Enabling and valuing feedback literacies

Edd Pitt & Naomi Winstone

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Enabling and valuing feedback literacies

Edd Pitt and Naomi Winstone

There has been a clear shift in the representation of feedback in the scholarly literature. Whereas feedback was once framed as the information provided by teachers to their students on their work, recent years have witnessed greater recognition of the agentic role of students in feedback processes, in terms of their responsibilities to process and enact feedback to inform their learning (e.g. Boud and Molloy 2013; Winstone, Pitt, and Nash 2021). Whilst there is a growing appreciation that the true impact of feedback comes not from what teachers do but from what students do, this does not mean that the role of teachers is redundant. Feedback design is an important activity for teachers, thus creating environments in which learners can take on greater responsibility in feedback processes.

Alongside increasing emphasis on the role of students in feedback processes has been the development of a body of research exploring the skills and capacities of students that facilitate such involvement. Such skills and capacities are most commonly discussed as part of frameworks for ‘student feedback literacy’ (Sutton 2012; Carless and Boud 2018; Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020). The publication of these frameworks has instigated an explosion of conceptual and empirical work on the topic of feedback literacy, including ecological and sociomaterial perspectives (e.g. Chong 2021; Gravett 2022), the development of tools for its measurement (e.g. Zhan 2021; Song 2022; Yu, Di Zhang, and Liu 2022), and pedagogic approaches to the development of students’ feedback literacy (e.g. Winstone, Mathlin, and Nash 2019; Ketonen, Nieminen, and Hähkiöniemi 2020; Malecka, Boud, and Carless 2020; Fernández-Toro and Duensing 2021; Hoo, Deneen, and Boud 2022; Man, Kong, and Chau 2022; Winstone, Balloo, et al. 2022).

Approaches to the development of student feedback literacy recognise the important role of teachers in enabling students to develop their own understandings of feedback processes. In this way, then, teachers also hold skills and capacities related to their practice in feedback processes. Carless and Winstone (2020) built upon Carless and Boud (2018) framework for student feedback literacy to propose a conceptual framework for teacher feedback literacy. They defined teacher feedback literacy as ‘knowledge, expertise and dispositions to design feedback processes in ways which enable student uptake of feedback and seed the development of student feedback literacy’ (Carless and Winstone 2020, p. 4). They outlined three dimensions of teacher feedback literacy: design (planning curricula and assessment tasks such that students come to appreciate the purpose of feedback, build the capacity for evaluative judgement, and take responsibility for implementing feedback information) relational (showing emotional sensitivity and empathy in feedback processes, and building trust with students) and pragmatic (managing the tensions created by competing functions of feedback, making decisions about workload such that time is invested in feedback that is likely to have an impact, and managing the constraints whilst exploiting the affordances of the discipline).

The articles in this special issue take very different approaches to the concept of teacher feedback literacy; they highlight the importance of recognising complexity and the likely
existence of multiple teacher feedback literacies. Taken together, the articles shine light on the skills and capacities that comprise teacher feedback literacy, and provide insight into how teachers develop their understanding of effective feedback processes and how to support student learning through these activities. The articles also caution against simplistic notions of feedback literacy, and thus draw attention to the importance of wider contextual influences on teachers in this crucial area of academic work. In this way, then, the collective contributions of these articles align with the concepts of doing, being, becoming and belonging, as represented in the Occupational Perspective of Health framework (OPH; Wilcock 2002; Hitch, Pépin, and Stagnitti 2014). These four dimensions interact to influence engagement in professional activities (Ennals et al. 2016), and draw attention to the importance of roles and responsibilities, identity, as well as the influence of complex systems on these factors (e.g. Lopes and Calapez 2012). We now turn to a discussion of the articles in this special issue, organised loosely against the processes of doing, being, becoming and belonging.

