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What do students and teachers talk about when they talk together about feedback and assessment? Expanding notions of feedback literacy through pedagogical partnership

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ABSTRACT

Responding to calls for partnership among students and teachers in feedback and assessment, this study explores the question: *What do students and teaching staff talk about when they talk together about feedback and assessment?* We used reflexive thematic analysis to interpret 15 hours of conversation involving 14 students and 22 staff members as they collaborated to redesign feedback practices in eight courses by co-creating a plan for change. The results revealed that participants largely focused on the challenges of feedback and assessment, such as university policy, lack of time and student disengagement. However, when they dug deeper into challenges within their sphere of control, conversations opened spaces for students to actively participate and contribute their knowledge. Students displayed intellectual candour and expanded notions of what counts as feedback *to them*, disentangling feedback from assessment to advance continuous feedback practices in supportive classroom environments. We argue that both student and teacher feedback literacy can be developed when teaching staff are willing to listen to students but that partnership processes that build and enhance feedback literacies are neither automatic nor straightforward. Further research to understand the conditions that enable partnership to build staff and student feedback literacy would advance collective knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Feedback; assessment; students as partners; feedback literacy; pedagogical partnership

Introduction

How learners and teachers develop shared understandings and uses of feedback is a question occupying the attention of scholars (Carless and Winstone 2020). While the proliferation of models, principles and literacies in assessment and feedback (some designed for teachers, others for students, and some for both) speak to a relational turn in the assessment and feedback discourse communities, some scholars have called specifically for teaching staff to engage with students as partners in the co-creation and co-design of feedback and assessment practices (Carless 2020; Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe 2021; Nieminen 2022). Partnership between students and teaching staff has been defined as 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in

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the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, pp. 6–7). When feedback is understood not only as a relational dynamic but also as a collaborative, reciprocal process between students and teachers, dialogue and trust come to the forefront of assessment design (Boud and Molloy 2013) and move participants toward partnership (Deeley and Bovill 2017; Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe 2021). Accordingly, Carless (2020, p. 436) argues that 'future research into partnership approaches to feedback could beneficially investigate both teachers' and students' perspectives'. In this article, we take up the call for research into partnership approaches in the design of feedback and assessment.

The questions that guided our research and analysis are:

- When students and teachers come together as partners to co-design feedback and assessment practices, what do they actually talk about?
- In what ways, if any, do such conversations move participants towards feedback literacy?

Using a novel study design, we present analysis of recorded conversations between students and teaching staff as they worked together in a partnership program. Our findings suggest that partnership in feedback and assessment design can stall in a focus on constraints but can go deeper when teaching staff and students focus on challenges within their sphere of control and, in particular, when discussions open spaces for students to actively participate and contribute their knowledge. We begin with an overview of existing arguments regarding feedback literacy and the recent calls for partnership between teaching staff and students - hereafter referred to simply as partnership - before discussing the context of and approach to our research. We then present our findings and explore implications for building staff and student feedback literacy.

Towards the development of feedback literacy in students and teachers

It is well recognised that students not only *use* (Sutton 2012) and *appreciate* (Carless 2020) feedback but also have an active and agentic role to play in feedback processes. Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1315) define feedback as a 'process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies'. Thus, feedback involves formative and summative approaches but with attention to multiple formats for feedback that is more than written comments justifying a grade. Literature on feedback includes practical guidance in shifting from feedback to feedforward through formative and summative approaches (Hattie and Timperley 2007), the single-loop and double-loop learning framework of feedback spirals (Carless 2019), and explorations of students' perceptions of feedback, as in a recent scoping review of 164 articles (Van de Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021).

Feedback literacy - the term that has emerged to capture the notion that teachers and students should develop understandings, capacities and dispositions to make sense of feedback in order to enhance learning outcomes (Carless and Boud 2018) - points to students' active and agentic role in feedback processes. Students with well-developed feedback literacy 'appreciate their own active role in feedback processes; are continuously developing capacities in making sound judgments about academic work; and manage affect in positive ways' (Carless and Boud 2018, p. 1318). The combination of these three features, Carless and Boud (ibid) argue, 'maximises potential for students to take action'.

