THE IMPACT OF PROGRESS FEEDBACK ON SELF REGULATED GOALS AND PERFORMANCE OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The demand for a continuous consideration of postgraduate supervision has risen because of the various problems reported in numerous studies, such as the high rate of dissatisfaction and attrition, supervisors' inadequate knowledge about practical aspects of candidature, and unsatisfactory levels in obtaining feedback about students' performance and progress. These studies indicated that giving and receiving constructive and ongoing feedback between supervisors and students plays an essential role in identifying both parties concerns. For postgraduate research students, the nature of their task requires them to work more independently. Thus, self-regulating learning becomes important, particularly at the early stages of the study where students start to set their study goals, and the social support of the supervisor becomes in need. Self-regulating learning is the process of setting a goal, employing goal-directed actions, monitoring strategies and adjusting them to ensure success. This paper discusses the effect of supervisor feedback on the student's self-regulation based on a review of the literature of self-regulation theory, and how receiving positive or negative feedback may affect student's goal setting and performance during the postgraduate study.

Keywords: postgraduate supervision, constructive feedback, feedback strategies, self-regulating learning, goals settings

1. Introduction

In most research universities, students who pursue postgraduate degrees usually do a research study under the supervision of one or more faculty members. The Economic and Social Research Council in UK ESRC (1991) has regarded the supervision process as the single most important variable affecting the success of the research process. Others (Armstrong, 2004; Connell, 1985) describe it as the most complex and subtle form of

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teaching in which academics engage and the most problematic. The role of any supervisor is to guide the research student throughout their study, provide the time, expertise and support to foster the candidate's research skills and attitude and to ensure the production of a research of an acceptable standard (Heath, 2002). The results of studies about postgraduate supervision quality showed low completion rates and levels of student's satisfaction with the guidance provided and unsatisfactory delays in receiving feedback about writing drafts and progress. This indicates not an ideal situation and inadequacy in the monitoring of higher degree student progress (Gurr, 2001; Aspland et al, 1999). Armstrong (2004) reported on the high figures of failure of graduate degrees in the social sciences in the UK and North America. Further, his study indicated that high proportion of those who complete their research degrees take longer time than expected, and students often express dissatisfaction with the research process.

These studies reveal numerous concerns for both postgraduate students and supervisors on the role of effective feedback in a successful supervisory relationship. This paper tries to shed light on the importance of constructive feedback on the student-supervisor communication, particularly in the post graduate research. This paper is structured as follows, Section 2 explains the quality factors of supervisory, Section 3 discusses the supervisor- postgraduate student relationship from different points of view, Section 4 presents the role of social support of the supervisor, Section 5 discusses the effect of feedback on self-regulated learning and goals settings, Section 6 suggests best strategies for giving feedback, Section 7 discusses the main findings of the research, and Section 8 concludes the paper.

2. Quality Factors of Supervisory

Numerous factors have been identified in the literature as significant to the success or failure of the postgraduate student research and study. In evaluating the relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors, much research has been done with a focus on the factors that may influence the quality of the relationship, as a key determinant of the success and timely completion of student's study. A study for the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (SNA, 2006) presented a comparative review of postgraduate student's attitudes in four European countries: Sweden, Finland, Catalonia, and Ireland. The results of the study showed the critical issues that students view as problematic; this includes a supervisor interest in their studies, levels of constructive criticism, the degree to which the supervisor engages the student in discussions of methodological, theoretical, and general subject area issues. Others (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011) confirmed these results and add more issues as communication and disagreements about the research project, conflicting perspectives within the supervisory role, limited knowledge and expertise of the supervisor in the field of study. This paper will focus on one of these important factors which is the constructive timely feedback of supervisor and its effect on the postgraduate student performance.

