring assessment systems that are linked to motivational theories and cognitive development based on the students' qualitative insights on their learning process rather than standardized testing. This context also highlights the importance of providing adequate feedback considering affect and the idea of shared responsibility.

Main themes emerging from this review

The importance of giving and receiving feedback is undeniable. Feedback is a fundamental component of teaching and learning. The way in which the feedback is put into actions that allow growth is ultimately its main purpose. However, it is often the part of the model that is not put into practice.

Feedback is a process of dialogue and this dialogue may have multiple inputs as in the case of peer reviews. The opportunity to respond needs to be observed because without a response the dialogue is not possible. Feedback works best when it is a collaborative process.

Effective feedback is a catalyst for growth. The giver must be able to identify key areas where improvements can be made and do it in a constructive way providing guidance and examples. This requires clearly establishing the desired outcomes in advance in the assessment process and for the intended recipient to be able to understand those expectations also in advance. The process can be time-consuming and laborious, particularly in mass education systems. Global education systems also present the additional challenge of intercultural understanding. Standardization of feedback is one of the remedies often proposed to cope with the workload, but it is not enough.

Emotions play an important role and need to be considered. Emotions are also influenced by culture, so for international education this is also an additional consideration. Ideas like compassionate feedback or kindness in feedback should be embedded in the process of providing constructive feedback. Maintaining high standards is not incompatible with kindness and compassion. Critique should provide guidance and open new directions to motivate and engage hopefully fostering exploration and curiosity. Feedback works when it inspires the recipient to improve and the improvements are visible. There is a shared responsibility between givers and receivers in the process.
Feedback requires training on the part of both educators and students. The development of feedback literacy should be part of professional development as well as student development.

Conclusions

Feedback is an essential part of teaching and learning. When it works well it leads to growth and development as it opens new directions. It is often poorly understood by students and not well constructed by educators. Standardizing feedback is insufficient. Feedback literacy should be a component of professional development and should be incorporated in teaching practices for feedback to achieve the desired results. This training should take into consideration the role of relationships and emotions. Additional research is needed into cultural, gender and other characteristics that may affect engagement with feedback. None of this is easy, none of this is simple, but when it works and educators see the growth and development in students, it can be extremely rewarding for all.

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