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FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FEEDBACK LITERACY

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Abstract:

Feedback is an integral aspect of higher education learning. The existing body of knowledge on this subject has reported several challenges that can hinder the power of feedback as a learning tool. In Malaysia, studies related to feedback in higher education remain limited compared to other countries. To address these gaps, this study was conducted to investigate how students and educators perceive and understand feedback. Following a qualitative case study design, four undergraduate students and four educators in a public university in Malaysia were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using the constant comparative method to generate the key findings. The study found that educators were regarded as the main source of feedback, mainly used to indicate the correctness of tasks. It is concluded that students and educators had a limited view of feedback and its potential to enhance learning. Looking to the future, the study recommends that student and educator feedback literacy be developed so both parties can maximise the potential of feedback. Correspondingly, with the advancement of today's technology, artificial intelligence (AI) can be utilised as one of the tools to support feedback literacy in higher education.

Keywords:

Feedback, Higher Education, Feedback Literacy, Case Study, Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

Feedback is an integral aspect of student learning (Morris et al., 2021). Previously, feedback was defined as information provided by an agent regarding a student's understanding or performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, in recent years where emphasis is placed

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on students' agentic role in learning, feedback is viewed as "a process in which learners make sense of comments about the quality of their work in order to inform the development of future performance or learning strategies" (Carless, 2019, p. 706). To date, extensive research has been conducted on the topic of feedback (Wisniewski et al., 2020). Similarly, scholars in the field of feedback have also established the importance of useful feedback in improving student learning (Carless, 2019).

Despite the growing interest in feedback in higher education, recent studies that are focused on feedback in this context in Malaysia are still scarce. For instance, Talib et al. (2015) reported that students valued feedback that is specific, meaningful and timely to facilitate the completion of their tasks. Meanwhile, Vasu et al. (2016) found that students preferred teacher feedback compared to peer feedback. In a more recent study by Singh (2019) revealed the significance of educator feedback on student learning. These studies, however, are quantitative in nature. The dearth of studies on feedback in Malaysia's higher education context is challenging because that means there is limited knowledge about how educators and students in Malaysia understand and perceive feedback with the changing conceptualisations of feedback in the literature (Dawson et al., 2018).

Literature Review

This section discusses cognate literature related to feedback in higher education.

What is Feedback

Feedback can be defined as information provided to a learner by an agent about their understanding, skill or performance (Hattie & Timperly, 2007). Feedback is an intervening mechanism during students' self-monitoring that can "confirm, overwrite, add to, tune, or restructure extant knowledge and beliefs" (Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 275), be it students' domain knowledge, metacognitive or cognitive strategies, or beliefs about the self. Without feedback, students might not know their strengths, weaknesses or the state of progress they are making towards specific goals and, consequently, will not be able to use such information to make necessary adjustments to their work.

Despite being one of the areas in higher education that is being researched, feedback continues to be one of the challenging areas for educators and students (Williams, 2024). These challenges may arise from factors such as students' and educators' feedback practices or institutional and other contextual influences (Handerson et al., 2019).

The Old and New Feedback Paradigms

Conceptualisations of feedback in the traditional paradigm can be traced back to behaviourist notions of learning (Hattie & Gan, 2011). Behaviourist notions are echoed in one of the earliest definitions of feedback from Kulhavy (1977), who described it as "any of the numerous procedures that are used to tell a learner if an instructional response is right or wrong" (p.211). Thus, feedback plays a corrective role in students' learning – it provides information that indicates the correctness of responses in relation to the instructional or learning activity (Price et al., 2010). They are considered directors of feedback (Molloy & Boud, 2014) and their role involves telling students what needs correcting and in some cases, how to go about making such corrections (Molloy & Boud, 2014). Students, on the other hand, are seen as passive recipients of information (Molloy & Boud, 2014). Students' achievement is believed to improve if they utilise corrective information provided by educators (Molloy & Boud, 2014).