3. The Supervisor-Postgraduate Student Relationship

Research indicated that good working relationship between supervisors and their Ph.D or master by research students were associated with good progress and satisfaction (Spear, 2000; Aspland et al, 1999; Armstrong, 2004; Mainhard et al, 2009). Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) see the domain of research supervisory practice as a facilitating process involving educational tasks and activities that comprise the work of supervision. These studies have identified the need for more awareness of supervision responsibilities, demands and interests of research students. As Zuber-Skerritt and Roch (2004) explained that to identify and communicate the postgraduate supervisor's role and meet the expectations of postgraduate students, there is a need for an in-depth research of the PhD experience and supervisory pedagogy to overcome some of the problems associated with the supervisor-student relationship. In discussing the characteristics of good supervisor, Brown and Atkins (1986) suggested a list of supervisory roles and attitudes which include director, facilitator, advisor, guider (suggesting timetable for writing up and giving feedback on progress), manager (checks progress regularly, monitors study, gives systematic feedback, plans work).

Research pointed out that feedback is an essential component in the learning cycle (Weaver, 2006). A consensus is developed in the literature around the conceptualization of feedback as a process of communication and dialogue in specific social context (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Others have defined it as giving and sharing information in the form of guidance and support as an integral element to fostering improvement, development, and understanding of material learned and applied (Sutton, 2009; Gullet, 2010). Gullet has concluded that influential and mutual feedback between peers, which has its focus on development rather than evaluation, is the most important feature during assessment. Also, argued by many researchers in higher education (Ramsden, 2003; Sutton, 2009; Hattie and Timperly, 2007; Weaver, 2006) that effective and high quality feedback is a key element of quality teaching in higher education.

In their study, Row and Wood (2008) noted that feedback is the most powerful factor that affects students' achievement. They also explained the consistent positive effects of feedback on learning and developing student's understanding and skills. They found that undergraduate students value feedback; want to receive feedback that enables them to improve their performance. However, students feel that providing late feedback shows little interest in their work, and students want tutors to consider their feelings and point of views when giving feedback. The study found also that feedback was considered unhelpful when it is vague, untimely, or when not enough information was provided to make it useful. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) describe introducing any type of evaluative activity or feedback between research students and supervisors as highly problematic for different reasons, such as cordiality of the circumstances and student's fear of negative consequences in a relation featured with difference in power and dependence. They suggested at the same time that providing feedback to students

give them the opportunity to reflect on their work, change and modify in order to become more effective.

4. The Role of Social Support of Supervisors

Social support from supervisors usually comes in the form of effective feedback. In a study by Wadesango & Machingambi (2011) on the issues postgraduate students perceived as problematic, they pointed out supervisor's feedback as one of the most important. During the interviews the researchers have conducted with a group of 40 participants (Master and Ph.D. students), 40% of the participants complained of receiving too little feedback from their supervisors, 25% raised the concern that supervisors tend to give feedback which conflicts with previous feedback. The results of the study indicated that consistency in providing feedback to the students is an important matter. In addition, students reported that delayed and infrequent feedback had a large effect on the completion of their study at the proposed time, as well as the quality of their research. This is compatible with the findings of Mouton (2007), that postgraduate students view the ideal supervisor as not only the one who provides prompt feedback but also constructive criticism. Zhao et al (2007) emphasized the importance of feedback and that students most satisfied with their supervisors when they receive both regular and constructive meaningful feedback on research and progress towards the degree. Therefore, the quality of formative feedback from supervisors is critical to the success of students doing research. Feedback is constructive when it both emphasizes the strength of the student and offers suggestions for improvement in a timely manner. For feedback to be helpful, it needs to be given in a concerned and supportive way and to include both positive and negative observations as people often dislike feedback if it is negative. The effective supervisor can reduce the stress on the research student by employing certain communication strategies to help student completes the study on time and feels satisfied.

5. Self-Regulatory Learning and Feedback Role

As stated in its theory, Self-regulated learning (SRL) is the process that students employ to independently analyze the learning task through setting specific goals, put efforts, apply strategies for learning, monitor performance, and assess achievements (Schunk, 2012). Although it is a general method for all levels of learners, but it becomes more important for postgraduate students as the nature of their task requires them to work more independently. As literature reveals, SRL can help students build up their study skills (Wolters, 2011), apply learning strategies that fit with their goals, observe their progress, and evaluate their academic outcome (Harris et al, 2005). Thus, supervisors should be aware of the factors affect students' ability to self-regulate, and the role of motivation in assisting SRL. Previous research discussed the critical impact of motivation on students' outcomes and self-regulating learning, which could be more difficult to achieve without it (Zimmerman, 2008). Moreover, Butler (1998) explained

that self-regulated learners often look for others' (e.g. teachers, peers) advices and help when they feel necessary. Obviously, supervisors can support this behavior by providing on going constructive feedback that may develop the research student skills. Patrick et al (2007) found that students who received ongoing feedback from teachers and peers were more likely to use self-regulating strategies in learning. In this regard, research (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) indicated that effective feedback covers How well tasks are done by students, What they need to improve, and How to do this improvement. It is found that the constructive feedback can effectively help students improve their academic outcome and promote student motivation and achievement (Wigfield, et al, 2011).

