Feedback Given, Feedback Received: Lessons From a Distance Learning Course

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Abstract

In the field of teacher education, feedback is widely recognised as a necessary component in the complex and dynamic process of learning. Involving cognitive, social and affective dimensions, feedback is given and received in the hopes that it will modify subsequent academic performance accordingly. However, while research examining online teaching, teaching strategies and online learning communities is well established, the area of online feedback is a relatively new area of research still in its infancy. Thus, against this background the present study, aims to make a contribution to this under-researched area and explore the online feedback given to postgraduate students undertaking a distance learning programme. Taking into consideration the complex and dynamic nature of feedback, the present study chooses to explore the inter-relational nature of the subject by examining how and what feedback was given (by the lecturer) and how it was received (by the learners). Data were collected from the course forums and analysed for content. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students in the same course. With some exceptions, findings from the content analysis suggest that much of the feedback given appeared to be in line with theoretical understandings of “best practice”; however, findings from interview data show how students’ understanding of the feedback they receive incorporates specific pedagogical, contextual and relational dimensions. Here the implications of these findings are discussed in terms of how lecturers teaching online courses may want to reconsider their feedback practices so as to improve student support.

Keywords: feedback, online learning, student perspectives.

1 Introduction

In the field of teacher education, feedback is widely recognised as a necessary component in the complex and dynamic process of learning. Involving cognitive, social and affective dimensions, feedback is given and received in the hopes that it will modify subsequent academic performance accordingly (e.g. [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]). As a focus of research, feedback is seen as formative rather than summative in that it does not attempt to formally evaluate or quantify the standard of work. While evaluation and testing are well-defined areas of research, feedback remains a relatively under-theorized and under-researched [7] and even less is known about online feedback. While ‘best practice’ in online teaching is well established (e.g. [8], [9], [10], [11]), specific research focusing on online feedback is still in its infancy (e.g. [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17]).

Thus, the present study, aims to make a contribution to this under-researched area and explore the feedback given to students during the course of their master studies delivered in distance learning (DL) mode. Therefore, taking into consideration the complex and dynamic nature of feedback, the present study explores the interrelational nature of the subject by examining how and what feedback was given (by the lecturer) and how it was received (by the learners). This dual perspective is an attempt to redress the balance of power by making the ‘evaluator’ the ‘evaluated’ in the hopes of offering new insights into established feedback practices and making suggestions for how they might be improved.

2 Methodology

2.1 Purposes of study and research questions

As a descriptive study, this study aims to use different research techniques in order to describe educational phenomena in terms of what is and compare it to what we would like [18]. In a rapidly changing educational setting, this type of research allows for the description, explanation and improvement of educational practices and learning experiences. It does not attempt to draw
conclusions which show cause and effect; rather, its aim is to uncover data that might not have previously been noticed or data which may not be encountered using other research approaches. As such, the following research questions guided the study: (1) What feedback was given to distance learning students? (2) How was this feedback perceived by DL students?

2.2 Context
The study explores feedback given to DL students who are all English Language teachers, studying for a postgraduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). As a DL programme, all course content is delivered online with the addition of three real-time online meetings scheduled at regular intervals throughout the 12 week semester. Course content is delivered by means of video lectures, audio presentations and selected readings and students are encouraged to explore ideas through the online forums and individual and group tasks. Specifically, these tasks ask students to reflect on and discuss course reading, share personal experiences, ask questions, express opinions and collaborate on group projects. Feedback is provided in response to these tasks and to any questions asked about specific academic, administrative and technical issues.

2.3 Participants
Data were collected in the form of written feedback given by a lecturer to DL students on one particular course taken as part of the DL programme. The female lecturer, aged 50 years had 26 years' teaching experience including 2 years teaching DL courses. Data were also collected from 5 of the 13 DL students enrolled on the specific course, who agreed to participate in interviews after its completion. These students (1 male and 4 female) were all English language teachers. They had between 5 and 22 years teaching experience with a mean average of 16 years teaching experience. Participants were based in Cyprus, Greece and Germany with ages ranging from 24-45 years with an average age of 38 years. Before agreeing to participate in the study, all participants read and signed a consent form expressing their willingness to participate.