Teachers set the stage for feedback by creating the educational conditions to foster the development of student feedback literacy (Boud and Molloy 2013; Carless and Boud 2018). Carless and Winstone (2020, p. 2) argue that 'teacher feedback literacy facilitates the development of student feedback literacy when teachers deploy their skills and capacities to set up the conditions for students to appreciate and use feedback'. Scholars and practitioners who call

for approaches to enhance the effectiveness of feedback as part of assessment, curriculum and learning design agree that effective feedback processes are a shared responsibility of students and teaching staff, and that relationships between these two groups matter.

Learner-teacher relationships in feedback and assessment processes (Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, and Epstein 2013; Rowe, Fitness, and Wood 2014) and, in particular, the relational factors of emotions, including trust (Carless 2013; Smith and Lowe 2021) and dialogue (Nicol 2010; Ajjawi and Boud 2018), resonate with the shared-responsibility discourse that underpins the literature on teaching staff engaging students as partners (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). Naming the overlaps between feedback and partnership discourse communities, scholars are calling for feedback processes to be understood as processes of learner-teacher partnership (Matthews et al. 2021). Such approaches expand thinking about feedback as an active process that improves learning and learning outcomes through learner-teacher reciprocity (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020).

Underpinning the concept of feedback literacy, facilitated through 'activities and processes which narrow… [students' and teachers'] differing perceptions carry potential for the mutual development of feedback literacy' (Carless and Winstone 2020, p. 3), is the belief in the necessity of a shared understanding of feedback where students and teachers are talking about the same things (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020). Partnership in feedback and assessment design offers a promising avenue towards such shared understanding - and also toward affirming the diversity of understandings that might productively inform feedback processes. Nieminen (2022, p.10) argues that co-design has the potential to disrupt the 'prevalent roles of "the assessor" and "the assessee"' and promote assessment literacy and inclusive assessment; partnership work similarly complicates these traditionally separate and distinct roles of teacher and student. Disrupting such assumed roles is essential to developing expanded forms of feedback that provide students more agency in their learning (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020). Encouraging dialogue about the shared responsibility between students and teachers is a promising means to develop the literacy needed to enhance the effectiveness for student learning of feedback practices.

Contributing new insight into student partnership in feedback co-design processes

Emerging research, typically from perception-based research design or reflective narrative accounts, demonstrates the complex work involved for learner-teacher partnership in assessment and feedback (Deeley and Brown 2014; Deeley and Bovill 2017; Matthews et al. 2021). For example, partnership approaches to gathering feedback in courses (i.e. units of study or subjects) demonstrate the constructive role students can play when they are invited into dialogue about feedback and specifically what staff and students talk about in relation to the feedback process (Cook-Sather 2009). The promises of developing shared understanding, designing effective feedback processes that support learning, and growing student and teacher feedback literacy continue to prompt scholars to call for such partnerships (Carless 2019; Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe 2021). Not only responding to this call but also complicating it, we offer this research on partnership in the co-design of feedback and assessment through a novel research study that captures what students and teachers actually talk about when they talk together about feedback and assessment. Partnership in assessment design activities enhances feedback literacy through illuminating how attending to students' perspectives enriches both shared understandings of feedback processes and purposes and a greater diversity of understandings of how feedback literacy might contribute to student learning.

A structured program to enhance feedback

This study was conducted in a large (50,000+ students), comprehensive (undergraduate and postgraduate programs), research-intensive, Australian university with a mission of knowledge

leadership and teaching excellence. At this institution, academics experience high levels of autonomy and there are no requirements for teaching certification or training. Low student ratings on the usefulness of feedback is a well-known problem at the university where this research was conducted, and across higher education institutions more broadly (Van der Kleij and Lipnevich 2021). Feedback therefore formed the focus for a Change Academy program, which aimed to enhance feedback and assessment practices. The model was adapted from the (then) Higher Education Academy Change Academy program that has previously been employed at the institutional and departmental level to drive curricular change. Key features of the model, as identified by Healey et al. (2013), included:

- formation of course teams (3–6 people) including course coordinators, student partners, educational specialists and members of teaching teams;
- the co-creation of 'pedagogical impact case studies' that outlined rationales for change, anticipated impacts, and plans for implementing and evidencing changes to feedback and assessment;
- ongoing engagement of course teams throughout the semester; and
- involvement of external feedback and assessment scholars.

