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Agency, Praise, Literacy or Mindset:

The Conundrum of Low Achievement and Feedback for Learning

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Abstract

The literature on improving student engagement with assessment and feedback has a tendency to treat all students as if they are the same. Students with lower levels of attainment are generally underrepresented within empirical studies and their feedback behaviours are less well understood. The recent drive to improve student assessment and feedback literacy and the move from 'feedback' being information about a task to being a process of understanding and using performance information is a larger conceptual leap for some students than others. In this paper, we consider issues surrounding the transition to new modes of feedback, focussing on what is needed for those who find study difficult and persistently are disappointed by their levels of attainment, to benefit from and take advantage of our feedback pedagogies. We examine literature advocating strategies such as increasing agency, using praise, developing feedback literacy and cultivating a growth mind-set. We argue that students who underachieve may benefit from strong relationships with educators and peers; exposure to feedback rich, low stakes environments, which permit repeated integrations of practice and feedback and building feedback literacy through peer assessment activities.

Introduction

Assessment and feedback in tertiary education differs from high school. Many university educators expect students to instantly perform critical thinking tasks with a high degree of independence, which for some students present a very challenging transition (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The literature suggests that students are offered far more direction and support within pre higher education environments than they might experience in higher education (Sambell and Hubbard, 2004; Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011). Students may have been enculturated into a particular way of thinking and knowing, which at times may be at odds with how they will be taught at university. For some, this problem may not be resolved throughout their degree, as they make do by just 'getting by'. While 'scraping past' has always presented challenges, these problems may be compounded by the move from traditional forms of assessment towards ones that rely on the learner taking increased responsibility for their own learning.

While this is a familiar story to educators, it is worth thinking about what this must feel like from a student perspective. For example, consider "John" who arrives at University feeling excited but also nervous and anxious about what to expect from his new programme of study. John found school difficult and became used to seeking out his teachers and running his ideas by them and then getting multiple comments on drafts before reworking based on these corrections. John often received the same sorts of comments on his written work despite trying hard all of the time. Consequently, John believes that whatever he does things don't change and he always performs the same time after time. In his first assignment at university, the tutors indicate his work is of low standard. He doesn't know what to do. He worries that he can't do anything at all. "John" provides an illustration of what it must feel like to be reliant on others' views but without any notion of how to change these views. This experience may be most obvious with respect to first year school-leavers but also applies to mature-age students, and those who are in later years of their university education. This paper explores what new concepts of feedback in higher education means for students like this.

In relation to feedback, Butler and Winnie (1995) suggest that "the most effective students … generate internal feedback by monitoring their performance against self-generated or given criteria" (p. 24). Nicol (2009) argues that when entering university students already possess the ability to self-regulate. However, can we be sure that such assertions apply to all students? What about students who continually struggle to meet their own aspirations of higher grades? Students who underperform are generally poorly represented within empirical studies and are therefore less well understood (Orsmond & Merry, 2009).

Defining low achievement is complex. Grades themselves may reflect structural or institutional bias (Mountford-Zimdars, Sanders, Moore, Sabri, Jones & Higham, 2017). Reasons for failure or low achievement may relate to students' social and cultural capital or psychosocial and identity factors (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2017); we do not want to suggest that those with lower grades are fundamentally different or incapable. Nor do we wish to stigmatise low achievement; after all the purpose of education is to improve student learning, not to classify it. However, we wish to enhance feedback and assessment experiences for those students who do not find higher education tasks easy and are persistently disappointed by their levels of attainment, whether it is measured by grades or other criteria.