2.4 Procedures
2.4.1 Phase 1
In the first phase, all messages posted by the lecturer to the 13 DL students, were collected from the course forums. The messages were written over a twelve-week period between September and December 2015. The total data set comprises 93 written messages posted by the lecturer in response to students’ questions, online tasks and discussion. Analysis of the written messages was adapted from a taxonomy by Blignaut and Trollip [19] and comprises three categories of feedback: corrective, informative and reflective. Codes were assigned to parts of messages based on semantic features highlighting units of meaning such as ideas and topics of discussion rather than syntactical features. NVivo was used to highlight coded segments of the text and to produce summaries of findings. Because of the elaborate nature of feedback, it is possible for single messages to contain multiple codes. Thus, to ensure the reliability of coding, an independent rater was also asked to code 10% of the data. A Cohen’s Kappa of 0.6 was established. This measurement of inter-rater reliability takes into account the possibility of agreement occurring by chance and therefore a value between 0.4 and 0.4 – 0.75 is interpreted as good. In addition, the percentage of agreement between the two raters was shown to be 91.63%.

2.4.2 Phase 2
Between January and May 2016, semi-structured interviews were conducted asking students about their experiences and perceptions of the course feedback they had received. Each interview lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded and full orthographic and verbatim transcriptions were produced. Once the researcher was familiar with the data, NVivo was again used to highlight coded segments of the text; themes and subthemes were then identified from the coded extracts and then aggregated into hierarchies. Unlike Phase 1, this analysis focused on identifying thematic nodes for the purpose of ‘thick rich descriptions’ rather than descriptive statistics.
3 FINDINGS

3.1 Feedback given

In total 108 messages were posted by the 13 students in response to readings and online tasks. In response, 93 messages were written and posted by the lecturer. Of these 93 messages, 27 messages (29%) were written to the whole group (collective feedback) while 66 messages (71%) were addressed to individual students (individual feedback). In relation to the length of feedback given by the lecturer, a total of 10,150 words were written with an average of 109 words per message. Moreover, the response time between students posting their message and the lecturer responding ranged from the same day (0 days) to 15 days with a mean average response time of 1.7 days.

In terms of the types of feedback given (Table 1) findings show that the most common type was informative feedback focusing on content (23%) and procedural content (17%). The next most common type of feedback was affective (11%) dealing with the social, emotional and motivational aspects of learning. Following that, corrective feedback was also provided (7%). Reflective feedback (asking questions that encourage students to reflect on their answers) was the least common type of feedback given (4%).

Table 1. Feedback given by type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Density by % coverage</th>
<th>Density by word number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informative-content</td>
<td>23.25</td>
<td>2347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative-procedural</td>
<td>16.62</td>
<td>1804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>11.21</td>
<td>1248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective</td>
<td>07.28</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>04.01</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Feedback received

Findings from interview data are thematically arranged in three sections highlighting the, pedagogical, contextual and relational dimensions of feedback and supported with extracts from the data.

3.2.1 Pedagogical dimensions

Within the first theme, students identify the pedagogical dimensions of feedback on their learning. Three subthemes emerge: positive feedback, negative feedback and functions of feedback (Table 2). Within each subtheme (parent node), there are a number of smaller sub-themes (child nodes). In the first subtheme positive feedback is identified by students as being accessible to all, focused, motivating, personalized, timely and useful.

