Looking Outside: The importance of teacher-student feedback and learner agency outside the traditional classroom context
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Abstract: This paper explores the importance of teacher-student feedback outside of the traditional classroom context. In today’s 21st century educational environment, teaching practices outside the classroom bear upon student success as much as commonplace classroom activities. The way in which feedback is communicated and the contexts in which it is received provides opportunities for learners to enact their own agency to achieve greater personal understanding and subsequent academic success.

Scholars have noted the 21st-century educational environment presenting unique opportunities and challenges in the area teaching, assessment, and learning (Beetham and Sharpe 3-4; Collins; Lambert and Cuper 265; Pellegrino 66). According to Oxford Brooks scholar Margret Price et al (287-288), teacher-student feedback is an important activity that is best framed as a dialogue between teacher and student, rather than a justification of a grade or a list of action items. This noteworthy point deserves the attention of tertiary-level educators. As such, there are two aspects of teacher-student feedback that are important for tertiary-level educators to bear in mind: the first being the process of teacher-student communication and the second being the fluid context(s) of this kind of communication within the 21st-century environment.
Firstly, I argue that one of the keys to student engagement and potential academic success is not just the provision of feedback, but the initiation of a conversation which provides a safe space for fostering trust and mutual understanding between teacher and student. Secondly, a significant part of this communication process takes place outside of the classroom. Careful attention should be paid not only to the way information is conveyed to learners, but the context(s) in which it is done by those who teach them.

In advancing the first aspect of teacher-student feedback in this paper, it is important to note that since the turn of the 21st century, higher education scholars have highlighted the need for educators to assist learners in navigating through the bombardment of information they receive both within the classroom and outside of it (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 273; Lambert and Cuper 273). Educators should also assist learners in interpreting the information they encounter in a meaningful way.

In 2002, a joint study conducted by researchers at the Universities of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam highlighted that learners expected assessment feedback on their work, but also that learners’ use of this feedback should be of particular concern to educators, taking into account the complexities of the assessment and communication process (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 61-62 Conscientious Consumer). Given these complexities, it is important for educators to be helpfully critical and reflexive in their approach to communicating assessment feedback to learners.

A well-known 2005 study by David J. Nicol and Debra McFarlane-Dick noted the importance of self-regulated learning, in which learners enact their own agency in the learning process (4). Self-regulated learning in this context refers to a learner’s agency or initiative and self-discipline in successfully completing required tasks according to specific requirements. The concept of (learner) agency is an important point which will be discussed later on; in this
context, agency refers to one’s socially constructed ability or potential to act (Barker 13). Both Nicol and McFarlane-Dick noted that feedback should be geared towards guiding and empowering learners, with a focus on personal performance rather than achieving a specific grade. Following this line of reasoning, teacher-student feedback should enable learners to develop greater independence in their abilities to process and understand information set before them.

Findings from a study published in January 2017, conducted by researchers at the University of Newcastle suggested that learners should be placed at the centre of assessment feedback exercises, to build both their confidence and competence (Eather et al 80). While this study focused on the assessment practice of peer feedback, the researchers emphasized that the way(s) in which feedback was communicated to learners accounted for greater degrees of personal understanding and subsequent academic success (Eather et al 70).

In another study published in 2017, education psychologists in the United Kingdom noted that the manner in which assessment feedback is communicated is one of the numerous factors which affect the ways in which learners engage with feedback to their own benefit (Winstone et al 33). However, other factors which bear upon the reception of assessment feedback were also more relational in nature, such as the behaviours and characteristics of both teacher and student (Winstone et al 33). This study also underscored the characteristics of assessment feedback and the context in which it is received as additional interpersonal factors which influenced the teaching process in a way which was beneficial to learners (Winstone et al 32-33). It is from these interpersonal factors from which I further develop my second point regarding the fluid context(s) in which student feedback is communicated today; these contexts are related to learners’ agency.
Often, learners in enacting their own agency to become self-regulated (Nicol and McFarlane-Dick 4), may seek formative feedback and academic support outside scheduled class times. This may come in the form of impromptu or after class face-to-face meetings, via email, social media or any other open channel of communication provided by their teacher or acknowledged by the student (apart from the teacher). Scholarship from Glasgow Caledonian University also confirms the importance of educators identifying moments when learners enact their own agency (through self-regulation) and responding appropriately with the needed support (Rae and Cochrane 227).

It is in these moments of personal initiative that learners may seek aid or clarity in navigating through the information they may have received during active teaching time. More than often, learners often require clarity regarding the contextual or ‘real-world’ applicability of the tasks they are required to perform for their assignments. Bearing this in mind, it is important for educators to understand that teaching extends beyond the classroom; this requires a shift in one’s approach to delivering the requirements of any particular course of study. In addition, this also requires educators to develop a keen eye for when learners enact their own agency.

Learners more readily exert their own agency when they believe themselves to be in a suitable environment which allows this. In the classroom, the relations of power between teacher and student may always provide an environment for learners to be self-regulated. Evidence of this can be found in the ‘flipped classroom’ model, where the delivery of teaching content is managed by the learner outside class time and structured activities relating to teaching content is undertaken during formal class times (Butt 34; Herreid and Schiller 62; McLaughlin et al 236-237). Facilitating self-regulation is not something that can be strictly planned and managed by a lecturer teaching a course; learners need to be empowered into enacting their own agency. Learners develop their understanding at
different times and at different rates. In light of this, learners may seek academic support when they believe it would be most relevant and beneficial to them. Educators should respond accordingly by rightly discerning each learner’s need, providing timely and suitable feedback within the contexts or channels of communication which foster the display of learner agency.

The 21st-century teaching and learning are no longer bound to the physical classroom as it was in previous times and is continuously placed under erasure in the contemporary mediated environment. Online course blogs, e-classrooms, online forums, emails, social media and other e-learning platforms have provided new opportunities for teaching and for learners to enact their own agency.

While a great deal of education scholarship places emphasis on digital to technologies and emergent trends related to 21st century teaching practices (Beetham and Sharpe 7-8; Brown, Dehoney and Millichap 3; Echenique, Molías and Bullen 32; Thompson 22-23), a gap still exists concerning the ways learners generate meaning from their educational experience, assessment feedback and the social complexities involved in the use digital technologies in the contemporary classroom (Selwyn 3). There is much work to be done in exploring these critical areas in the development of pedagogic theory and practice. The ways in which learners generate meaning from the context(s) in which they receive feedback can bear upon how assessment feedback is constructively put to use.

Educators would do well to consider the subjective nature of the student learning process and the personal negotiation of meaning as learners engage with information and ideas shared in the classroom. It would be misguided to view teaching as an activity narrowly confined to a particular space and time for a given semester. To best support the conversational nature of assessment feedback suggested by Margret Price et al (287-288)
earlier in this paper, due consideration should be given to the way in which teacher-student communication is delivered and the shifting context(s) of this kind of communication within the 21st-century environment, most notably by looking outside the (traditional) classroom.
Works Cited