In their seminal paper on the nature of effective feedback, Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that feedback will initiate three key questions in students, where am I going? how am I going? where do I go next? Central to the effective element within this conception of feedback is the degree to which the student is able to successfully address these key questions through processing, understanding and regulating their emotional reactions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Hattie and Donoghue (2016) argue that students can be taught how to understand assessment tasks and associated assessment strategies, which will help them to make their own evaluative judgments without external feedback. This exposure can develop their self-regulatory behaviour and is accelerated by students increasing their effort and approaching more challenging tasks than they were formerly used to (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). On the other hand, Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest that those who receive lower grades are more dependent upon the support structures provided by the lecturer for feedback. Çakir,

Korkmaz, Bacanak, & Arslan (2016) argue that students with lower levels of self-regulation are more dependent on feedback from lecturers but they are less able to use it productively. However, as Orsmond and Merry (2009) argue, if lecturers attempt to help lower achievers by providing more and more feedback information, this only serves to limit student capacity to develop self-regulation and feedback-seeking behaviours. These students may not only struggle to use feedback, but also struggle to regulate their learning and identify strategies to better use feedback (Orsmond & Merry, 2009).

A recent shift in assessment and feedback literature emphasises the agency of the learners (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Parker, 2017; Boud & Molloy, 2013). Fundamental to Boud and Molloy's proposal of "Feedback Mark 2" is a shift from passive students to responsive students and for feedback to become less mechanistic and more constructive. In this model, learners no longer wait for lecturer driven, one-way transmission of feedback, rather they become constructors of their own understanding and needs, seeking feedback from multiple sources within a dialogic framework (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This drive towards a more dialogic feedback framework was in part due to the limitations of previous conceptions of feedback, where students rely only on others (mainly their lecturers) to identify weaknesses and ways of improvement. However, the literature, which describes student transition to higher education, suggest that students usually come from environments, which were prescribed, formulaic, and rather monologic (Winstone & Bretton, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that students are set in their learning ways because of their previous experiences. The move from 'feedback' being information about a task to being a process of understanding and using performance information is a large conceptual leap. We think we need to pay more attention to what the shift towards more dialogic feedback demands of students.

Bloxham (2009) suggests assessment within higher education is often designed around lecturers' disciplinary conceptions, cultural norms and expectations, and not the students'. Arguably, lecturers have become so used to ways of knowing within their discipline, it may be difficult for students to be on the same page especially in the early stages of University. Moreover, Boud and Molloy (2013) note: "... Learners rarely enter courses prepared for [new forms of working with feedback], so there is a *need to help develop their capacity, and disposition*, to operate effectively to seek and utilise feedback. (italics ours)" (p.704). Students at all stages of their degree may need some level of support to adjust to the demands of their environment both in terms of content and process.

To this end, there are calls to improve student feedback and assessment literacy. Carless and Boud (2018) conceptualise feedback literacy as an enabler; it allows students to appreciate feedback, make judgements about their work and that of others and manage their emotional responses. Moreover, successful assessment literacy development requires consistent opportunities for students to actively engage over time with explicit and implicit expectations within assessments (Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Handley & Bryant, 2012). One way to achieve this is through a dialogue between educators and students surrounding how they interpret and make meaning of specific assessment criteria (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006 and Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). For example, group marking of exemplars alongside individual mark and

share activities aligned to the assessment criteria, may also help to develop a student's assessment literacy.

The literature on improving student engagement with assessment and feedback has a tendency to treat all students as if they were the same, while they have very different histories, capabilities and expectations. As educators who have incorporated many of these contemporary notions of feedback into our teaching, we have observed that while it benefits many, those students who are already bewildered can become deeply 'lost'. This paper considers the issue of transitions to new modes of feedback, focussing on what is needed for all students to benefit from or to take advantage of our feedback pedagogies.

Low achievement and feedback

Transition to higher education may be particularly challenging for all students, because their sense of self may be characterised by a continual feeling of uncertainty that renders them fragile (Barnett, 2007). Barnett argues that the majority of students are in a 'state of anxiety' when they are learning and that assessment clearly proliferates such feelings. While there is some dispute over Barnett's labelling all students as 'fragile' (p.28), students with lower grades appear to be in position of vulnerability, with Barnett (2007) arguing that they will have negative emotional responses.