Teacher feedback literacy: Doing

The concept of doing represents the roles and responsibilities associated with a particular professional activity. Carless and Winstone’s conceptual framework for teacher feedback literacy, whilst informed by relevant areas of the literature, was not empirically derived. In contrast, Boud and Dawson’s (this issue) data-driven Teacher Feedback Literacy Competency Framework is an important contribution to the literature. They recognise that not all teachers have the same roles and responsibilities in feedback, and hence distinguish three levels of practice on this basis. Clearly, those fulfilling roles and responsibilities at the macro level (programme design and development) need to operate in different ways to those acting at the meso (course module/unit design and implementation) and micro (feedback relating to individual student assignments) levels. The sheer number of individual competences identified through their analysis demonstrates the complexity of feedback processes that teachers need to navigate; for example, designing feedback processes, managing pressures and tensions, evaluating and developing processes, and making principled use of technology. An indication of the roles and responsibilities in feedback processes is also provided by Esterhazy, de Lange and Damşa (this issue). They propose that teacher feedback literacies consist of three temporally defined processes: planning future feedback encounters; enacting present feedback encounters; and reflecting on past feedback encounters.

The UK Professional Standards Framework for teachers in higher education (UKPSF; Advance HE 2022) is brief to say the least when it comes to articulating the skills and capacities needed for effective practice, simply stating that teachers should be able to ‘assess and give feedback to learners’. Frameworks such as those presented by Boud and Dawson and Estherhazy et al. could be useful tools for framing professional development in higher education not just by articulating important dimensions of practice, but also by stimulating reflection and dialogue. For example, in Boud and Dawson’s contribution, the distinction between different types of roles and responsibilities stands to avoid frameworks for teacher feedback literacy being used as a simple checklist, which Tai et al. (this issue) caution against. Instead, using the framework to inform a questioning approach may be valuable, inviting teachers to address questions such as: what are my roles and responsibilities in feedback processes, and how can I negotiate shared responsibilities with my students? What is and is not under my control? Where and what are opportunities for design, dialogue, ongoing discussion? How will I know whether the feedback environment has been effective?

Teacher feedback literacy: Being

Being represents the identities we hold in relation to professional activities, and the need to be able to act in ways that align with our identities and values (Wilcock 2002). For teachers
navigating complex ecosystems of practice, they are likely to be exposed to colleagues, students and managers with competing conceptions of feedback, all of which can create challenges for their sense of identity in relation to their role in feedback processes. Many of the articles in this issue acknowledge such challenges of working alongside others who think differently about feedback (Esterhazy et al. this issue); in particular, there is a strong awareness that the kinds of feedback approaches that would be indicative of teacher feedback literacy, where students are positioned actively, can contradict dominant transmission-oriented models of feedback. Thus, an important part of being in teacher feedback literacy is to recognise one’s role as more than just ‘information provider’ (Deneen and Hoo, this issue; Tielemens et al., this issue). This can be challenging for teachers when student evaluations carry heavy weight in career progression decisions; as a result, teachers may feel pressured to focus on approaches to feedback that are most likely to lead to student satisfaction (Tai et al., this issue), rather than enacting their own beliefs about what is valuable in terms of supporting student learning through feedback.

Many articles in this issue stress the importance of shared responsibilities with students in teacher feedback literacy. By sharing responsibilities in feedback processes, teachers cede the role as sole provider of feedback information, whilst students take on a much more active role in the process (Winstone, Pitt, and Nash 2021). Adjusting one’s identity in a model of responsibility sharing is pertinent to the dimension of being. For example, Deneen and Hoo (this issue) argue that through establishing partnerships with students to address power imbalances, constructive dialogues between teachers and students should develop. This is further emphasised in Tai et al (this issue) who suggest that shared dialogue in feedback processes can promote relational connections, whereby teachers enable students to use dialogue as a stimulus for enacting feedback information in subsequent work. Approaches such as these seek to move beyond fixed roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’; such an identity shift may cause tension or discomfort for those who are used to inhabiting a well-rehearsed role in feedback processes.

Teacher feedback literacy: Becoming and belonging

In considering the development of feedback literacies, and processes of becoming, Esterhazy et al. (this issue) draw a parallel with the development of teacher assessment literacy (Xu and Brown 2016), where it is suggested that these skills and competences can be developed through individual processes such as reflection, or collective learning activities where teaching communities learn and develop through interaction and collaboration. The latter approach resonates with the concept of belonging in occupational activities, where being part of a learning or practice community provides the environment where meaningful development can occur. The articles in this issue look beyond more simplistic (and perhaps outdated) professional development courses as ways of developing teacher feedback literacy; instead, there is clear recognition of the more complex, interwoven development of approaches to feedback within professional communities.

