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Mini Review

Feedback Cultures in Universities: Unspoken Basic Assumptions and the Illusion of One-Size-Fit-All

L Brummer*

Experimental Psychology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

***Corresponding author**: L Brummer, Experimental Psychology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

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Summary

In Higher Education (HE), it is common that the teacher dictates the feedback that students receive. This feedback often aligns with the learning goals of a course or program. This traditional feedback setting positions learners as passive recipients of feedback, contrary to what education nowadays is or should be about. Recent (re) conceptualisation of feedback in education has placed emphasis on giving more agency to learners (e.g., feedbacking-seeking behavior; FSB) and/or by viewing learners as active recipients. However, regardless of this active role of recipients, the feedback culture should be critically addressed. This feedback culture—a term borrowed and adapted from organisational cultures—consists of a pattern of shared basic assumptions (about feedback) learned by a group and carried over to new individuals (including learners and personnel) as a foundation to perceive, think, and feel about feedback [1]. As a result, these basic assumptions are persistent influencers in the feedback and/or learning process—potentially hampering the 'renowned' effect of feedback on both immediate and long-term learning outcomes.

The assumptions in a feedback culture will be shortly outlined below. Note that this is not an exhaustive list; it is a selection. These assumptions might be intertwined with expectations about/in learning and—in some cases—cannot be viewed separately. For consistency and clarity, I will refer to these as assumptions. Awareness of—and perhaps even explicit communication about—these assumptions will advance the feedback and/or learning process. This applies to both learners and teachers.

The first assumption is nested upon the idea that if no feedback is good feedback. Due to time constraints, an individual cannot point out everything that could use a revision. It would also be an overwhelming experience if extensive feedback would be provided. Therefore, most feedback consists of the main aspects that need revision—leaving other feedback out of the picture. Remain critical about every section in your work, even if no feedback is provided.

This leads to a second assumption: feedback is bad or wrong. The feedback on learners' work is often marked in red (either on paper or with track changes). Grading in some university courses involves using a traffic light scoring with(out) feedback. Green resembles the aspects that are sufficient, orange the aspects that need minor attention, and—as you can guess—red means that revisions are required. Extensive feedback often accompanies by red colouration. If I think about what is often associated with the colour red in, for example, traffic it signals STOP! DANGER! DO NOT CROSS! And this signals learners to stay out but I do not want that! You want learners to be engaging in the feedback they have received. I want my learners to dive into that feedback and intertwine that with their learning. Thus, instead of using colours with specific associations (e.g., red for errors, incorrect information and green for correct), use more neutral colours instead such as blue, purple, or pink (the colour as such does not matter; the association might). Therefore, I have refused to work with that specific traffic light colouration when I grade. Feedback means that work is up for improvement. In terms of learning, that is the best place you—as a learner—can be in. Someone else will take their

time to look at work, meaning that your work is up for improvement (or revisions). Take this opportunity with the right set of signals.

A third assumption pertains to learners processing and implementing sufficiently, despite that learners might need training to do so [2] to become feedback literate [3]. Training and practice allow learners to grasp what needs to be done. Unfortunately, in practice, there is often no time for training or practice, but another powerful tool in education is modelling [4]. As a teacher, demonstrate how you would provide, receive, process and implement feedback. This will help learners get started with receiving, processing and implementing feedback. Display openness and readiness for feedback.

A fourth assumption is that feedback is a cognitive process and—subsequently—only cognitive factors matter. The dominant cognitive focus (see Brummer et al., under review) is—besides incorrect and incomplete—also problematic because of its simplistic rendering of educational feedback practices. Feedback is more than a cognitive process: motivation [5], affections such as emotions [6,7] and metacognitive factors [8] are involved—often in complex interplays that make each feedback context somewhat unique. This is the complexity that teachers face in their daily educational practices. Thus, pay attention to cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational and affective factors when feedback is involved.

A fifth assumption involves the perception of feedback as a separate activity. This means that feedback is frequently perceived as a service and as something extra and, as a result, the emphasis placed on feedback as something 'big'. I agree that feedback is crucial for the learning process, but it is also part of the learning process. Feedback should be embedded as an integral part of learning. In practice, this means that feedback from one course (i.e., feedback artefacts) can be relevant for another (perhaps later) course. Look back at the feedback you have provided and/or received and decide what you are going to do with it for your current work. Bring your feedback artefacts!

A sixth assumptions pertains to what feedback actually is, namely feedback is giving away the right answer. Despite that some feedback can be correctional, such as knowledge of result (KR) and knowledge of correct result (KCR), feedback in educational context can be labelled as elaborated feedback [9]. The context is often not black and white and multiple answers—depending on argumentation and critical thinking—can be correct. If feedback was not complex enough, this definitely will complexify the context. As a result, feedback can never be in the form of one-size fits all despite that limited resources require this.

A last assumption is that feedback is a one-way street. Feedback is not something you provide and that is it, despite that learners treat it like that or think it works like that. Feedback should open a dialogue; it is a conversation. Feedback goes back and forth—during which the recipient and provider jointly work together on the take-home message from the feedback. A last remark has to be made about the role of (gen)AI in the feedback process, in particular as a feedback provider. Despite the role of (gen)AI in providing feedback on—for example—spelling and grammar and/or cognitive and emotional support [10], critical thinking remains crucial. Also, in the context of (gen)AI these assumptions about feedback still hamper learning. As I concisely addressed before, awareness of and explicit communication about these assumptions can clarify any misaligned ideas. Moreover, it also creates dialogue about feedback which, in turn, can positively contribute to the feedback and/or learning process of both the teacher and learner.

It is known that a feedback culture—or the feedback process in general—is considered complex. The follow concluding remarks should not be forgotten. Feedback—despite supported by (gen)AI—remains a human process. Feedback can have a lot of and/or different impact on an individual. Second, feedback is a form of caring and requires compassion. As a teacher, you want to support learners; you want them to thrive. Third, feedback is often externally determined—either by teachers, (gen)AI and/or peers—it remains an intrinsic process. The individual needs to do the work—albeit it can be externally supported. Opening up about this process helps the individuals involved (and you will learn more about your teaching!). Fourth, a learner needs to be open to and ready for feedback. Tackling the aforementioned assumptions will provide a foundation for that, but ultimately it is up to the learner. Last, ask the right questions. This applies to both teachers and learners. How does this all work in HE? Frankly, I am open for feedback about that [11].

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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