Enhancing students' feedback literacy through peer-review in large classes

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Abstract

Feedback is an essential element of teaching and learning. In order to use feedback effectively, students must appreciate the value of feedback, understand the language of feedback and how to implement feedback (Winstone et.al., 2017). This paper describes a peer-review activity used to enhance feedback literacy of a large cohort of Early Childhood Care and Education students (104). An increased understanding of feedback may lead to improved academic writing, critical thinking, and higher-grade achievement (Huisman et al., 2018). Implications for higher level teaching include incorporating feedback into curriculum planning, employing the concept of 'feedforward' and higher academic achievement for students (Sadler, 2010).

Keywords*: Feedback; feedback literacy; peer-review; assessment; teaching large groups.*

1.   Introduction

This paper discusses the use of a peer-review activity, facilitated using Peermark on Turnitin to enhance first-year undergraduate students' feedback literacy in a large-group context. Preparations for peer review included feedback training through detailed explanation of the assessment rubric, guided reflective questions and the use of exemplars. Following the peer review activity, students were encouraged to use what they learned from their experience (both as reviewer and reviewee) to enhance their academic writing and performance in their final assessment submission. The aim of this activity was to improve students' understanding of feedback and confidence in discussing, requesting and using feedback, therefore, making feedback for both teachers and students of large classes a more positive experience.

2. Description of the Teaching/Learning Context

2.1 Class Profile

This activity was undertaken with a large group of first-year undergraduate students studying Early Childhood Care and Education comprising 104 students. They received some input in smaller group tutorial sessions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all teaching and learning was facilitated via online platforms.

2.2 Teaching Approach

The specific teaching and learning approach for this paper is the use of *Peermark* on *Turnitin* to facilitate a peer-review activity in order to enhance students' feedback literacy. Students were required to submit a short draft section of their essay. They then had to review two peers' draft submissions. Students were awarded marks towards their final module grade for engaging in this activity. Prior to reviewing, the assessment rubric and associated language was explained, exemplars were used and questions were discussed to structure the reviews. Students were given one week to complete the reviews which were required to reach a set word count before completion. All reviewers and reviewees remained anonymous throughout the process to facilitate honest, constructive feedback. After all reviews had been submitted, students could access their peer feedback and had the opportunity to discuss it in class and use what they learned for their final essay submission.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Role of Feedback

Feedback has the potential to impact students' development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, this development depends on the implementation of what the learner gains from their received feedback. The feedback process is double-sided; the giver and receiver must both have an active role. Simply, feedback is only really useful if the student decides to act upon it (Nash & Winstone, 2017). This can often influence the lecturer as they feel there could be 'extra work' (time consuming and effortful) in providing feedback for every student that may not access it, let alone use it (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Even students who express their wish to receive feedback, or those that complain they do not get enough, may not use the feedback they receive (Jonsson, 2013). This could be due to several factors, for example, they receive the feedback too late (the final submission deadline has passed); they may not understand the feedback they are given; the feedback may be in the form of statements of what is incorrect/needs to be improved, with no suggestion on how to do so; and how the feedback may relate to other modules/assessments. It may also be as simple as the students are not willing to try to use the feedback they receive (Winstone et.al., 2017).

As mentioned, to implement the feedback students receive, they need to be able to understand and interpret it (Sadler, 2010). This can also be referred to as the student's 'feedback literacy'. This involves requesting feedback, creating, and implementing feedback, as well as making judgements on academic work (Carless & Boud, 2018).

3.2 Feedback in Large Classes

In order to facilitate student feedback literacy development in a large class context, teachers need to have the necessary knowledge and pedagogic skill to implement and practise effective feedback processes. They must also have positive attitudes and dispositions towards student learning and provide opportunities for feedback training. This also lessens the practical challenges involved in feedback processes that arise with large group numbers (Carless &Winstone, 2020, Winstone & Carless, 2019).

It is important to consider the development of the student's self-regulated learning skills in relation to feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Students need to feel motivated and a sense of ownership over the assessment process (Orsmond & Merry, 2011). This also links with socio-constructivist views of learning where the students are active in their learning and the teacher with feedback acts as a facilitator or guide (Thurlings et al., 2013). Students also require the time to implement the given feedback, for example, before the final submission for the module (Carless, 2020).