For example, Esterhazy et al. (this issue) describe peer mentoring meetings as a means to establish learning communities for teachers to discuss and share feedback experiences. In the context of feedback in doctoral supervision, they describe peer mentoring meetings as a stimulus for shared exploration, collective reflection, and questioning as participants explored challenges in practice. This discursive interplay facilitated the development of plans for approaching future interactions with students to offer productive feedback episodes, and supported the development of collective feedback literacies amongst the members of the learning community. Crucially, the development of feedback literacies is likely to occur in communities that are not just composed of educators: teachers and students are likely to learn with and from each other within the feedback ecosystem.
Entanglement of student and teacher feedback literacies

In their 2020 conceptualisation of teacher feedback literacy, Carless and Winstone suggested that there is likely to be an important interaction between teacher and student feedback literacy, whereby the ways in which teachers design feedback processes (in turn informed by their own feedback literacies) can enable the development of more sophisticated feedback practices in their students. The symbiosis of student and teacher feedback literacies is a theme discussed in many articles in this special issue. For example, in their article, Boud and Dawson (this issue) incorporate the development of student feedback literacy in their competency framework, where they recognise the value of teachers engaging in meaningful discussions with students about feedback, raising students’ confidence in their recipience skills. They also discuss the need for teachers to recognise the importance of student feedback literacy, and to understand their critical role in its development. This highlights the need to understand more about the entanglement of feedback literacies across all actors in feedback processes through further empirical and conceptual work.

Across the articles in this issue, we see indications of the potential mechanisms via which teachers enable the development of feedback literacy in their students, such as scaffolding, structured interactions and dialogue. For example, Heron et al. (this issue) argue that feedback talk in classroom contexts is an important vehicle for the development of student understanding. In classroom discussions, teachers can stimulate student learning through probing, questioning and providing clarification. Thus, a crucial part of teacher and student feedback literacies involves coming to recognise the everyday discourse within classrooms for its potential as feedback interactions. Similarly, Esterhazy et al. (this issue) argue for the importance of the everyday practices in which teachers and students engage, such as planning for future feedback situations, enacting feedback and reflecting on past feedback encounters. Such practices are woven into the natural rhythms, cycles and spirals in which students and teachers participate. By engaging in discussion, teachers and students refine understandings of feedback with a shared goal of improving the practice (Tai et al, this issue).

The entanglement of teacher and student feedback literacies is aligned with notions of shared responsibility in the article by De Kleijn (this issue). Drawing upon Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach to learning, she recognises the importance of interaction between teachers and students in developing feedback literacies in tandem. Central to De Kleijn’s framework is the concept of teachers scaffolding students’ involvement in feedback interactions. This is an important contribution because it offers practical guidance as to how student and teacher feedback literacies can develop together. Similarly, Tielemans et al. (this issue) discuss interprofessional feedback dialogues in the context of health professions education, where supervisor-guided dialogic feedback interactions are central to students’ learning through feedback. Their framework for interprofessional feedback dialogues has the potential to disrupt common power hierarchies in feedback conversations, such that more junior professionals are enabled to feel more confident in engaging in feedback interactions with more senior staff.

In their article, Deneen and Hoo (this issue) describe the potential of an intervention designed to support students to engage in peer feedback and self-evaluation to develop feedback literacies. They describe teachers as ‘orchestrators of learning and literacy’ (p.2); for example, through teachers providing ‘meta-feedback’ on students’ peer feedback, students are able to hone their skills in feedback interactions. They demonstrate that what we take as evidence of the effectiveness of feedback processes is also indicative of the entanglement of student and teacher feedback literacies; they argue that if students demonstrate practices indicative of feedback literacy, this is likely to be evidence that teachers have designed the learning environment in ways reflective of teacher feedback literacy.

