69 How do past feedback experiences influence the use of feedback in postgraduate coursework students

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

A sociocultural view casts feedback as a process that is influenced by context and prior experiences. Yet few have investigated how past feedback experiences shape current student engagement in feedback.

The aim of this paper is to interrogate the feedback histories of students to find out how prior experiences with feedback frame their attitude to and use of feedback in current postgraduate courses. To do this, reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data gained from interviews and longitudinal audio diaries.

Early results suggest that: 1. In the past, teachers were the first point of contact for feedback which stays the same in future courses. 2. Students lacked peer feedback in their past degrees, resulting in distrust in this form of feedback. 3. Absence of education on feedback literacy in previous courses leads to other sources of information, e.g. self-feedback, being rarely considered.

Full paper

Background: Concerns about student failure to use feedback information are prominent in the literature (Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019). Students often do not make sense of feedback information from multiple sources, interpret and apply it to their subsequent work (Carless & Boud, 2018).

In this paper, we focus on one aspect of this by showing how past feedback experiences (students' feedback histories) frame current expectations of and actions upon feedback information from various sources, such as teachers, peers, unit forums, self.

Aim: This paper examines how feedback histories shape students' utilisation of feedback information. Our conceptualisation encompasses previous feedback experiences from various contexts (formal study, work, family, volunteering/internships), using various sources of information (teachers, peers, self, work managers/colleagues, friends), and different processes (peer review, self-feedback, learning conversations).

Literature review: Through a sociocultural lens, feedback is considered as a process influenced by previous experiences and context (Esterhazy, 2019). Few studies explore the impact of learners' feedback histories on the feedback in new contexts. Malecka et al. (2022) emphasise that learners adjust to new contexts by comparing their past feedback experiences with current environments. The presence of context and culture specific skills gained in prior education might hinder learning of international students if their prior experiences differ from what is expected from them in a new context (Rovagnati & Pitt, 2021; Rovagnati, Pitt & Winstone, 2021).

Participants: Participants were ten postgraduate coursework students from various Master's courses (Teaching, MBA, IT, Business, Sport Management) at a large Australian university.

Research design: The study uses three guiding theoretical frameworks: sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and the concept of learning lives (Erstad, 2012, 2013) and learning careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000) to examine spatial and temporal aspects of feedback histories.

Primary data from a qualitative study was collected over a trimester. Participants completed an entry interview, a series of longitudinal audio diary entries, and a final interview. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) was used to generate themes.

Results and discussion: Early results suggest that prior feedback experiences influence students' future actions on feedback from various sources. Below, we present the generated themes.

1. In past feedback experiences, teachers were the first point of contact.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of feedback histories were about feedback from teachers. Despite the spread of student-centered approach to learning, traditional views on teachers as providers of knowledge dominated students' prior education experiences. In their Bachelor's degree, students reported to be less engaged with feedback. If they needed some input, they expected to approach teachers, which they rarely did. More active learners sought formative feedback from tutors only.

In postgraduate courses, this tendency remained unchanged. However, Master of Teaching students stood out in their perception and evaluation of feedback information. They tended to look at comments from teaching staff more critically. Concerns were expressed because teachers were expected to serve as role models but sometimes failed to provide effective feedback.

2. Students rarely experienced peer feedback in their past degrees.

Despite broad support for peer feedback in the literature (eg. Tripodi, Vaughan & Wospil, 2021), reports of peer feedback encounters were infrequent. If some feedback with classmates took place, it was typically in the context of an assigned group project where they discussed each other's contributions.

The absence of previous peer feedback experiences appeared to contribute to students' reluctance to seek feedback input from classmates. Some students expressed doubts about the effectiveness of peer feedback as they do not know their peers well and do not trust the reliability of their comments. Other participants struggled with online communication, so they did not reach out to ask for assistance.

3. Lack of reflective tasks and no education on feedback literacy in previous courses.

No reflective tasks or feedback literacy interventions that are pivotal for learning (Winstone & Winstone, Little et al., 2023) were reported by participants, resulting in students not seeing value in alternative sources of information or in their adopting an active role. When asked, learners mentioned situations when they received comments from friends, family members or work colleagues. However, they did not recognise this (or self-feedback) as a valuable element of their learning.

Conclusion: This paper shows how feedback histories of postgraduate coursework students shape their perception and behaviour in current feedback processes. The implications from this are: scaffolding students to increase their engagement with feedback by incorporating relevant tasks into courses, feedback design to promote reflection, educating teaching staff on providing productive input and designing appropriate feedback processes.

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