Table 2. Theme: Pedagogical: Positive feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Student comments: examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessible</td>
<td>T: before the exams and during the study period I am trying to read all the messages because I want to see if I am on the right path or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>M: I liked the fact that she always highlighted the part where she had to make comments and she explained very clearly what she expected of me in this particular part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating</td>
<td>A: to me, feedback is the motivation, I get really motivated even with bad feedback, you know what I mean by bad…it helps me understand what I did and what I was supposed to do, it's like a clear guidance... I can closely relate it to achievement, yes it also adds to confidence obviously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>T: but for me you know, maybe this is because I don’t have the face-to-face opportunity… but for me it’s very important for you to know who I am… you know when I write (student's name) you know it’s me (student’s name) talking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the second subtheme, negative feedback is perceived by students as critical in tone, inconsistent, inconvenient, lacking, and vague and confusing (Table 3).

**Table 3. Theme: Pedagogical: Negative feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Student comments: examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>T: for instance, when I ask about references, how to cite something, I am asking because I really don't know, I have a slight idea but I am not sure if it's the correct way...so an answer like “you have to do it like masters students do” is not the kind of answer I have been waiting for...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>A: the more the students, the less the feedback or the lateness of the feedback but no this has not proven so, like for example as I told you previously in the independent course there were 2 people and I didn’t get any feedback, either in the forums or the assignments, just nothing, whereas in other courses I got feedback right away and quite detailed...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Inconvenient</td>
<td>A: all WebEx sessions are at times that I have work so I have never been to a WebEx session, so this is my first one actually, so come on guys please talk to us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of</td>
<td>A: but well I kept posting on the forum and no reply, no nothing, even when I said “Hello, this is (student’s name) at the beginning of the course, I didn’t even receive an “ok, welcome” so it was a bit strange like you don't want me around, yes I got no feedback, I felt like I was in the dark...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague &amp; confusing</td>
<td>E: for this course I am trying to finish today, it’s basically, try and answer this question give your own views and I am a bit confused ...like, what do you mean, give my own views? A couple of other students did ask the lecturer but to be honest I was still not sure so I’m just kind of giving support by what I find in the readings and giving a little bit about my own views</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the third subtheme, students distinguish the different functions of feedback in relation to their learning. These functions include: affective, corrective, informative and reflective feedback (Table 4).

**Table 4. Theme: Pedagogical: Functions of feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Student comments: examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>A: ... and it was after midnight and I thought oh my god, she is not sleeping honestly, so that was amazing really because when I asked for an extension I was really stressed, but it’s nice to have somebody saying ‘alright, calm down, I am there, let’s see what we can do’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective</td>
<td>T: and also as a student I need to know why you are giving me this specific feedback, to explain to me why that was wrong and where can I find the correct answer...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>M: The lecturer also referred us to other links for extra information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>T: I like the comments “well done” or “nice thoughts but I also like it when lecturers ask us “how about this?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 **Contextual dimensions**

Within the second theme of contextual factors, three sub-themes emerge: culture, teaching and work/home life (Table 5).
Table 5. Theme: Contextual factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Student comments: examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>A: maybe it’s a Greek thing but I wouldn’t expect a student of mine to say alright I have 99% what went wrong? I would say what the hell are you talking about, this is magnificent but yes, I wanted more explanation and not just a grade but obviously it’s not the lecturer’s problem, its mine…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E: I don’t know if we can expect quick feedback if there are like 50 students and one professor…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A: I am kind of vague and I guess because I had been a teacher at a university before I was kind of timid about following up on my confusion and not wanting to be annoying so I kind of just plodded on because I know how it is to get bugged by students when I am expecting them to understand and they’re not understanding…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E: I mean people have got their jobs and family obligations, whatever, and so forth, and professors will say they’re giving them plenty of time but they don’t understand what’s going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/home life</td>
<td>A: I sent a message, and I got no reply, saying that because of a family situation, I need a big extension because I am many hours in the clinic, I’m outside the home and I have everything going on in my head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E: it’s very challenging but it’s my fault in a way, maybe I should be interacting with the professor more and asking questions and even for extensions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.3 Relational dimensions

The third theme focuses on the relational dimensions of feedback. Two subthemes emerge from the data: firstly, students’ intrapersonal relationship to knowledge construction – how students construct knowledge based on their personal experiences (Table 6) – and, secondly, students’ interpersonal relationship to knowledge construction – how students construct knowledge through their social interactions with others, specifically their peers and their lecturer (Table 7).