Feedback also needs to be more than just a positive or negative comment. It should include an explanation for the mark given, details on what was done well, identify weakness and suggestions on how to amend these - this is not always possible given the demands of a large class (Sadler, 2010). We cannot assume the learner knows how to use the given information (Boud & Molloy, 2013). It is essential to consider how the student interprets the feedback, not just what was intended. This points us towards the idea of 'feedforward'. From the beginning of the learning/assessment process, students need to understand the requirements of the assignment task, how it will be assessed and the criteria or rubric that will be used (Sadler, 2010). An effective way to achieve this is through the facilitation of a peer-review activity.

3.2 Peer Review

For students to be truly feedback literate, they must both give and receive feedback (Molloy et al., 2020; Noble et al., 2020). This can improve writing performance (Huisman et al., 2018). When engaging in a peer review activity, students develop their understanding of the application of criteria, are exposed to different approaches and perspectives and compare it to their own writing (Nicol et al., 2014).

Students must try to go beyond judging their peers and give a detailed explanation as to why they are critiquing this way (Sadler, 2010). Students should have access to exemplars to aid awareness of what they are looking for and aid their feedback competence. Sadler (2010) sees four main targets for peer feedback (addressing the task, achieving purpose, explanation of judgement in reference to assessment criteria and crucially, advice for improvement).

Co-construction of learning happens through discussion, investigation, and shared interpretations (Price et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important that the teacher provides a secure environment, where students' self-esteem is safe, they are supported, and they feel others are being honest with them. It is the role of the teacher to model appropriate behaviours and language (Carless & Boud, 2018). The potential impact of feedback is enhanced through this relational pedagogy and approachable atmosphere (Price et al., 2011). Facilitating peer-review through user-friendly online software where students can remain anonymous both giving and receiving feedback create this atmosphere.

4. Empirical Methodology / Data

4.1 Key Findings Based on Student Survey (n=31)
- All students strongly agreed/agreed they learned from engaging in the peer review activity.

- 97% of students strongly agreed/agreed that they have a better understanding of feedback after engaging in the peer-review activity.

- 97% of students strongly agreed/agreed they now have a better understanding of the assessment rubric.

- 84% of students felt they learned more from reviewing peer's drafts than from the feedback they received.

- 93% of students now feel more confident asking for, accessing, and using feedback after engaging in the peer-review activity.

- 90% of students felt their final submission was better because they engaged in peer-review.

- 84% of students expressed a desire for more support with their feedback literacy.

- All students strongly agreed/agreed they would take part in a peer review activity again.

5. Analysis of/ Reflection on / Implications for Practice

In a large class context, facilitating peer review activities can be challenging and time consuming, however, using peer-review software allows the teacher to focus on the feedback training aspects of peer-review, rather than the organisational aspects. As students were already registered on the virtual learning environment (Moodle), Peermark automatically assigned two drafts to each student and presented the pre-set questions on each review for students to answer. Peermark also created a list for the lecturer to check who had submitted the drafts and who had completed their assigned reviews. Peer-review allowed all students to receive individualised feedback from two sources without excess time or stress on lecturers and students.

Assigning marks for participation in the peer-review activity enticed all students to engage; this was key to ensure all students gave and received reviews. Upon reflection, students expressed that they would have liked more feedback training using exemplars before reviewing and suggested reviewing in pairs or small groups to allow discussion of different ideas and perspectives in future peer-review activities in large group classes.

Feedback provision at the end of the semester was straightforward despite the large student number as the lecturer could refer to the assessment rubric knowing that students were

familiar with the grading criteria, language used, and that they had developed an awareness of the overall role of feedback for learning and development.

It is hoped that this intervention benefited students' learning experience in several ways. Students now have an awareness of grading rubrics and may take them into account across various modules over their four-year programme. Students have begun to develop their feedback literacy and understanding of the importance of feedback, its use and the terms commonly associated with feedback. This was most likely their first experience of peer review so has laid the foundations of critical thinking skills for future use.

It is also hoped that facilitating this activity at the mid-point of the semester aided students with entering the academic writing mind frame and encouraged them to read around the topics covered in class. By having a draft deadline date halfway through the semester, students were less likely to put off beginning their essay the last week of term. This gave them more time to develop arguments, read, draft pieces, and proofread before submission. They may also have been exposed to wider references and points of interest that they had not previously considered.

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