

Surfacing the Materiality of Emotions in Feedback Through Multi-Modal Diaries

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Despite ongoing innovation in digital technologies in feedback, student satisfaction with feedback remains low. This paper explores how emotional and material dimensions—particularly the role of digital technologies—shape students' feedback experiences. Drawing on sociomateriality, the study analyses multi-modal diary entries from 24 first-year STEM students at a UK university, part of a broader longitudinal qualitative project. The diaries, combining text and photographs, captured in-the-moment reflections on feedback. Findings show that digital devices were not neutral tools, but shaped students' emotional experiences, offering privacy, enabling social comparison, and influencing feelings of inadequacy or reassurance. The study argues that feedback should be understood as an embodied and relational process, emerging through entangled networks of people, technologies, and emotions. I propose multi-modal diaries as a powerful method for surfacing these complexities, providing rich insight into how feedback is lived, felt, and mediated in everyday student practice.

Full paper

Introduction

Feedback, understood here as the sense-making process by which students use evaluative information to improve subsequent academic work and learning strategies (Wood, 2021, p. 1173), has become increasingly digitalised in Higher Education (HE). Recent scholarship has explored the effectiveness of various technologies for feedback – from typed versus handwritten comments (Gabaudan, 2013), to screencast (Orlando, 2016), and AI-generated feedback (Lee and Moore, 2024). These studies highlight increased efficiency, personalisation or satisfaction.

However, despite such innovations, the Assessment and Feedback category continues to receive the lowest scores in the UK National Student Survey. Why, if innovation is abundant, does student dissatisfaction persist?

This paper argues that a key issue lies in a narrow conceptualisation of feedback as transmission of information rather than an emotionally and materially embedded practice. Current work often treats technologies as neutral vehicles, focussing on measurable outcomes like marks or preferences (Selwyn, 2016b). Less explored is how technologies shape the emotional and material conditions under which feedback leads to meaning-making. This neglect is significant, as feedback is increasingly recognised as a relational and emotional process tied to identity and power (Carless and Boud, 2018; Sutton, 2012). Critical digital education scholars have warned that technologies can entrench structural inequalities (Selwyn, 2016a). In response, this paper adopts a sociomaterial perspective, which understands feedback not as unidirectional communication but as emerging through entangled assemblages of people, technologies, spaces and emotions (Gravett, 2022). This paper specifically explores how multi-modal diaries reveal these entanglements more effectively than conventional approaches such as interviews.

Methodology

This paper draws from an ongoing PhD project investigating the role of digital technologies in students' meaning-making of feedback during their first year.

I employed a longitudinal qualitative design involving 24 first-year STEM students at a historic Russell Group university. Participants completed two semi-structured interviews and a four-month period of multi-modal diary entries between October 2024 and February 2025. Whilst the wider study investigates broader aspects of feedback practice, this paper focusses on the diary entries to explore how this method reveals emotional and material aspects of feedback.

The diaries allowed participants to use both text and photographs to document feedback encounters. This low interference, student-led design captured real-time reflections and visceral reactions more effectively than retrospective interviews

sometimes cannot. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

Diaries revealed that digital devices were not passive tools for accessing feedback information, but active participants in meaning-making. Students described moments of vulnerability, particularly around social comparison and academic inadequacy.

Lydia's use of her personal laptop was emotionally significant:



'I am using my own laptop, which I like... it's smaller than the big computer screens in the lab, which means that it is harder for others to see my bad mark.' (Lydia)

Here, the device created a protective emotional environment, shielding her from perceived judgement. Yet the same device enabled real-time social comparison:

"What makes it worse is that comparing to others shows that the average mark was around 60." (Lydia)

The same laptop that protected her also amplified anxiety. This duality underscores how feedback is not simply delivered to students through digital means but emerges through entangled networks of emotion, technology and identity.

Tanya's diary entry reflects a similar interplay:

"I already felt that my work was inadequate... Being alone in the room was helpful since the presence of someone who's done better can make me feel like a bad student." (Tanya)

Here, the emotional experience of feedback was shaped by both social proximity and digital mediation. Tanya used her phone to connect with her boyfriend, mitigating isolation:

*"After the initial shock, I joked about it to my boyfriend... his presence on the phone eased me."
(Tanya)*

Tanya's narrative supports literature that sees feedback as affective and relational (Ryan and Henderson, 2018) while also showing how technologies mediate these affective states.

These findings show the value of diaries in surfacing emotionally complex dimensions of feedback. Unlike interviews, which often require participants to rationalise or retrospectively interpret experiences, diaries allow spontaneous and situated reflections. They offer access to the everyday dimensions of how feedback unfolds—particularly its emotional and material textures.

Conclusion

In addressing student dissatisfaction with feedback, it is crucial to move beyond efficiency and toward how feedback is lived. This paper demonstrates the value of multi-modal diaries for surfacing the emotional and material dimension of feedback. Feedback is not received, it is encountered and felt within assemblages of bodies, devices and relationships. Future research should continue to use methodologies attuned to these complexities.