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Perceived Effects of Technology-Mediated Dialogic Feedback on Feedback Engagement and Use

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Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: Despite the importance of feedback engagement in higher education, there is still much to be learned about how it can be effectively supported. This study qualitatively explored using digital data, survey data and depth interviews, the use of technology-mediated dialogic feedback practices with a group of 14 undergraduates and examined their influence on feedback engagement and use. The practices were found to support the negotiation of meaning and the collaborative improvement of feedback suggestions in peer review, furthermore, feedback conceptualised as a conversation lowered cultural and affective barriers to engagement in peer review and motivated feedback use. The practices also encouraged interaction by lowering the perceived formality and imposition of student-teacher questions and aided understanding and use of feedback. The findings evidence a successful approach for supporting feedback engagement and have important implications for the field and for improving the student assessment and feedback experience.

Paper: Introduction

Although the importance of feedback in higher education is widely accepted (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) it is also a topic that has been highlighted as one of the least satisfactory aspects of the learning experience for students (HEFC, 2016-2018). In addition, more scholarship has focused on what constitutes 'good feedback' than on what influences how it is perceived, engaged with, and used by students (Winstone et al.; 2017b).

Recent studies on how disengagement with feedback can be avoided (e.g. Winstone et al. 2017b) and

on how engagement can be supported (e.g. Winstone et al. 2017a) have covered important ground. However, they have generally neglected the potentially central importance of sustainable and dialogic feedback practices (Nicol, 2010) in nurturing feedback engagement and use.

Learning from dialogic feedback is viewed as a dynamic interpretive process of communication in which 'shared and individual interpretations are developed through dialogue, sense-making and through co-construction between participants' (Carless & Boud, 2018 p. 1316). Dialogic feedback has been found to help learners to negotiate the meaning of the feedback they receive (Zhu & Carless, 2018). However, learners also reportedly require teacher adjudication of disagreements in the peer review process, and making time for peer review both inside and outside of class have proven to be ongoing 'contextual challenges' (ibid abstract). Similar problems have also been reported in other empirical studies of feedback dialogue.

Technology-mediated dialogue may offer a solution to some of these issues. It has been demonstrated through various studies to deepen understanding and thinking, solve logistical communication issues, sustain bi-directional dialogue over time, and may help writers in understanding the audience perspective. However, much previous research on technology-mediated dialogic feedback and feedback engagement has examined the impact of one way digitally mediated feedback (e.g. Nicol, Thompson & Breslin, 2014). There appear to be very few studies considering the influence of ongoing dialogic feedback practices on feedback engagement and use (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018), and even fewer utilising technology. This constitutes a considerable gap in the field.

Aims, research questions and methodology

This study examined the effect of dialogic technology facilitated feedback practices with 14 undergraduates using Google Docs for peer and teacher review (in groups of 3) on a credit-bearing advanced academic writing course at a prestigious Korean university. Taking a constructivist epistemological stance, over a 16-week period data was collected from Google Drive, student reflective writing, qualitative surveys and 'depth interviews' (Bryman, 2016). This followed an 'explanatory sequential design', in which preliminary data analysis informed the focus of subsequent data gathering. Research questions aimed to examine reflective accounts of participant experience of the practices and to examine the perceived effect on feedback engagement and use. Data were analysed inductively using Nvivo following Braun and Clarke (2006), to reduce bias by a priori expectation and focus on what participants viewed to be most important.

The analysis revealed that dialogic peer and teacher feedback practices using Drive have significant effects on feedback engagement. Dialogue not only facilitates the 'repair' of failed peer feedback suggestions facilitating their use, but also a collective scaffolding process in which an unsophisticated feedback suggestion can be developed through discussion into more effective advice. This processes consists of multiple interactions and facilitates subsequent 'feedback on improvement' discussions. Participants also indicated that conceptualising 'feedback as a conversation' encouraged teacher-student interaction during the drafting process, by reducing the sense of imposition on the teacher. Questioning feedback digitally also aided in both the understanding and utilisation of teacher feedback.

Peer feedback as viewed as 'discussion', also reduced emotional and cultural barriers to engaging in peer feedback activities which were clearly expounded in the interviews. The perception of

interaction and support within the learning community motivated participants to use their feedback and giving peer feedback supported self-assessment skills. Finally, access to a peer community during the drafting process encouraged audience perspective taking which lead to improvements in written clarity.

Discussion

These results support those of Zhu and Carless (2018), by providing further evidence (and examples) that learners were able to negotiate the meaning of their feedback through discussions with peers. The use of Google Docs also seemed to solve the issues reported by Zhu and Carless, as the peer review process was extended and took place over weeks utilising mobile learning affordances and any free time the students had (e.g. commuting, breaks between classes). Participants were also able to consult outside reference materials during the feedback negotiation process, before tagging the teacher in the discussion (through Google Docs) as a last resort. The technology facilitated the exchanges smoothly and quickly (including reminder emails), and participants indicated high satisfaction and engagement with their feedback experience and high feedback utilisation.

Finally, participants gave clear accounts of how giving peer review helped them to develop skills for making judgements about their own work and supports the findings of earlier studies (e.g. Lundstrum & Baker 2009) in which giving peer feedback resulted in higher attainment than receiving. The results also offer an explanation for such phenomena, and evidence the benefit of having peer perspectives during the drafting process.

Conclusions:

These results support and in some cases help explain findings from previous studies, and this may be useful in communicating the potential of the methods to reluctant practitioners and students. Most importantly, the study has demonstrated the potential for technology-mediated dialogic feedback practices to support feedback engagement in various ways; to enhance understanding, allow collaborative development of feedback points, encourage interaction and ease emotional and cultural sources of communicative apprehension while providing motivation to engage with and use feedback. These findings make an original contribution to the feedback engagement literature and provide empirical evidence of methods for successfully enhancing the student feedback experience in higher education.

(950 words)

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