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On the other hand, the current conceptions of learning have resulted in a corresponding shift in how feedback is conceptualised, with students now positioned at the centre of the feedback process (Molloy & Boud, 2014). Pivotal to contemporary notions of feedback is the agentic role of students in the feedback process and their engagement with various sources of feedback to improve their learning (Carless, 2015). For students to take on an agentic role, they must be active seekers and generators of information rather than mere recipients of information provided by others. A much more recent focus in feedback research is student and teacher feedback literacy. Students who are feedback literate possess an appreciation towards the feedback process, develop dispositions to make judgments, are capable of managing attitudes and take actions to use feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). Meanwhile, educators with feedback literacy do more than merely provide information on students' work (Boud & Dawson, 2023). They utilise their skills and capacities to provide the ideal environments for students to utilise feedback. These include developing students' abilities to make evaluative judgement, engaging in dialogue and supporting students in managing their affect in the learning process (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

In other words, the new feedback paradigm places both students and educators as co-constructors of the learning process. They work together to support students' learning dialogue that involves judgements, suggestions and questions about students' work and understanding (Boud & Dawson, 2023). Indeed, these skills are not just important for students to enhance their learning, but also a capability needed for their career and lifelong learning process (Carless & Boud, 2018).

As mentioned in the previous section, studies on feedback in the Malaysian higher education context are still limited and need more exploration. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the perspectives of students and educators about feedback in this context. This current paper addresses these gaps in knowledge through the employment of a qualitative case study to investigate how university educators and students in Malaysia understand and perceive feedback. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do educators and students perceive feedback?
2. What are the sources of feedback?
3. What are the purposes of feedback?

Methodology

Our study was carried out using a qualitative case study design. This design allowed the researchers to provide an in-depth account of a phenomenon under study through questioning and interactions (Njie & Asimiran, 2014). In the context of the study, the application of a qualitative case study enabled the researchers to understand the experiences and understandings of informants regarding feedback through semi-structured interviews. Four undergraduate students and four educators from a local university in Malaysia were involved in this study. The informants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2014). They were selected based on a common criterion whereby all informants were involved in the final-year project. The final-year project is a credited course that needs to be undertaken by final year bachelor's degree students. Prior to the fieldwork, the researcher sought the consent of informants to be involved in the study. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that pseudonyms would be used in any published work. Formal consent was gained through the signing of a participant consent form.

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Data were obtained through comprehensive semi-structured interviews conducted with the informants. With permission from the informants, the interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were then analysed deductively and inductively using the constant comparative method to integrate overlapping codes and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The trustworthiness of the data was established through member checks and peer debriefing.

Findings

Findings of this study indicated that feedback was an embedded aspect of the final-year project process. In general, educators and students used feedback to ensure the successful completion of the writing. This section presents the perceptions and experiences of informants about feedback.

What is Feedback

Essentially, informants perceived feedback as *"providing information to students"* (Educator A). This information could be conveyed in a variety of ways, including *"marks or corrections that we return to students"* (Educator B), *"an idea or corrections"* (Student A) and *"constructive ideas"* (Student B). Feedback was also described as a form of communication between student and educator: *It [feedback] is communication* (Educator B).

Information about the quality of students' work and ideas formed the basis of this communication. Ideally, educators and students thought this communication should be bidirectional – a process whereby both parties engaged in *"give and take"* (Student B). Clear communication between students and educators was important so information could be on effectively. However, rather than being a two-way exchange, it seemed that for some, feedback was considered a one-way transfer of information from educator to student:

> *If either party—either the lecturer or the student cannot give or accept feedback…I think it [feedback] would be inefficient—both in giving and accepting* (Educator C).

In contrast, others talked about feedback in terms of asking questions, clarifying understandings, seeking further information and generally sharing ideas, indicating a more interactive, two-way exchange:

> *We had two-way communication so he [my student] could clarify whether he understood something or not. He can ask what he did not understand…* (Educator A).

