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What characterises productive feedback encounters?

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Feedback has been reconceptualized in recent years from a focus on the comments staff make regarding students' submitted work, to a process in which students seek and utilise information about their work. If this is the case then we need evidence about how students seek out, make sense of, and use feedback processes drawing on formal and informal sources. This paper utilises the emerging notion of feedback encounters as analytical lens to address the question: What characterizes productive feedback encounters? The study draws from data collected from students in a cross-national study using digital ethnography. While most feedback encounters led to small effects on learning, some had a much greater effect. The paper discusses the conditions in which the latter occurred and considers the design implications arising from the results.

Full paper

Many feedback practices have focused on optimizing what teachers do, and paid little attention to how the students use the information provided. This focus has been critiqued and a new conceptualisation makes clear that the key aspect of productive feedback is how students make sense of and use performance information to inform

future work.

This paper explores how students experience and engage in feedback processes in the context of online and blended courses adopting a digital ethnographic approach. The notion of feedback encounter has been proposed as a way to analyse feedback processes (Esterhazy, 2019). A feedback encounter is an interaction with teachers, peers, materials, technologies, or any other person or artefact inside or outside the course which addresses the student's understanding of task criteria and quality, their own level, or what would be a good next step. For a feedback encounter to be productive it must have a positive impact on learning.

Methods

The digital ethnographic approach allows for the exploration of rich accounts of student experiences in feedback– both those that are part of the course design and those that students seek out on their own or come across incidentally. The dataset is from digital ethnographic fieldwork at an Australian and a Danish university it includes online observations and elicited data from 18 students (13f, 5m). Elicited data included longitudinal audio diaries (LADs) and qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Analytical approach

An earlier phase of analysis led to the notion of the feedback encounter as a meaningful unit of analysis that can link together phenomena such as sources, impacts, technologies, interactions, tasks, roles, course materials in small, detailed narratives of student experiences with feedback (Authors 2022). It identified three main categories of encounters:

Elicited feedback encounters are those that a student actively seeks out, for instance when asking for help or showing their draft to a peer.

Formal feedback encounters are those that are part of the course design, such as when a teacher comments on submitted work.

Incidental feedback encounters are neither planned by teachers nor

elicited by students, rather they happen by chance, for instance when an informal conversation with peers prompts the student to reflect on their own work.

For the present study feedback encounters were categorised further to identify how each type operated to influence student activity.

Types of impact

Instrumental learning

Many elicited feedback encounters were explicitly sought by students simply to check that their work fulfilled the task criteria. Formal feedback encounters, typically involved teacher comments on student work, most often led to superficial edits, in which the student simply followed any explicit directions contained in the comments. While these encounters support students in their work, their impact is instrumental, ie. they do not require or prompt any significant reflection or deeper thinking. Resulting adjustments or corrections make sense within the student's current frame of understanding and therefore, these encounters only have a minor impact on student understanding and approach.

Substantive learning

Less commonly, feedback encounters have substantive impacts when they prompts critical reflection on their own assumptions and lead to a new level of understanding or quality of performance. Often substantive learning was the consequence of the student experiencing a challenge to their current understanding. It was not sufficient that the encounter is experienced by students as challenging, i.e. at odds with their beliefs about their own performance or assumptions about what constitutes good work or a good approach. For a feedback encounter to have substantive impact, the student must take up the challenge and seek to make sense of it even when it requires substantive, and maybe uncomfortable, changes to understanding and work.

The role of timing

The second factor that influences impact is timing. Timing was not

primarily a matter of time passed between doing a task and receiving comments on it. Rather, it was in relation to the needs associated with whichever subsequent task the student is anticipating or currently working on.

Discussion

Whether an encounter will have instrumental or substantive impact depends on factors related to student meaning making and context. We identified two such factors, namely that the feedback encounter must be experienced as having an element of challenge that the student must be willing and able to make sense of, and that the encounter must take place at an appropriate time in relation to whichever task the student is currently working on. The full paper will discuss the implications of this for course design.

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