Table 6. Theme: Relational dimensions of feedback: intrapersonal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Student comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>A: anyway when I was 24 I needed a lot of guidance not that I don’t need it now but I feel more confident about stuff that I have worked on extensively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E: I guess because I had been a teacher at a university before I was kind of timid about following up on my confusion and not wanting to be annoying so I kind of just plodded on because I know how it is to get bugged by students when I am expecting them to understand and they’re not understanding and you know, you know what I mean…its challenging but it’s my fault in a way, maybe I should be interacting with the professor more and asking questions and even for extensions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Theme: Relational dimensions of feedback: interpersonal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Student comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>A: I really adore reading to work out what others have written because it opens a new door to things I haven’t thought before or things I have thought differently which is the thing I like and then I can see the feedback and see if that was a good direction I should have taken, yes I do so, very often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E: but I just sense that from the students they are just a bit uneasy about criticizing, there’s more of a sense on the forum of trying to support each other instead of critiquing what they are writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: I have been in contact with only two people but we have really, really interesting conversations about the lectures and about our experiences … other students do not answer the questions, even though the question is not addressed to the lecturer, it’s not to “dear lecturer” its addressed to “dear everyone”, well I think it was to do with showing respect to the lecturer and not commenting on what they are about to say</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Feedback given: quantity and type

The first part of the study offers an insight into online feedback practices in this course in terms of ‘what is’. Feedback given by the lecturer to students was fairly comprehensive with the lecturer responding with 93 posts giving both individual (61%) and collective feedback (39%) to the 108 posts written by students. The messages were fairly substantive in length with an average 109 words per message. The feedback was timely in most cases with a mean average response time of 1.7 days.

In terms of the types of feedback given, it was unidirectional from lecturer to student. While students were invited to ask and answer questions to and from each other, this did not happen in the public space of the course forum although, anecdotal evidence from the interviews suggest that students did interact privately. In relation to the types of feedback given, it was overwhelmingly focused on providing information about course content and procedures (40%). To a lesser extent there was feedback that focused on motivating and supporting students (11%), correcting their answers (7%) and asking them questions (4%).

Many aspects of these findings are supported by the literature which advocates that effective online feedback that is personalized [13] substantive [20] and timely ([21], [22]. However, there are also aspects of the findings which do not align with notions of ‘best practice’ in that feedback should be mutually constructed rather than transmitted from lecturer to students [23]. Furthermore, findings also show that the lack of reflective feedback, which in this study is the least common type, is also contrary to notions of ‘best practice’ [24].

4.2 Feedback received: student perceptions

The second part of the study offers insights into online feedback practices through the subjective perceptions of students and the extent to which the online feedback they received negatively and/or positively affected their learning. These findings show how students interpreted their feedback according to specific pedagogical, contextual and relational dimensions of learning.

In relation to the pedagogical dimensions of feedback, findings largely support the extant literature about what constitutes best online feedback practice e.g. accessible to all [25], focused [15], motivating (e.g. [26], [27], [28]), personalized [13], timely (e.g. [21], [22]) and useful [29]. Conversely, student perceptions of negative feedback as critical in, tone, inconsistent, inconvenient, lacking, and vague and confusing are also inferred in the same literature. Perceptions of the pedagogical functions of feedback as affective, corrective, informative and reflective are also well discussed in the literature [19].