Data for this paper were generated during the first phase of the program: an intensive, two-day workshop where teams of teaching staff and students collaborated to identify feedback issues in courses, learn from recognised scholars to translate theory (e.g. feedback literacy, models of feedback, scaffolded assessment design) into practice, map out plans for change (small changes or larger re-design), and engage in discussions with other teams. Two of the authors of this paper, together with two student partners, co-facilitated this two-day workshop (one author was also involved in a course team but that course team was not part of this study). A well-established, semester-based institutional Student Partnership Project model enabled the involvement of student partners and provided compensation via a grant.

Academics with course coordination roles expressed interest in the program, and all who indicated time and willingness to commit to the process (including engaging with student partners) were invited to participate. Students applied to be involved, and the course teaching team selected students. In some instances, the course team sought out students who had taken the course, while other course teams preferred the inclusion of students who had not taken the course. Consideration of gender and of overseas versus local students was also a factor in the selection process, but there was not an academic grade criterion or threshold for participation.

Students and staff working together

Eight course teams involving 36 people (14 students and 22 staff members) were invited to participate in the research study. All agreed to participate after reviewing the study information sheet and gave informed consent as per institutional ethical guidelines for human research (approval #2020000076). Table 1 provides an overview of the course teams. To maintain confidentiality, course codes are not assigned. The eight teams were planning for courses that ranged in size from 30 to 1000 students in the disciplines of architecture and design, biology, business, dentistry, education, law, mathematics and midwifery.

Capturing conversations and identifying themes

The primary data source for this paper is the pedagogical conversations that took place among course teams about why they wished to implement specific changes to their feedback and

Table 1. Overview of course teams.

Broad discipline	Course label	People (# of students; academics; support staff)	No. of hours	Total instances of recording
Biology	1	5 (1 course coordinator, 2 student partners, 1 tutor, 1 learning designer)	2 hrs 27 mins	3
Architecture	2	4 (1 course coordinator, 1 tutor, 1 educational researcher, 1 student partner)	1 hr 50 mins	4
Dentistry	3	4 (1 course coordinator, 1 previous course coordinator, 2 student partners)	1 hr 27 mins	3
Education	4	3 (1 course coordinator, 2 student partners)	2 hrs 17 mins	5
Law	5	4 (1 course coordinator, 2 student partners, 1 learning designer)	1 hr 48 mins	4
Mathematics	6	4 (1 course coordinator, 2 student partners, 1 academic developer)	1 hr 6 mins	2
Midwifery	7	6 (1 course coordinator, 2 student partners, 2 tutors, 1 learning designer)	1 hr 57 mins	5
Business	8	6 (1 course coordinator, 1 student partner, 1 tutor, 1 teaching-focused academic, 2 learning designers)	2 hrs 7 mins	4

assessment practices, what proposals they had for change, and how exactly they imagined bringing these changes about.

Table 1 shows the total instances of recording. At designated points in the workshop - when teams were discussing issues with feedback, deciding on approaches to enhance feedback, and mapping out plans - they were asked to audio record conversations using a provided iPad (using voice record software). The iPads stayed in the centre of the table and participants were asked to record for 20 minutes but with the understanding they could pause or stop at any time. Most teams kept the recordings going for longer than 20 minutes.

In total, we captured approximately 15 hours of audio-recordings. These recordings were first downloaded from each iPad into a secure folder and then deleted from individual iPads. Recordings were transcribed first using transcription software and were then re-transcribed by the research team for accuracy. Each course team was then emailed the finalised transcripts; none provided changes or requested removal of any text.

We utilised Braun and Clarke (2019, 2006) approach to reflexive thematic analysis to facilitate the identification and interpretation of themes in the qualitative data set. This six-phrase process is not strictly linear, but instead is applied in a flexible manner, as researchers may be required to move back and forth through each stage of analysis as new interpretations of the data come to light. We began with the 'familiarisation' stage, which required an intimate familiarity with the data. To achieve this familiarity, we manually transcribed the audio files and reread each manuscript multiple times. We noted our initial observations and potential themes that emerged in the conversations, as well as our initial thoughts and feelings about the data.