5.1 How Feedback Affects Setting Goals of the Student

For a postgraduate student, Setting goals and how to achieve them could be the most critical and confusing part in the study, particularly at the early stages. However, students have to do it merely by themselves and/or seeking help from their supervisors. A Postgraduate student at the beginning of the study sets initial goals which are not necessarily ultimate but usually can be adjusted during the study period. Therefore, performance of students depends on the individual goal. Goal setting theory states that *"the simplest and most motivational explanation of why some people perform better than others is because they have different goals"* (Latham & Locke, 1991). In this respect, performance feedback is important because it allows student to evaluate the previous performance relative to a specific goal. Latham & Locke (1991) concluded that feedback and goals together are more effective in improving performance than either one separately. Performance feedback is also essential to understand how students regulate their goals and behaviors across time. As predicted by goal-setting and social– cognitive theories (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Latham & Locke, 1991), when individual gets positive feedback (feedback that tells individuals that they have met their goals) this will lead them to continue on the same performance or set more difficult goals. On contrast, when an individual gets negative feedback (feedback that tells individuals that they have not met their goals), it may lead to increased motivation and putting more efforts in an attempt to decrease the gap between their current performance and the goal. The other alternative to recipients of negative feedback is that they adjust their goals downward particularly with those individuals with low self-efficacy (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Obviously, these predictions confirm the positive relationship between performance feedback and future goals across negative and positive feedback.

5.2 Effect of Feedback Nature on Setting Goals

The idea that feedback gives information on how much a current performance meets a standard performance has been elaborated on in several theories like goal setting theory (Locke and Latham, 1990), control theory (Taylor et al, 1984), social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Feedback can be both positive and negative. While giving positive feedback is relatively easy, being a supervisor can involve occasions when it is important to give negative feedback on research or progress in general. Research

generally shows that when a learner receives a positive feedback, s(he) perceives no gap between the goals and the actual performance, so keeping the same behavior is expected, because learner is satisfied with her/his progress and feel no or little need to change the goals or performance. However, when the feedback is negative, the normal perception is that there is a gap between the goals and the current performance which leads to dissatisfaction (Podsakoff & Farh, 1989). According to the control theory (Taylor et al, 1984), perceiving this situation as a result of receiving negative feedback leads to the learner attempt to reduce this gap by increasing effort, particularly if the feedback source is credible. Several empirical works have confirmed that students who received negative feedback tend to adapt the previous performance, set higher performance goals for their future, and put more efforts towards achieving their goals (Podsakoff & Farh, 1989). However, these studied pointed out that these results are expected with learners of high self-efficacy and when the feedback source is trusted and the feedback is accepted by the learner.

5.3 How to Promote Feedback Acceptance by Research Student

The role of the supervisor is to support her/his student by providing effective feedback on their performance. But, whether the student accepts the supervisors' feedback or not depends on different factors. Of the factors that play an important role is the interpersonal trust. As research indicated, there are two dimensions of interpersonal trust, cognitive and affective trust. Cognitive trust is based on the expectations of the peer reliability, particularly on the cognitive aspects like professionalism and expertise of the supervisor (McAllister, 1995; Erdem & Ozen, 2003). This is because usually the supervisees expect the supervisors to attain more knowledge and experience than them in the task. Thus, it is concluded that it is more likely to accept and act upon the feedback by the student when there is enough trust of the supervisor's intellectual content and knowledge, specifically in the field of student's study. The other factor is the affective trust which is based on reciprocity of care and concerns in an affective working relationship between the supervisor and the student. As pointed out by research (McAllister, 1995; Erdem & Ozen, 2003), when two partners (supervisor-student) start to develop emotionally in a relationship by being open about feelings to each other's, trust will increasingly develops over time between them. Therefore, it is concluded that both cognitive and affective trust can foster motivation to perform and encourage feedback seeking behavior of the student. Also, these factors could build up a sense of safety for both parties when there is an environment that provides a chance for criticism and free exchange of thoughts (Edmondson, 1999).