Sources of Feedback

Three external sources of feedback supported students' development and progress. Informants indicated that these sources were available within their disciplinary and academic context.

Educators as a Source of Feedback

When talking about feedback, students saw educators as *"the most important person, I mean, she needs to be the main person to provide feedback"* (Student A). Students saw their role as ones of asking educators for feedback about *"what [we] don't understand because our educator is there to guide us"* (Student D). Educators expressed a similar view, identifying themselves as the principal source of information for students, where their role was to provide feedback or information that guided students in terms of the research processes:

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> *We as educators, need to guide students' ideas about how to collect the data and ultimately achieve their research objectives* (Educator C).

Students considered educators the key sources of information about the research project including the quality of their ideas, the research design and any subsequent written work as their educators were knowledgeable and deemed to be experts in the area of study and/or research process. In turn, they saw themselves as novices or apprentices who needed feedback from their more knowledgeable and experienced educators about the research process and area of study:

> *...my lecturer, he knows better than me, is knowledgeable than me, so I have to listen to him* (Student B).

Peers, Senior Students and Other Academics as Sources of Feedback

Students also sought and received feedback from other external sources. For example, some talked about receiving feedback from peers and more senior students, particularly when wanting to know, before meeting their educator if *"what I have done is correct"* (Student A):

> *...my friends gave me feedback about the questionnaire, such as on the clarity and mistakes in the questionnaire* (Student D).

Disciplinary Sources as Sources of Feedback

Student B was the only student who talked about feedback in terms of information from external print-based sources. He mentioned how he sought information from disciplinary-related materials such as journal articles, textbooks and notes so he would *"know whether my [experiment] result is correct or not, so I have to read journals so I can compare my results with those in the journals"*. Similarly, one of the educators talked about how she referred students to exemplars such as her master's thesis so they could gather information about their work by comparing it to *"the components of the thesis, what should be in the content, how you achieve the content"* (Educator C).

In short, both students and educators considered the latter to be the primary and arguably the most significant source of feedback. No explicit mention was made by either students or educators of the former having a role in generating feedback for themselves. Thus, both students and educators perceived feedback as information from external, knowledgeable sources, i.e. educators and to a lesser extent, peers and disciplinary sources.

The Purposes of Feedback

From the points of view of students and educators, feedback served three purposes: to improve task-related work, to indicate progress, and to enhance motivation.

To Improve Task-related Work

Both students and educators perceived the primary function of feedback was to address and rectify task-related aspects of students' work.

> *...so when you receive feedback, you know what parts [in your written work] you need to improve...* (Student B).

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The main way in which students and educators saw improvement occurring was through the identification of mistakes and errors, so students could make corrections. However, as some students noted, *"we can't see our mistakes"* (Student D). Thus, feedback from educators was considered particularly useful when it identified aspects or areas that needed corrections: *"…when she gives me comments on my work…I am able to know the parts that were incorrect"* (Student A). Similarly, educators saw feedback helped students identify parts of their work *"that [which] is inaccurate"* (Educator C) to enable them to make necessary revisions, or as Educator D mentioned, *"redo it again"*. Students perceived that when feedback helped them to *"know our weakness"* (Student C) and identify misunderstandings or inaccuracies in their work, it helped them to make changes and as a consequence improve its quality.

To Indicate Progress

To a lesser extent, feedback was considered as means of providing students with an indication of the progress they were making. For this reason, it served to confirm whether the tasks that were carried out at various points throughout the research process were in line with the goals of the project and what was expected:

> *I will make it clear about her progress: "I am happy with this correction" or "I am not happy with this progress". I will make it clear* (Educator C).

In terms of progress, feedback from educators helped students identify what needed to be completed concerning the research process:

> *[My lecturer's] feedback gives me information on what I need to work on next. For instance, she told me the things I need to complete first before proceeding to the next step* (Student D).