In the data coding phase, we completed close readings of the transcripts and produced 'succinct, shorthand descriptive or interpretive labels for pieces of information that may be of relevance to the research question(s)' (Byrne 2022, p. 9). From these initial codes, we generated a series of themes that we felt represented the transcribed conversations. We then conducted a recursive review of our potential themes in relation to the coded data items and the entire dataset. At this stage, we revised our initial themes to facilitate the most meaningful interpretation of the data. We then developed a detailed analysis of our thematic framework, including a thematic diagram and descriptions of each theme and subtheme. Finally, in the writing phase, our findings were further revised in accordance with our continually evolving understanding of the data until we felt that the final product accurately and comprehensively reflected the content of the transcripts.

The first theme we identified is that, when students and staff talked together about feedback and assessment, many tended to default to discussions of challenges and obstacles commonly encountered in large (20,000+ student enrolments) higher education settings. Some groups did

not move beyond these constraints-based conversations. But when staff and students dug deeper to understand the challenges presented by feedback and assessment, and when staff demonstrated a genuine willingness to listen to student perspectives, rich dialogues unfolded that brought to bear on these challenges a range of insights and expertise from students, academics and teaching specialists. Captured in the second theme, these multi-perspectival, dialogic interactions allowed some groups to move into productive conversations about how to enhance feedback and assessment in university classrooms.

Default to challenges as a means of academic catharsis about bureaucracy and student disengagement

Most of the conversations began - and some persisted - with participants 'defaulting' to discussions about the perceived challenges of feedback and assessment in university settings. These conversations were initiated and dominated by staff members, and tended to lack nuance, as it was apparent that some staff were using the sessions as an opportunity to 'vent' about the constraints of university administration and the difficulties of teaching students. The three issues that were most frequently cited as constraints to feedback and assessment practices were: university policy, a lack of time and student disengagement.

Policy

University policy was often mentioned by staff as a constraint that restricted the types of feedback and assessment practices that could be implemented in a course. For example, when discussing potential alterations to their course assessment, one teacher explained:

> I would almost like it if you had the potential to resubmit it, if you wanted to. But I just don't know if that works within our current systems and processes… I think that drafting is probably the closest to actually what we want, we just have policy reasons that we can't pre mark anything. (Teacher, course 8)

Other staff considered university policies to be so domineering as to completely remove the possibility of making certain changes within a course:

> Student: Are you doing anything around like the practicals?
>
> Teacher: No… keeping in mind that the course starts next week… making changes to the practical that's about a year of development work, so there's no changes in the assessment design and the learning activities. (course 1)

Lack of time

Another challenge frequently cited by staff was a perceived lack of time to implement feedback and assessment processes. This challenge was often discussed in the context of institutional policy, as staff explained that they didn't 'have control' over the timeframes they were given to teach a course and grade assessment (Staff, course 1). Staff members who had existing feedback processes built into their course explained that such processes were already placing them under a lot of time pressure:

> Learning specialist: Providing their feedback every week, how's that going for you? Onerous? Big burden?
>
> Teacher: It's somewhat time consuming…
>
> Learning specialist: Okay, so if we could put down the workload of providing feedback on 10 lots of seminar preparation by 160 students, I think the sustainability of that for you… (course 5)

For other courses, an issue raised by both staff and students was a lack of timely feedback. Group members agreed that staff did not always give students feedback at a point when they could use that feedback to enhance their learning and performance. As one student explained:

> We found that it [feedback] was slow to [be] receive[d]… and because of that it was too late to then implement it into our next assessment… There's no point to me if I'm reading it and I've already got my grade and the assignment's done, and for me it just doesn't make sense to go to all the effort to not use it. (Student, course 4)

Student disengagement

A third challenge, also raised by staff, was a perceived lack of student engagement with feedback. Staff were concerned that some students were 'not really engaged' during classes, and did not take feedback 'seriously' as they 'just want[ed] to see the grade' (Staff, course 1 and 3). One teacher, when discussing how their students were not engaging with the feedback given on their final assessment, illustrates how the challenges of institutional policy and timeliness can often work together to constrain student engagement with feedback:

> I can see how many people looked at their Turnitin submission [where feedback and criterion standards are reported online], and I know no-one looked at their final assessment task… most people don't care. Like, we can't release your final assessment task until your grades are released [in a different university online system] so that you can't calculate your grades before final grades are released. So in my courses, I automatically have my criterion standards released on the day that your grades are released. And I think about sending an email every time saying like, 'criterion standards have been released if you want to check them' but I know people have checked out and they know they've passed so no one's actually going to look at it, like it's not going to help in that course anymore. (Teacher, course 4)

While these types of discussions were largely one-sided, a frank acknowledgement of some of the challenges of feedback and assessment appeared to serve as a kind of academic catharsis about university bureaucracy.

