Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Can Relational Feed-Forward Enhance Students' Affective Responses to Assessment?

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: We examine the role of instructor-student relational feed-forward, enacted as a dialogue relating to ongoing assessment, in dissipating student anxiety, enabling productive learning behaviours, and supporting wellbeing. We undertook qualitative data collection within two undergraduate teaching units that were adopting a relational feed-forward intervention over the 2019-2020 academic year. Student responses were elicited via small group semi-structured interviews and personal reflective diaries, analysed using thematic analysis. The results demonstrate that relational feed-forward promotes many elements of student feedback literacy, such as appreciating the purpose and value of feedback, exercising volition and agency to act, and managing affect. Students were keen for instructors to help them manage their emotions related to assessment, believing this would promote their wellbeing. We conclude by summarising key characteristics of emotionally resonant relational feed-forward, and offer ideas to scale relational feed-forward to larger class sizes.

Paper: Introduction and aim

Students' emotional responses to feedback can play a significant role in determining how they receive and act upon feedback (Pitt and Norton 2017; Ryan and Henderson 2018). Negative emotions can reduce students' motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Fong et al. 2019), impeding their ability to act on assessment feedback in-task and with reference to subsequent work (Winstone et al. 2017). Instructors thereby need to consider carefully how to manage students' responses to feedback so that students feel capable of learning from instructor commentary.

Positively, conceptualisations of feedback are increasingly anchored in social constructivist approaches (Boud and Molloy 2013). Student and instructor dialogue can promote not only cognitive sense-making (Carless and Boud 2018), but the foregrounding of affective emotions (Ryan and Henderson 2018). In this presentation, we acknowledge the emotions that students experience related to feedback and examine the influence of instructor-student relational feed-forward (Ajjawi and Boud 2018; Carless and Boud 2018) on students' emotions and learning behaviours. This is one

of the first studies to investigate the impacts of instructors and students working together to regulate students' emotions to support positive learning behaviours and wellbeing.

Methods

Sampling framework

We undertook qualitative data collection longitudinally over the 2019-2020 academic year, initially within three universities (one module per institution). This framework represented a convenience sample of modules adopting a relational feed-forward intervention. Phase one of data collection, undertaken as modules began, elicited 30 student responses from first to final years of undergraduate study, across three different subjects, and identified students' previous emotional responses to written assessment feedback (Hill et al. 2021). A second phase of data collection, undertaken post-feed-forward intervention, gathered a further 19 student responses (Table 1). We detail phase two results here, referring briefly to phase one findings.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Feed-forward approaches

Student responses to relational feed-forward pertained to two assessments: a two-stage personal development plan for first-year Health Sciences students and essay drafting and final submission for second-year Geography students. Students met with their instructor to discuss work in progress ahead of submission of final assignments for summative grading. The meetings were purposely friendly, open, and dialogic.

Data collection

Students were recruited to one of two activities: small group semi-structured interviews and personal reflective diaries. Phase two small group interviews were conducted after relational feed-forward, at the close of module teaching. A sub-set of phase one students (following natural attrition) took part in phase two, allowing them to reflect on any evolution in their feedback emotions and behaviours. Two small group interviews were convened across each module, totalling four interviews that captured 14 student voices. Interviews lasted 40-60 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Personal reflective diaries were captured electronically over the duration of the modules. Five diaries were received from students at the end of the first-year module, after relational feed-forward, but none were received at the close of the second-year module. Identification of themes followed the

same process as for the interview transcripts.

Findings

Six over-arching themes were identified with respect to relational feed-forward and student emotions, learning behaviours, and wellbeing. These were: 1) students' emotions as they anticipated instructor commentary; 2) the impact of relational feed-forward on students' emotions; 3) students' relationships with the instructor; 4) students' assessment attitudes and behaviours; 5) the role of the instructor in managing feedback emotions; and 6) the impact of relational feed-forward on wellbeing. We will exemplify these themes in our presentation using student testimony.

Discussion

The instructor-student relational meetings supported students to process and manage not just the (meta)cognitive, but the affective aspects of their assessment tasks in a positive manner. Negative emotions arising from feedback did not dwell with the students as they had done previously with respect to written commentary. Relational feed-forward helped these students feel positive about their work in real time, boosting their confidence to act on instructor commentary (Sadler 2010).

Talking with the instructor about work in progress was valued by the students because it was personalized and supportive, helping them to deal with their emotions and promoting wellbeing. The relationship with the instructor is important in encouraging students to seek wider learning support (Middleton et al. 2020). Our students self-avowed to new learning behaviours, carrying forward into future work, increasing their self-efficacy (Ritchie 2016).

Implications for practice

We present characteristics of emotionally resonant relational feed-forward that lead students to experience positive emotions and a sense of wellbeing (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 here]

We explore pedagogies that mitigate negative assessment emotions and offer ideas to scale relational feed-forward to larger class sizes.

References:

Table 1. Sampling framework

University	Level of Study	Module (Subject)	Sample Proportion (Phase two)
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, USA	Year 1	Health Sciences	36% (14 from 39 students)
University of the West of England, UK	Year 2	Geography	17% (5 from 30 students)

Table 2. Characteristics of emotionally resonant relational feed-forward meetings

Key Characteristics

1. Be prepared for each meeting, having reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the work and the key points for action.

2. Be warm and welcoming from the outset – consider the physical context, your body language, your tone of voice, and your forms of verbal expression.

3. Clarify the assessment process and the purpose of dialogic feed-forward within it.

4. Express feedback carefully, balancing positive and negative comments, and beginning with a positive point. Highlight key developmental features for students to focus on.

5. Relate your comments clearly to the work in progress, rather than making them about the student.

6. Make the students feel valued and respected for their efforts, showing them that you care.

7. Reassure the students that they are capable of making the changes that you suggest.

8. Share personal responses to critique of your scholarship – normalize emotions and intellectual stumbling blocks. Explain what you do to move forward confidently with your work.

9. Support your students to construct an action plan before they leave the meeting.

10. Check the students are okay as they leave the meeting and reassure them that they can contact you with further specific questions.

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