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Making comparisons in an open feedback environment: Providing exemplars, modelling uptake strategies, and supporting feedback implementation

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Abstract

Technology-mediated open feedback environments can allow learners to compare their work with others and even view others' teacher feedback, dramatically extending learning opportunities available. However, the potential benefits of comparison as a complement to peer feedback activities within a technology-mediated feedback environment have been underexplored. Through inductive data analysis of data from several advanced academic writing classes before and after COVID-19, this paper explores reported benefits of making comparisons in a technology-mediated 'open' feedback environment and how this complements dialogic peer feedback practices. Inductive analysis of reflective writing, surveys, and interviews with 26 consenting students revealed that students believe they learn a great deal from dialogic peer feedback, which includes access to an audience perspective, co-regulation and a sense of learning community. Complementing this, making comparisons within the open environment allowed them to model others' work and uptake processes, improving their understanding of standards and contributing to feedback literacy.

Full paper

Constructing peer feedback may assist learners in the development

of understandings of quality (Carless, 2020), potentially through comparisons they make as they consider the differences between their own work and that of peers (Nicol et al. 2014). Through such processes, learners can generate high-quality 'inner feedback' that can be applied to their understanding or future work (Nicol & McCallum, 2021; Nicol & Selvaretnam, 2021). Recent work has also demonstrated the benefits of providing peer feedback through screencasts combined with cloud-based documents (Wood, 2022). Feedback produced this way is perceived as higher quality and provides a balance of global and local level feedback while technology mediated dialogues enable students to seek more feedback from peers or negotiate the meaning of feedback and how it can be applied. Such methods allow learners to collaboratively generate more actionable feedback, lower relational impediments and overcome logistical barriers to collaborative learning from feedback (Wood, 2022).

Conceptually, complementing what can be learned from dialogic peer feedback practices, technology-mediated feedback environments can provide learners further opportunities for making comparisons by providing access to a range of additional information. For example, when students work on unique assignment titles, peers can view each other's developing work and view peer and teacher feedback from students in different peer feedback groups (Wood, 2021a). Thus they can compare their work and understanding against 'any other information…in the learning environment that will help them achieve those goals' (Nicol & Selvaretnam, 2021, 2). Such practices dramatically extend the learning resources available. However, there has been little evidence in the literature regarding how comparison as a 'non-explicit' learning process can be deployed during routine blended and online teaching practices and how this can complement peer and teacher feedback practices in a way that can offer more support to learners while reducing teacher workload.

Through inductive analysis of reflective writing, surveys (N=40) and interviews (N=26) from several advanced academic writing classes before and after COVID-19, this case study explores the reported benefits of making comparisons in a technology-mediated 'open' feedback environment and how this complements dialogic peer

feedback and teacher feedback practices. According to the data, in addition to the benefits reported in Wood (2021, b), dialogic peer feedback practices helped learners understand current performance in comparison to the standards and find areas that needed improvement. Exposure to an audience perspective helped them understand and refine aspects of their writing that were not clear to others. Providing peer feedback helped learners make comparisons with their own work, both in terms of what to improve and avoid. The comparisons they made in the 'open' feedback environment allowed them to model not only other students' work but also other students' agentic feedback uptake strategies. The feedback environment also enabled learners to locate specific examples of what they had been advised to do in peer or teacher feedback and model them. This helped with the incorporation of recommendations from feedback. Viewing how other students struggle in the research writing process also helped them understand that they were not the only ones struggling. Seeing multiple examples of work improving after peer and teacher feedback inspired the learners and increased receptivity to feedback as vicarious learning opportunities presented themselves.

These findings suggest that engaging in dialogic peer feedback and implicit comparison making within a technology-mediated environment play complementary and beneficial learning roles. They also suggest that one type of learning opportunity should not be prioritised over another, especially when opportunities for both activities can be built into a class through technological mediation in a scalable and workload sustainable manner. Exploring workload sustainable feedback practices is essential considering the trend toward larger class sizes, the burden on educators of providing effective feedback, with seemingly ever dwindling time allocations by institutions. The findings have important implications for instructors wishing to provide a social, caring, and connected learning experience for students using technology. Such practices enhance learner's agency to orchestrate their own learning, and enable learners to form emotionally supportive communities (Wood, 2022a) while availing themselves of natural learning opportunities within the feedback environment (see Wood, 2021).

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