In relation to the contextual dimensions of feedback (Table 5), students perceived online feedback through the lens of their own cultural expectations (“maybe it’s a Greek thing but...” and “I think there are some cultural adjustments made when giving feedback, like when I look at the roster I am the only non-Greek or Cypriot student there...”). This is borne out in the literature [30] which explores how “constructivist-based pedagogy couched in the highly interactive communication world can be a lonely place for an international online learner whose cultural experiences are different than the dominant educational cultures” [31]. Findings which show low expectations of feedback based on class size, as well as perceived lack of understanding by the lecturer about students’ work and home lives are also
cited in the literature are reasons for high student attrition and low online course completion ([32], [33]).

Relationally, findings also highlight the extent to which feedback is constructed through their relationship to self and others (Tables 6 & 7). In relation to self, students’ concepts of the importance of autonomous learning stand out (‘I needed a lot of guidance, not that I don’t need it now but I feel more confident about stuff that I have worked on extensively’ and ‘I kind of just plodded on because I know how it is to get bugged by students’). Indeed, within the literature, concepts of how students view their learning and learning context are strongly associated with their own learning outcomes [17]. In relation to learning with and through others, feedback is welcomed by students as an indication of teaching presence which is also linked to course satisfaction and learning outcomes ([10], [11]). However, it is also noted that for some students, too much teaching presence in the form of feedback may actually inhibit autonomous learning (I can see how too much involvement can create less motivation in students and less self-responsibility). This too is supported by the literature ([34], [35]). In relation to feedback provided by peers, it is noteworthy that while students value the contribution of other students (I really adore… reading to work out what others have written because it opens a new door to things I haven’t thought before or things I have thought differently which is the thing I like and then I can see the feedback and see if that was a good direction I should have taken), they did not, for various reasons, participate in the feedback process (but I just sense that from the students they are just a bit uneasy about criticizing, there’s more of a sense on the forum of trying to support each other instead of critiquing what they are writing…). This would seem to confirm two main findings, firstly, many students perceive feedback as a top-down process from lecturer to students [14], and secondly, without knowledge of feedback strategies or motivation, students are reluctant to offer feedback to their peers ([12], [25], [36]).

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this particular study, the participants were all practicing teachers and, as DL students, they each had their own feedback practices and beliefs. Thus, the degree to which these practices and beliefs align with the lecturer is critical. The first part of the study gives an analysis of the online feedback given during a specific course, in terms of the frequency, type and length. This can be evaluated in terms of what the extant literature identifies as ‘best practice’. In addition, the second part of the study also offers a more subjective analysis of how students evaluate these particular feedback practices pedagogically, contextually and relationally. These findings can be used to make lecturers aware of their online feedback practices and how they may be seen to support or inhibit student learning. Therefore, in relation to lessons learnt, the following questions can help lecturers examine their own online feedback practices:

Pedagogically: Is online feedback accessible to all, focused, motivating, personalized, timely and useful? What type of feedback is offered and how does it support student learning? E.g. To what extent does it provide information about course content or procedures? To what extent does it ask questions and encourage students to reflect on their learning?

Contextually: To what extent does the online feedback reflect the values of the dominant education culture? Does feedback take into account the experiences and expectations of learners from other educational cultures? To what extent is the quality and quantity of feedback shaped by the teaching context? To what extent does feedback consider the external work/home life pressures face DL students?

Relationally: How do students feel about the online feedback they receive? To what extent is your teaching presence established through feedback? What kind of presence is it? What is the role of other students in the feedback process? Is feedback mutually constructed by lecturer and students and between students? Why/why not?

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of this study. The perceptions highlighted by the survey and interview data represent those of a small sample of DL students enrolled on one specific course. Findings are therefore representative of the teaching of that particular lecturer for that particular course. As such, the idiosyncratic nature of the data does not provide a basis for transferability and generalizability to other courses or other lecturers teaching on the same programme. However, such a study does provide insights into the content and process of giving feedback and does attempt to make explicit the specific beliefs and practices about online feedback that support or inhibit learning as perceived by this group of DL students.
REFERENCES