Grades have a significant role to play in this discussion. Grades are often overlooked within educator discourse, due to their perceived negative effect and furtherance of more strategic or even surface learning approaches. However, the university system defines students by their formal achievement as described by grades, rather than their successful grasp of concepts. There is no reason to presume that students themselves would see this situation any differently. In this regard, Sutton and Gill (2010) have argued that the "grade is the prism through which feedback is read" (p. 7). Butler (1988) reported that for those receiving poor marks, the grade accompanied by feedback could significantly reduce their interest in executing tasks. Lipnevich and Smith (2008) found that when students received a personally satisfactory grade their work mastery motivation and effort was reduced. More recently, Pitt and Norton (2017) and Pitt (2017) have argued that grade expectation can significantly influence how feedback is interpreted, processed and subsequently utilised. A student who receives what they interpret, as a poor grade will not always react negatively, similarly if they receive a good grade they will not always react positively (Pitt, 2017).

The main point is that grades are significant pieces of performance information that affect students. One of the consequences of repeatedly receiving low grades is that students may begin to characterise themselves as incapable of responding to or enacting feedback. This seems a likely explanation for students who are represented in research data with maladaptive responses to feedback. In Pitt and Norton's (2017) study, a student notes: "If I see a negative comment I blank it out of my mind instead of maybe looking over it and going right, that's what I needed to actually do. I try and block them, yeah, instead of looking at them and go right, that's getting sorted and that's getting improved." (p. 504)

Traditionally, educators have understood students' lack of capability in managing feedback to be explained by their lack of academic skill proficiency. This positions students within a

framework where correctional sentence level feedback (Bean, 2011) (e.g. grammar, spelling development and academic writing feedback such as paragraph construction and argument building) are *provided* to them (Sutton, 2012). Such an approach reflects a belief that the students' lack of progress can be overcome by addressing their technical deficiencies. However, as suggested above, the problem is far more complex and there is more to using feedback than correcting sentence-level errors. The remainder of this article will now discuss four key ideas; agency, praise, feedback literacy and growth mind-set in relation to how feedback may help students who find higher education tasks difficult but are persistently disappointed by their attainment.

Is designing for student agency the answer?

The underlying assumption in newer conceptions of feedback is that in order to develop independence, students require agency over their own learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013). However, what is agency? A student can be considered agentic when they "exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their … identities" (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013, p. 62). Designing assessments that allow students to exert influence, make choices and take stances, does not necessarily mean that they will learn. Indeed, as Winstone et al., (2017) note, a student may come to say, "'…[I] just feel like I kind of do my essays a certain way now and I don't really know how to get out of that. Even if they give you pointers, I'll still end up…I'll still end up doing it in the same way" (p. 2035). Indeed, Harris, Brown and Dargusch (2018) describe how students exert their agency by resisting a learning focus. Further, as Vehviläinen (2009) reported, students show a subdued resistance to the critical feedback comments by teachers during a supervision meeting. The students are exercising their agentic right, but whether they are actually learning is questionable.

Therefore, agency is important, but students must *want* to improve their learning as well. Winstone et al., (2017) have characterised this as 'volition'. So while, educators can provide the opportunity for students to influence their own learning (that is, exercise their agency), only students can provide the desire to learn. Gilber, Whitelock and Gale (2011) from a constructivist perspective would argue that lecturers need to create learning environments that tailor feedback to the student's strengths and requirements. This however does not automatically result in positive engagement by all students (Handley, Price & Millar, 2008). Therefore, we need to promote volition, which naturally brings us to motivation.

Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that motivation is based on feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness. These three elements may provide insight in understanding how to help those who wish to improve but don't find university easy (Bearman, Castanelli & Denniston, 2018). In particular, it suggests that opportunity for agency is not enough. Students with low self-efficacy, who do not feel connected to their units, courses, cohort and lecturers, may not feel sufficiently motivated to direct their attention to changing their learning/study approaches [Bearman et al., 2018]. There is potentially a vicious cycle at play here for those receiving lower grades. Bandura (1997) suggests that efficacy is involved in individuals' selection of the challenges they may embark, their effort expenditure during the task and how likely they are to persist with said task if things do not go to plan. In other words, self-

efficacy beliefs may mediate an individual's propensity to overcome adversity or challenge, directing them to deploy more effort and commitment to the assessment task (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). When presented with assessment and feedback situations, which are challenging, low self-efficacy may be reinforced, meaning students hold on to their familiar, but maladaptive learning practices. Whilst feelings of self-doubt have been shown to provide the motivation for learning in some situations, they can also obstruct the use of previously held study skills as stress can divert the student's attention towards fear of failure (Bandura, 1986).

Is praise the answer?

Praise is not always recognised as a primary source of feedback and not the most overt in nature when compared to written feedback comments. Baumeister, Hutton and Cairns (1990) define praise as "favourable interpersonal feedback" (p. 131). Dev (1997) has argued that praise can foster students' self-esteem, motivation and subsequent performance. Such praise arguably could serve to positively affect perceptions of those who constantly receive lower grades and written feedback information with a negative tone. However, it may be naive to accept this simplistic effectual nuance without considering the mechanisms behind the potential effect of praise on students' performance. Whilst support from some researchers (Dev, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) is highlighted in the literature, the effect size is not always strong (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Further, the age group that such research has been carried out with varies and thus impinges on the effect size findings across the age range (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). We have already outlined in this paper that students' self-efficacy within a feedback framework requires consideration. The student's belief in their capability to execute the course of actions required to achieve desired outcomes is reinforced by their personal achievements (Bandura, 1997). Arguably receiving praise could increase students' capacity to believe in their own ability to succeed and therefore increase their self-efficacy level and subsequently academic achievement.

The positive behavioural reaction to receiving positively framed praise has been linked with increase in motivation and subsequent goal setting (Ilies & Judge, 2005). In line with such research, Gray's (1990) behavioural motivation theory could be identified as an explanation for such an occurrence. Gray (1990) argued that the environment has a large effect upon an individual's affective state, which in turn manipulates behavioural motivation. To this end, the increased positive feelings within the individual (after receiving positive praise) subsequently increase that individual's performance outlook and subsequent effort deployment and persistence. Ilies and Judge's (2005) research demonstrates that the relationship between feedback and the setting of future goals by an individual can be explained by their affective reactions to praise feedback. A cautionary note must however be made in relation to where the praise is coming from. Investigating younger children's reactions to positive praise behaviour, Henderlong and Lepper (2002) reported that when the teacher was giving praise to students they would attend to the learning task in order to please the teacher. However, when the teacher was not present this behaviour ceased. This would suggest the children were externally motivated by the praise and that the after effects alluded to in the research by Dev (1997) and Pintrich and Schunk (2002) do not seem to have any

longevity. This seems to be an interesting factor to consider, especially if we appreciate that the contact time a student in higher education will experience during their academic calendar is minimal. Clearly, the after effects of praise, framed in both positive and negative terms, needs to be considered.

The negative effects of praise have also been discussed within the literature. Baumeister et al., (1990) argued that praise can have both a positive and negative effect upon an individual's performance. Interestingly their research broke skills down into two categories; effort tasks and skilled tasks. In the effort task positive feedback improved performance, however in the skilled task it had a negative effect. Within this skill task, it was also reported that both task relevant and task irrelevant praise had the same result of decreased performance. To explain such a finding Baumeister et al., (1990) argue that the praise may have negatively affected the individuals' cognitive processing ability, resulting in them attending to personal concerns about their ability rather than attending to the task in hand. This perhaps is most applicable to feedback in higher education when students are writing draft essays. Submitting a draft to a lecturer may have an effect if the praise they receive calls them to question their own ability and therefore subsequently effects their cognitive processing for the final submission. Although praise has been researched across many different environments and with differing age groups, it still seems apparent that there is a lack of conclusive evidence in relation to its effects upon motivation and behavioural reaction. As such, this area becomes even more interesting and warrants further investigation if we appreciate the most recent findings of Lipnevich and Smith (2008) that students receiving praise reported lower levels of motivation than students receiving no praise at all. This would arguably seem counter intuitive to most educators and perhaps lead them to question whether giving praise is helpful to those with lower levels of attainment.