The interrelationship of teachers and students in the feedback literacy landscape, where development occurs through complex interactions, demonstrates that teacher feedback literacy
cannot just be about teachers. Teachers enact their practice in complex systems, and the nature of these systems both enables and constrains the development of practice.

**From individuals to systems**

The complex, entangled nature of feedback ecosystems creates challenges for defining and creating prescriptive models for the development of teacher feedback literacy. Indeed, Tai et al. (this issue) use a sociomaterial lens to argue for the importance of the situational nature of teacher feedback literacies. Importantly, teachers’ agency in the design and enactment of feedback processes is subject to contextual constraints; thus, merely possessing the relevant knowledge that could inform the design of effective feedback processes is not enough. Tools and systems that are commonly utilised in feedback processes (e.g. Learning Management Systems or Virtual Learning Environments) place constraints on how feedback processes can and cannot be operationalised, and institutional policies and procedures also give prominence to and minimise certain practices. Whilst the environment and its affordances are likely to facilitate the development of literacies, Tai et al. (this issue) draw attention to the possibility that literacies themselves play an important role in enabling feedback processes to be effective despite institutional structures and constraints.

The socio-political landscape also enables and constrains practice. The challenges of precarity and casualisation in academia influence the work surrounding feedback; for example, where comments are provided by graduate teaching assistants and sessional staff. The gaze of external accountability, for example through the external examining system in UK higher education, can put pressure on teachers to provide defensible comments, rather than support student learning through feedback (Winstone and Carless 2021). The dominance of metrics, student evaluations and satisfaction surveys may well promote and reward practices that misalign with elements of teacher feedback literacy, such as promoting a focus on what is provided to students as feedback, rather than their roles in generating, making sense of and using feedback to support their learning. In their article, Boud and Dawson (this issue) argue that teachers may well hold more sophisticated understandings of feedback, but not practice in alignment with these understandings, as a result of constraints imposed by rigid policy requirements or the dominant academic culture in their environment.

If teacher feedback literacy is important in facilitating student outcomes, then institutional policies and procedures need to value, enable and reward development in this area of academic practice. How are teachers given opportunities to engage in dialogue around their feedback practices, to attend training events or engage with scholarship? Rather than seeing limited feedback literacy as a deficit within teachers themselves, we should instead consider the extent to which the culture and working environment has afforded time and space to engage meaningfully in feedback activities.

This leads us to look beyond the feedback literacies of students, teachers, or even students and teachers in partnership, towards what we term **systemic feedback literacies**. We use this term to represent the extent to which the environment, or system, supports and enables effective feedback processes to develop and flourish. This is likely influenced by the nature of the feedback culture (e.g. Winstone and Boud 2019; Watling, Ajjawi, and Bearman 2020; Pitt and Carless 2021; Winstone 2022) and the shared values and beliefs held within a particular context. Features of feedback literacies at the level of the system could include:

- the positioning of feedback processes within policy and practice as central to student learning, personal development and confidence
- the creation of opportunities for teachers and students to construct shared understandings of the value and purpose of feedback in the context of their own disciplines
• creating an environment where the effectiveness of feedback processes is positioned as a shared responsibility between students and teachers, rather than being the sole responsibility of teachers
• recognition of the time and emotional work that goes into feedback processes, resisting the commodification of feedback through assigning fixed amounts of time to the activity
• recognition of the value of a wide range of evidence sources that signify the effectiveness of feedback processes, alongside resistance to focusing on simplistic measures such as student evaluation instruments
• giving teachers time and space to engage with scholarship and participate in dialogue to open up new ideas about how feedback processes can and should be developed

What might enable the development and maintenance of such systemic feedback literacies? First, we argue that the extent to which teachers and students are given opportunities to engage in development activities, and to learn through mutual discussion around feedback processes, is important. Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education are one way in which systemic feedback literacies can be nurtured, by modelling to course participants those collaborative approaches to feedback processes that have the potential to develop feedback literacies in tandem. For more experienced teachers who may not engage so readily with development opportunities (Brew, Boud, and Namgung 2011), a culture that promotes and rewards development, alongside appropriate resourcing, is critical. Recognition of the workload associated with effective feedback processes is also important. The sheer complexity of feedback processes and the varying roles and responsibilities of teachers should lead to renewed recognition of the time and space needed for feedback to fulfil its learning potential.