Rich dialogic interactions illuminating multiple points of view to enhance feedback

Some groups were able to move beyond a constraints-based approach and engage in more productive conversations about enhancing feedback and assessment in higher education contexts. In these conversations, some groups entered into complex, dialogic exchanges that drew on the diverse perspectives and expertise of students and teaching and learning specialists. While these conversations were still guided by staff, they represented spaces in which students were able to more actively participate and contribute their knowledge. In these rich (though not universal) dialogic interactions, staff and students engaged in shared discussion about how to improve feedback and assessment practices at the university. These conversations covered two broad topics: first, groups reviewed their collective understanding of what constitutes meaningful feedback, and, second, they discussed the importance of creating safe feedback environments for students.

Expanding understanding of what counts as feedback for learning

Some groups pondered the question of how they could construct feedback that would be meaningful for students. As part of this line of enquiry, some groups established a more expansive view of feedback as something that is more than simply formalised comments given alongside a student's grade. This reconceptualisation of feedback was student driven, and it included notions of feedback as relational and dialogic as opposed to transactional and one-way, informal instead of formal, and non-traditional (e.g. peer assessment) rather than traditional (i.e.

written). A dentistry student, for example, suggested that a combination of observation and self-evaluation could allow students to generate feedback for themselves throughout the semester:

> Student: It would be amazing if the manager, instead of just looking at what everyone else is doing, has a little section on their sheet that says, 'What have I learned from watching everybody?' Then they can say, 'Okay, well, you know, I like how that student talked to the patient, or I like how they did this in that way. And then it's more like, what can I take out of it as well. So I think it's not so much in the assessment, but I think the weekly task sheets that you can print off, if they just have a little section.
>
> Teacher: I think that's a great addition to that weekly task.
>
> Student: Yeah, because that's feedback, but that's feedback for yourself, and kind of self-reflection… And like, take the good things out from it, and try to use that for when it's your turn to be operating. And I think that would be a big step in kind of helping us develop the skills… (course 3)

Students and staff agreed that traditional feedback was often not useful to students as it was typically given too late in the semester and, thus, could not be used to improve learning or assessment results. Therefore, some groups agreed that meaningful feedback must be given at appropriate points in the semester, so that students could use it to improve their learning. For example, some students suggested that staff implement a draft mechanism that would allow students to obtain and act upon feedback *before* submitting an assessment:

> Student 1: Could we give feedback halfway, like say the assignment's due in week five for instance, could we give feedback in week four? I personally would put a lot of energy into my draft. And then just give a small amount of feedback at the final marking.
>
> Student 2: Yes, because that directly impacts my result.
>
> Student 1: And I would learn from the feedback, whereas by reading the feedback, then not implementing it, I forget it. And like if it's actually implemented and worked on and worked hard to implement the things that you've had issues with or done not wrong, but that you can improve on, actually doing the things to improve on means that you've learnt and understood it better. (course 7)

Creating a safe feedback environment for students

Once the groups discussed what constituted meaningful feedback, they shifted their attention to the impact of feedback. Specifically, a topic raised by students in multiple groups was the idea that feedback can be highly emotional for students, and, therefore, staff should ensure that feedback is provided in an appropriate way and in a safe learning environment. For example, 'gentle' methods of feedback interactions, including peer-to-peer and group feedback, would help to create a positive classroom culture:

> Student 1: Remembering back, I was quite nervous to ask questions… So I think maybe even having the chance in seminar groups, because generally it's smaller groups so even like, swap seminar, preparation parts, and read through what other people have written, because I think that would be like a lot less intimidating… in my class, and I'm not sure if it was the time of day or the class, but no one really put their hand up. It was so hard to sort of just actually put your hand up like 'Oh, I don't understand'. I think and that might open up the conversation a little and people might be more willing to say, 'Yeah, I actually don't get this'.
>
> Student 2: Yeah, I was brave enough to come to you in the break between hour 1 and hour 2 and say, 'I'm not sure about this part', because you would always invite people to do that if they wanted to, but I know a lot of people aren't brave enough to do that. But maybe at the table group, with peers, they would be.
>
> Learning specialist: Then as a group, you can say, 'Oh, can you come over here and explain this to us?' Because it's much safer to do that with your peers in a group… And that's how you can get some dialogue happening. (course 5)

These conversations represented a rare chance for staff to hear about, and empathise with, the emotional aspects of student experiences with feedback. In a couple of rare cases, such as in the example below, staff even shared their own stories about their emotional reactions to feedback, demonstrating a similar level of vulnerability as the students:

> I get frustrated when I submit a journal article and I respond to absolutely everything that I can and then send it back again, and then get different [comments] back… you didn't include that the first time round. (Teacher, course 4)

The lived realities of feedback that were shared among the groups highlighted the importance of classroom cultures in which students can have constructive and safe feedback discussions with peers and teachers.

Discussion

In addressing our guiding question for this article - what do students and teachers talk about when they talked about feedback and assessment? - we found that recorded conversations from workshops on feedback and assessment design both called into question and reaffirmed that co-design through partnership can be a promising approach to building feedback literacy and enhancing assessment design and feedback practices (Carless 2019; Carless and Winstone 2020; Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe 2021; Nieminen 2022). A key finding of our research - that not all course teams moved past discussions of challenges - raises questions about the involvement of students and teaching staff as co-designers given the relational complexities when students and academics engage in pedagogical dialogue (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). However, where course teams did shift beyond focusing on challenges, the workshop conversations contained dialogic interactions that expanded participants' traditional conceptions of feedback, including notions of who gives and who receives feedback, how and when feedback can be used by students to enhance learning, and the role of pedagogical design in facilitating the safe exchange of feedback for learning.

Talking together did, and did not, foster feedback literacy for students and teachers

Our findings and analysis deepen understanding of the interplay between teacher and student feedback literacy. Student feedback literacy, developed 'when teachers deploy their skills and capacities to set up the conditions for students to appreciate and use feedback' (Carless and Winstone 2020, p. 2), is also fostered when students seek out, create and use feedback during learning processes as well as develop capacities in making academic judgements (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020). The focus on being hindered by institutional constraints prevented the development of feedback literacy over the two-day workshop because it did not create the conditions, support the agency, or deepen the capacity of students to make academic judgments. In contrast, course teams that moved past a focus on constraints offered multiple examples of students not only developing feedback literacy but also demonstrating deeper engagement - one of the barriers academics identified. In these groups, students articulated a desire to use feedback in their learning and to improve their grades, discussed the role of classroom culture for constructive and safe feedback interactions, and demonstrated nuanced analysis and deep engagement. Students and staff shared the emotional impact of feedback in a form of intellectual candour (Molloy and Bearman 2019) that can contribute to safer spaces for exploring feedback.

However, not all course teams had productive conversations that expanded thinking about feedback, fostered feedback literacy or involved intellectual candour. Furthermore, the role of students in these course teams did not necessarily enact partnership; in a number of cases,

students were listening more than talking and not really being heard when they did talk. For conversations about feedback and assessment to enact partnership principles, participants need to be intentional about ensuring that they all 'contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014 p. 6) to the conversation, including empathising as well as analysing.

Students fostering teacher feedback literacy

While teachers can create conditions for students to develop feedback literacy, as evidenced in the space they made in some team conversations for students to share their experiences and insights, our findings indicate that student feedback literacy can also create conditions for the development of teacher feedback literacy. When there was space for student partners to contribute to conversations, they displayed an intuitive or experiential perspective that resonated with many of the principles of learner-centred feedback (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson 2020), and also showed nuanced understandings of the intersection of agency, engagement and learning. Whether a shared understanding between staff and students was established was not clear from the dataset, but it was evident that students, in some groups, were able to communicate an expanded notion of what counts as feedback, which might in turn shape staff understandings and practices. In such conversations, students tended to disentangle feedback from assessment by asking academics to consider pedagogical approaches to feedback (e.g. weekly tutorial sheets, self-assessment) more than assessment design changes. Creating the kind of safe environment students mentioned through opportunities that afford greater student agency in their own learning and in support of their peers' learning resonates with classroom co-creation practices (Deeley and Bovill 2017). By considering pedagogical approaches to feedback, students were side-stepping many of the challenges raised by academics about assessment and feedback.