Is feedback literacy the answer?
Alongside new modes of feedback, several authors have proposed the concept of "feedback literacy" (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sutton, 2012). There is a suggestion that the development of students' feedback literacy will enable them to process and interpret performance information in a measured and sustainable manner. Further, if the students' feedback literacy is suitably developed then they will be more disposed to accessing and utilising feedback regardless of performance outcomes. In their 2018 paper, Carless and Boud focus mostly on the 'practical challenge' of feedback literacy; managing cognitive and affective responses. Carless and Boud (2018) suggest that students need to be able to appreciate and understand the role of feedback; they should be able to make judgements about the quality of their work and those of others; and they should be able to manage their emotions. These together, allow 'feedback literate' students to take action on feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). However, in the case of low achievement, it is worth considering two further challenges. Sutton (2012) describes feedback literacy as "a complex process which presents learners with epistemological, ontological and practical challenges" (p. 39). An epistemological dimension to feedback literacy suggests students need to be academically engaged to the point whereby they are procuring and understanding disciplinary knowledge. An ontological dimension suggests students must invest in an academic identity. This complicates matters; extensive

research indicates that low attainment is associated with those students who are not invested in an academic identity (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017).

Carless and Boud (2018) suggest a number of ways that lecturers can help students to become feedback literate by creating opportunities in their curricula. One suggestion is peer feedback, which has in more recent times gained traction within the assessment and feedback for learning literature. Despite broad support for the tenants of peer feedback, there is relatively little information about the effect on students who are finding the work difficult. As we have argued within this paper, such students do not necessarily easily slot into many of the theories or conceptions that have been suggested within the assessment and feedback literature thus far. Peer feedback requires students to have a developed level of critical assessment skills in order to provide meaningful and useful feedback on peers' work. As with feedback literacy, this is problematic for those who find it difficult to grasp course content, as they by definition do not always possess the requisite disciplinary knowledge or evaluative judgement skills. Indeed, in their self-report study Davies (2006) noted that students with lower levels of attainment did not feel they possessed critical skills as in the main they had not done this before. This is an important consideration for all students regardless of their achievement status and if peer feedback is to be used to develop student's feedback literacy, they will need multiple experiences. Students with lower grades however may need longer to develop the necessary skills and knowledge in order to engage with, and benefit from, peer feedback. If these students are helped to successfully engage with peer feedback, through scaffolded tasks and multiple opportunities, their grades can be improved earlier in their university studies than students with higher grades (Li, 2011). Such gains can be attributed to the collaborative learning environment that peer feedback promotes. This was especially demonstrated in Webb, Nemer, Chizhik and Sugrue's (1997) study whereby those with lower grades who were put into peer feedback groups with those with higher grades performed better than those with lower grades who were not grouped with those with higher grades. In these situations, we do need to be mindful of what Davies (2006) acknowledged that those with high grades may be more adept at offering critical comments. This presents a challenge for the educator who wishes to use peer feedback specifically to assist those who are having difficulty with the work. Research has shown it can provide positive benefit to them in the early stages of learning. The degree to which this benefit is sustainable over a longer period when the complexity and deepness of critical feedback increases needs to be investigated.

Is growth mindset the answer?