6. Strategies for Giving Feedback

In terms of improving performance, a critical component of feedback is the manner in which information is presented. Gipps et al (2000) suggested that teachers' use of intentional feedback often vary by presentation and content. Presentation refers to who feedback is delivered to and how feedback is delivered. Certain strategies are important

in giving feedback. Supervisor should present his concern objectively not emotionally and without judgment. Focus on the problem not the student. Ask questions and listen to understand what is being said and help student to understand how to improve her/his work. Negative feedback is person focused and could be disappointing instead of encouraging. Positive constructive feedback is problem focused and seeks way to improve performance. In giving feedback, especially when assessing written work, the purpose should be clear. Vague comments may leave the student confused and not able to know what to do. Supervisors should mention work that is being done well in addition to any series shortcoming that needs to be overcome. In that, supervisor needs to be specific about the errors that were made, what should be done to correct them, and the expected results. Supervisor better listen to student, make sure the student has opportunity to talk about his perspective on this constructive feedback, allow the student to ask questions to clarify what the supervisor is talking about and then offer suggestions of corrective action. The student on the other hand should be prepared to receive supervisor's constructive criticism in a positive way. Student should check attitude, recognize that supervisor's feedback is not a personal attack. Student should listen carefully to understand the message, especially if it appears to be negative and critical, and then reflect back the message to the supervisor to clear up any misunderstanding before it becomes more complicated. For this, student may need to clarify the feedback by asking questions. Student is expected to accept praise with appreciation, considering that positive, encouraging feedback is an indicator of a good performance. Then students should use the positive feedback as a motivator to strengthen what is already being done.

7. Discussion

The importance of performance feedback as discussed in the previous sections is evident because it allows individuals to evaluate their previous performance relative to a specific goal or standard. The constructive feedback will be most helpful when used to develop the current performance of the student. Hence, If the student remains open minded when receiving this sort of feedback, s(he) will feel more confident in openly discussing research, issues, and challenges with the supervisor and will help break down barriers and encourage productivity. When students perceive feedback as not personal, they will tend more to accept it and being able to integrate it into future work, which is a powerful skill that will be of great benefit for the student in the future career life. On the other side, if the supervisor be able to receive feedback, this points supervisor's ability to create effective communication with the student. As the most commonly reported difficulties for the research student relate to communication difficulties with supervisor, maintaining good communication strategies can help avoid some of the more troubling situations in which students and supervisors can find themselves. When students feel confident that they can offer feedback without consequences they will feel that supervisor listen to them, value their opinions which increase their confidence and help student to grow in areas of weaknesses. Studies in

the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student (Sutton, 2009) affirm the importance for both tutors and students to enter into a meaningful and effective academic dialog through which student can effectively provide feedback by identifying strength and weakness in tutors' practice. Sutton argued that dialog relationship encourages students to compare their own performance with that ideal and enables them to diagnose their own strength and weakness. Through dialog students can receive formative feedback which emphasizes the strengths of student's work and offers suggestions for improvement.

8. Conclusion

Supervision is a complex role especially if it involves supervising postgraduate students. The importance of feedback in the supervisor-research student relationship has been analyzed in different studies that confirmed the effect of constructive feedback on the student who receives it in timely manner. Constructive feedback focuses the strength and weakness of the student research not the student himself. It regularly offers suggestions for improvement, and needs to be given in a concerned and supportive way by discussing both positive and negative sides of the student research. For the supervisor to be helpful to the student, there are certain communication strategies that the supervisor may employ to reduce the stress on the research student. It is found that ongoing effective feedback can encourage self-regulated attitude of the research student whose nature of task demands working more independently, which will be reflected on continuous monitoring of performance that fits with the goal set by the student until achieving the timely completion of the study and success.

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