The risks of under-estimating power dynamics in feedback practices

The relational turn in the feedback discourse community signals the recognition that feedback practices and processes that foster student learning are dependent on the quality of the relationship between students and teachers. While assessment and feedback have typically been framed as the domain and dominion of academics, with assumed and entrenched beliefs about the role of the student and the teacher, numerous partnership and feedback scholars have argued for feedback to be understood and practised as a form of partnership (Matthews et al. 2021). Such an approach necessitates considering the power dynamics at play in feedback processes, a topic rarely theorised or considered by such literature. The socio-historical discourses of 'the student' in contrast to those of 'the teacher' in classroom assessment are unquestionably accepted as normal, stable and uncontested (Nieminen 2022). But the feedback practices being asked of students (be agentic, seek out feedback, be a giver as well as a receiver) and teachers (trust students more, foster learning and learning communities) require a substantial shift in mindset. Scholars of partnership have long focused on the relational dynamics and changes in mindset demanded of both students and teachers when learning is understood as an interdependent, relational, emotional and social process (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). Therefore, intentionally structured partnership practices, including in team conversations about feedback and assessment, can complicate taken-for-granted traditional power dynamics.

Our findings suggest that learner-teacher power dynamics combined with the power-laden nature of assessment raise new issues to be examined as more scholars call for partnership or co-design in the areas of feedback and assessment. Perhaps Winstone and Boud (2022) call to parse feedback and assessment is a way forward, particularly as part of the growing inclusive assessment movement (Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe 2021; Cook-Sather 2021; Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021; Nieminen 2022).

Questioning the goal of feedback literacy: from shared to nuanced understanding

Our findings and analysis suggest that the emphasis on the importance of shared appreciation and understanding of the purposes and processes of feedback through developing feedback literacy might be complemented by an exploration of the range of understandings that students and staff bring to the work. Might feedback literacy be more inclusive and responsive if the goal were not always shared understanding but rather recognition that people can engage with feedback in a range of ways and that by listening to that range students and staff alike could be both more 'literate' and more responsive? Such an expanded view of feedback literacy opens up additional possibilities for inclusive assessment. One of the aspects of partnership practices that is so impactful is that students and teachers come to perceive the differences in their perspectives, and, rather than forge a shared understanding, they allow the differences to inform a more nuanced, complex, deeper understanding that not only lets differences remain but actually benefits from doing so.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned about nurturing the conditions for partnership in assessment and feedback. Our study into the *what* - what students and teaching staff talk about when they talk together about feedback and assessment - affirmed the promise of partnership to foster feedback literacy (although not uniformly or in predicted ways) and expanded notions of feedback practices that support learning. Our findings also showed that such conversations do not automatically constitute partnerships, and they require careful attention to power dynamics and enactment of the principle of supporting equal, although different, contributions.

Overall, our findings point towards the need for more research into the practices of partnership in the co-design and co-creation of feedback. Further research that illuminates the conditions or principles for effective learner-teacher partnership in assessment and feedback, expanding on the work of Bovill, Matthews, and Hinchcliffe (2021), would be invaluable. We encourage thoughtful research in the area of equitable and inclusive assessment, particularly in relation to students with disabilities and/or who have been historically marginalised (see de Bie et al. 2021). Creating the conditions for epistemic justice in the domain of assessment, thereby speaking to what counts as legitimate ways of knowing and legitimate ways of demonstrating knowledge, will challenge existing assessment structures and feedback assumptions.

The relational turn in feedback and assessment discourses highlights the need for students and teachers to enact the values of shared responsibility, trust and dialogue. When students and teaching staff can live those values in the co-design of feedback practices, understandings of what counts as feedback for student learning are expanded and feedback literacies are further developed. Yet, there is much to be learned about how to create the conditions for these forms of partnership in assessment and/or feedback to work well.

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