Dweck (2002) coined the term "growth mind-set", referring to those who interpret their intelligence as something that can be developed through learning opportunities and experiences. Conversely, those with a more "fixed mind-set" believe that their intelligence cannot be considerably advanced through learning opportunities and experiences. This has apparent implications for university student behaviour, especially if we consider low achievement. Dweck's (2002) mind-set theory would purport that a student holding a fixed mind-set, who then underachieves, may be devastated by the setback or interpret a failed assessment as reflecting them as a failure. If a student who receives low grades or other

negative appraisals of their work operationalises such viewpoints in relation to the assessment task, their ability conceptions may therefore play a restrictive and diminishing role. This is problematic as it influences the way the student understands their ability level in future assessment opportunities. They may for instance believe that the task they were completing was perhaps too hard for their ability level and that is why they failed it. Psychologically this has important implications for students if their viewpoints about their own ability and performance are already diminished and they consistently receive feedback and grades, which seem to reinforce this viewpoint. For example, Dweck (2002) argues that students with a fixed mind-set may avoid future challenging situations that may expose their weaknesses or intelligence deficiencies. In relation to the potential for feedback to initiate growth, students with a fixed mind-set may disregard this opportunity due to their increased focus upon grade outcome and the desire to avoid situation where failure may be possible (Gibbs & Simpson 2004). Further, they may pursue poor study behaviours, lack the ability to self-assess and struggle to process and utilise feedback (Mega, Ronconi & De Beni, 2014).

Comparatively, students who have a growth mind-set interpret feedback has having a positive impact on their learning (Dweck, 2017). They tend to raise their ability inference when receiving positive feedback. That is, they believe that their ability is improving over time and the positive feedback is re-affirming this belief. Such students demonstrate adaptive self-regulation, high intrinsic motivation, high self-efficacy and have achievement goals set and are willing to take on challenges (Zhao, Zhang, & Vance, 2013; Dweck, 2017). Developing our understanding of this concept Mega et al., (2014) argue that if a student believes they can improve their intelligence they will deploy many different approaches to manage and regulate their learning. Such research alludes to the notion of a student's mind-set being flexible; some researchers have even argued this could be promoted further if they are taught about the theoretical underpinnings of mind-set theory (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015). Central to this argument is students learning from their mistakes and developing effective strategies to improve in the future despite setbacks. However, in a recent meta-analysis Sisk, Burgoyne, Sun, Butler, and Macnamara, (2018) reported that only certain groups of students (students who had previously failed a course/module or were economically disadvantaged) may benefit from growth-mind-set interventions. Further, they argued that mind-set interventions did not benefit high achieving students. Importantly, as Mendoza-Denton, Kahn & Chan (2008) suggest, if students are already confident in their ability then mind-set interventions may have a detrimental effect upon students who hold a fixed mind-set. Sisk et al's (2018) main conclusions seem to indicate that the effect of most mind-set interventions is weak, and that educational resources could better be allocated elsewhere. Focussing on changing mind-set is likely not a panacea for all students, especially if they are already meeting their own aspirations. While mind-set interventions may help in some specific circumstances, we suggest that this does not really assist the on-the-ground educator.

No easy answers: where to with feedback for low achievement?
The discussions within this article have posed many questions. In particular, what is needed for all learners to benefit from our new agentic models of feedback? We began the article by introducing "John", who arrives at university with little academic capital, fixed conceptions of ability and a lack of feedback literacy and who instantly receives a lower grade and negative

comments about his work. As we have suggested, John might not benefit from the new model of feedback that has been argued for in recent literature. So how can this new feedback model work for those who find university study difficult and are dependent on others to guide them? What can educators do to help students in John's circumstances? We propose a number of pedagogic strategies. None of these is a panacea, but each may go some way to addressing the issue.

The first thing to note is that it is important not to characterise students as low achievers by highlighting their low achievement. This may demotivate, and reinforce students own views of themselves as incapable of change. Any tailoring to those who are having difficulty needs to be framed within an overall pedagogical approach, which offers support to learners across the spectrum.