From the educators' perspective, feedback provided students with the necessary guidance so they could advance their project. In this way, educators saw themselves as guides:

> *…usually I will call him and discuss with him…and then from there, I will guide him about the steps that he has to proceed…* (Educator D).

To Enhance Motivation

To a much lesser extent, feedback was considered a motivational tool to help students sustain momentum during the project. Educators indicated that they deliberately used feedback to motivate and encourage their students:

> *When I want to motivate him, I will tell him that this is already your last stage before you graduate…* (Educator A)

Meanwhile, students commented on how information from educators took the form of advice and affirmative encouragement:

> *He gives me advice [in terms of emotional support], sometimes counselling for me…* (Student B)

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To sum up, the primary purpose of feedback was to help students notice task-related mistakes and/or areas of weakness so they could make the necessary improvements to their work. To a lesser extent, feedback helped indicate the state of students' current progress and tasks to be completed next. To a much lesser extent, feedback served to motivate students.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that students and educators saw feedback as an important part of the final-year project. In the main, feedback served as a tool to improve students' work. While there were indications from the informants about being involved in a two-way exchange of information, based on their perceptions, it seemed that the educators were the primary and most influential source of feedback. Educators played an authoritative role in outlining to students what should be completed next in their final-year project. They also made sure that students were on track with their progress to ensure the successful completion of the research project.

The perceptions of informants indicated that feedback mainly involved a one-directional information transfer from educators to students. This suggests that students were dependent on their educators' knowledge and expertise in completing the final-year project. Furthermore, as viewed by informants, feedback was primarily used to identify and correct errors in students' tasks. Students appreciated their educators' feedback, which helped identify the weaknesses and misunderstandings in their project. It is also interesting to note that neither educators nor students mentioned that students were the generators of information. As a corollary, they had limited autonomy in evaluating their work and understanding. In summary, the findings reveal that both students and educators held a rather narrow understanding of feedback.

The findings of our study highlight the limited feedback literacy among students and educators. If students and educators are to use feedback effectively, they need to be feedback literate which includes understanding their complementary, active roles in the feedback process and recognising feedback as a reciprocal process (Carless & Boud, 2018; Joughin et al., 2021). However, in the context of our study, students were regarded as passive recipients of feedback from their educators, rather than being co-constructors of feedback alongside the educators. This hierarchical and unidirectional approach to feedback limited students from generating their self-evaluation of their work, understanding and progress – a key component to students' self-regulation and learning independence (Nicol, 2021). Furthermore, the emphasis on feedback mainly as information to indicate the correctness of tasks shows that students and educators did not harness the potential of feedback. While this type of feedback is useful to help students make corrections, it does not contribute to deep learning. As attested by Wisniewski et al. (2020), feedback that promotes learning combines information about the task, the processes needed to complete the task and feedback that promotes self-regulation. In other words, students need to understand the mistakes they made, what contributed to these mistakes and how they can avoid them next time (Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The current study found that feedback was an integral part of the final-year project. Both students and educators acknowledged the importance of feedback, but there was little evidence of dialogic engagement between them and students' agentic role in learning. An implication from this study is the need to develop students' and educators' feedback literacy. Educators and students must be educated on their roles in feedback and learning as co-constructors of knowledge. They need to realise the importance of creating opportunities for students to

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evaluate their work and understanding. As a practical start, especially in the context of Malaysian higher education, educators can invite students to compare their previous work with their current work or with other comparators such as the assessment rubric, exemplars and work done by peers (Nicol, 2020). In addition, rather than being the main provider of feedback, educators should engage in dialogic interactions. As posited by social constructivist and sociocultural approaches, dialogic interactions between students and educators can help develop students' agentic role in learning (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Moving forward, artificial intelligence (AI) tools can be used to promote students' feedback literacy. For instance, Tubino and Adachi (2022) found that the use of an AI powered automated feedback tool helped students understand the reciprocal nature of feedback. The tool also removed the power relations that might exist in typical educator-student interaction, making students less emotional in the feedback process and more critical in judging feedback on their work.

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