Many teachers possess intrinsic motivation to develop their practice and to seek to enhance learning opportunities for their students (Winstone 2017). However, incentives are important, not least in conveying the value of such approaches. As argued by Brownell and Tanner (2012, p. 340), ‘There needs to be an incentive for faculty to modify their pedagogical approach; even though time is necessary, time alone is likely not sufficient for widespread change to occur’. One such incentive might include rewarding the development of feedback processes through career advancement opportunities such as promotion, where many institutions’ criteria for promotion recognise engagement in educational scholarship and development (Macfarlane 2011; Smith and Walker 2021). Crucial to the success of this approach is ensuring that criteria are aligned with the engagement in the process of developing practice, rather than metrics such as teaching evaluations that reward success rather than a willingness to explore the improvement of student learning outcomes. Other more innovative approaches are evident in the literature, for example, in a Swedish university where staff who demonstrate the development of their practice can apply to be admitted to a ‘pedagogical academy’, whereby they receive a pay rise and additional funding for their work (Andersson and Roxå 2004).

Boud and Dawson (this issue) argue that strong and effective leadership, at the micro, meso and macro levels are critical in the development of systemic feedback literacies. A collaborative approach to innovation in feedback processes is likely to be facilitated by leaders who operate a distributed approach to leadership and who empower teachers to innovate and experiment, safe in the knowledge that their efforts will be appreciated and rewarded (Bolden 2011). The nature of the organisational climate also plays an important role in enabling the development of systemic feedback literacies. The culture and climate need to promote and value risk-taking and recognise that new approaches rarely have optimum effects immediately. If innovation and experimentation are seen as risky, we cannot expect teachers to move beyond the status quo (Le Fevre 2014).

The development of systemic feedback literacies will likely be enabled where policy and process at the level of the institution position feedback as a partnership between teachers and
students, and where students play active rather than passive roles. In an analysis of strategic
documentation from 134 UK universities (learning and teaching strategies and Teaching
Excellence Framework submissions), Winstone (2022) demonstrated that students are commonly
positioned as playing a passive role in feedback processes (i.e. to receive feedback information
that has been provided by their teachers), both linguistically and conceptually. Winstone argues
that strategic documentation is powerful in its influence on practice; positioning teachers and
students on either side of this kind of transactional approach to feedback is likely to send the
message that this is the approach that is valued. In this way, then, policy and process docu-
mentation has the power to shape practice in ways that are either more or less aligned with
systemic feedback literacy, depending on their framing.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue have demonstrated that feedback processes are enacted and
experienced in complex, nuanced ways. It makes little sense to talk about a ‘feedback literate’
teacher, because the educational landscape of higher education is constantly changing, and
teachers continuously adapt to the changing demands of the environment. This was clearly
demonstrated when teachers were required to change their approaches to assessment and
feedback at a very quick pace in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Pitt and Quinlan 2021).
No matter how experienced or ‘effective’ a teacher was in their engagement in feedback pro-
cesses prior to the pandemic, the playing field was levelled, and educators and students had
to learn together how to adapt and change practices in response to the changing national and
international situation.

We believe that an important direction for future research in the area of feedback literacies
is to understand the complex interplay through which teacher and student feedback literacies
develop symbiotically. However, even more important is to look beyond just teacher and
student feedback literacies to consider feedback literacy at the systemic level, and how well
the system in which students and teachers are situated enables effective feedback processes
to flourish. It is important for future research on feedback literacies to explore the features
of systemic feedback literacy and test the impact of different types of environments and
feedback cultures on the ways in which feedback processes and interactions evolve in prac-
tice. Whilst there is no single ‘effective’ feedback approach, the decisions that teachers make
and the ways in which they engage in feedback encounters with their students have the
power to influence students’ own feedback literacies, and their educational and professional
outcomes. In turn, it is features of the system in which teachers and their students are sit-
uated that have the power to enable or constrain those activities that constitute impactful
feedback.

ORCID

Edd Pitt http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7475-0299
Naomi Winstone http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8157-8274

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