Some students will have both a lack of disciplinary knowledge and an unestablished academic identity. Moreover, they may be poorly equipped to actively change this. In this article, we have argued that if feelings of competency, relatedness and agency are required to feel motivated then new paradigms of feedback intrinsically offer agency but not necessarily competency or relatedness. We need to therefore ensure that the feedback processes offer relatedness (Bearman et al., 2018). Thus, educators must consider how faculty and peers can have meaningful interactions with students who receive lower grades and who may appear disengaged, in order to build their motivation to change and their sense of identification with their studies. As mentioned before, it is important that this is done in way that does not stigmatise, but at the same time educators' natural tendency to focus on those who are engaged needs to be countered.

Some students will have poor self-efficacy and a fixed mind-set and as a result low levels of volition to change their behaviour. If these students receive negative or disappointing performance information (particularly in the form of grades), their self-efficacy may continue to deteriorate. As mentioned, the learning environment needs to emphasise the relational and allow interrelationships to be fostered in order to shape identity and build motivation. However, it may also be important to create more learning situations tailored for those who are overwhelmed, which they feel they can master. Building on this growing feeling of competence, previously disengaged learners might become not only more motivated but also more confident in engaging with the daunting task of revising their work based on critical feedback.

Overall, a course should offer a rich learning environment to support *all* students through exposure to many low-threshold feedback encounters as integral parts of their daily course study activities. This can be achieved through creating sufficient time, space, feedback information and potential resources. This will provide those who are finding learning difficult with many opportunities to produce work, get frequent information on how they are doing and guidance on how they might improve. The design of the curricula is essential and should allow all to experience that learning is not linear, accepting that some bumps in the road or episodes of disappointment are inevitable and it is how they overcome, process and subsequently modify their assessment and feedback behaviour that will help them to develop as learners. For those who are finding the materials difficult, this could be achieved by

working on repeated low-stakes tasks during a unit or module. Such tasks make it possible to have a practice effect, e.g. students might be required to perform a similar task several times during a module and each time they will get feedback that they may use in order to do better the next time. Acknowledging every improvement from task to task might help students to build confidence. This approach could promote agency and positive competence feelings. For example, the tasks might be accompanied by specific templates, which the student could choose to use or not use.

Developing feedback literacy may also offer some solutions. However, we must be mindful that for those who have mastered less of the course content, limited disciplinary knowledge could negatively mediate their wavering willingness to academically invest in becoming feedback literate. Further, if they have fixed mind-sets, this will inhibit the potential for growth and improvement over time. In order to develop feedback literacy across the spectrum of attainment, the curriculum should provide opportunities for all to engage with peer feedback at the outset of their studies, with a particular orientation towards the benefits of reviewing others' work. Grouping those with lower grades with their higher achieving peers may have beneficial effects upon learning. Such an approach might help all to see that a fixed mind-set could be overcome, as they will directly experience those who operationalise an incremental mind-set. Lecturers can also involve students in the creation of assessment criteria for assessments to mitigate the negative effect upon autonomy and agency that lecturer set criteria promotes (Fraile, Panadero & Pardo, 2017). This can at first be a skill, which is developed in the more formative, lower risk peer feedback activities which happen in class. Over time such an approach could be used for summative assessments once students have built up the requisite skills and experience.

Conclusion

While the literature suggests that students who have difficulty with their study also struggle with feedback, it provides less guidance as to how educators can help, particularly in an environment where more responsibility is shifting to the student. This paper has examined possible approaches such as increasing agency, using praise, developing feedback literacy and cultivating a growth mind-set. There are no easy answers but some pedagogic strategies may assist. All students, but particularly those who are persistently finding study too hard, may benefit from strong relationships with educators and peers; exposure to feedback rich, low stakes environments, which permit repeated integrations of practice and feedback and building feedback literacy through peer assessment activities.

Disclosure statement

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