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Teaching note: personal attack or the personal touch? Evaluating the use of video feedback methods with qualifying social workers

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ABSTRACT

Social work skills such as the ability to reflect on self and to recognize and manage emotions are fostered in part through using and receiving feedback, however there is limited research about feedback methods that effectively enable social work students and post-qualifying workers to engage with the emotional aspects of learning and feedback. This teaching note reports on a pilot project in which video feedback on academic assignments was provided to first year undergraduate social work students studying at a university in England. The project findings underscore the importance of engaging with the emotional dimensions of feedback processes and recognizing how feedback experiences can shape emerging learner and professional identities. The findings also underline the psychological and social skills required to engage in more performative aspects of contemporary education and practice. We argue that social work students are likely to benefit from support to develop meta-cognition (the process of thinking about one's thinking processes) and self-regulation (regulation of emotion and behavior) skills before they can make sense of academic and practice-orientated feedback. Video feedback on academic assignments is therefore best utilized when it is underpinned by a dialogical approach to teaching and learning in the 'classroom' and the 'field'.

Introduction

Feedback literacy and feedback dialogue have received increasing focus in teaching and learning within higher education over the past 20 years (Winstone & Carless, 2019), rooted in a rejection of the idea that teacher feedback is the key mechanism that drives student attainment and development: a view characterized by Adcroft (2011) as the 'mythology of feedback'. This 'mythology' or 'old paradigm' view is considered to take insufficient account of the social, cultural and affective processes that shape learning and relies too heavily on didactic concepts such as the transmission of ideas or the view that educators are trusted experts (Adcroft, 2011; Carless & Boud, 2018). Instead, there is

growing pedagogic recognition that the ability of learners to use feedback requires tacit as well as experiential knowledge and that these hidden aspects of learning need to be rendered visible. Similarly, the degree to which learners can use feedback is, from a dialogic perspective, shaped in part by emotions. For example, students who feel a low sense of self-efficacy and control may respond to (perceived) negative feedback with greater sensitivity and tend to internalize these feelings, whilst students who identify positively with the student role are better positioned to experience feedback as constructive and developmental—i.e. an opportunity to learn (Maidment & Crisp, 2011). The cultural shift toward feedback as dialogue rather than transmission is seen to be critical if higher education is to authentically welcome more first-generation, disadvantaged (McGill & Quinn, 2019) and international students (McCarthy, 2015).

Feedback therefore requires dialogue between students and teachers: that is, opportunities for discussion, questioning, and reflection about what is being taught and assessed so that shared meaning and understanding can be co-developed (Winstone & Carless, 2019). There are nevertheless challenges in implementing a dialogue-based approach in the context of the 'massification' of higher education: i.e. the determined, rapid effort to widen access to higher education amongst populations that were previously not able and/or incentivized to attend higher, often elitist, education institutions. Massification is characterized by large student numbers, increased demand on institutional resources and increased class sizes, thus potentially reducing opportunities to foster student-educator relationships and discussions about learning (Fox & O'Maley, 2023; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Video and audio feedback methods may enhance opportunities for more relational approaches to feedback which in turn help to foster discussion between educators and students about teaching and learning. Such practices are seen as central to making more explicit the 'hidden' curriculums that are embedded across the disciplines (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018) and in social work education contexts (Miller et al., 2011). Furthermore, in a context of rapid digitalization of learning and teaching, video feedback is more relevant and accessible to an increasing number of students and teachers (Rapanta et al., 2021).

This article reports on a pilot project exploring the use of video feedback amongst first year social work students. In the following section, we briefly outline some of the associated benefits and limitations of video feedback before explaining the context and rationale of the project.

Video and audio feedback

Video and audio feedback methods can be experienced as more 'personal' and students have reported feeling better appreciated and supported by educators using this method (West & Turner, 2016). Whilst it is unclear whether all students like the more intimate nature of hearing and/or seeing a teacher when giving feedback (Mahoney et al., 2019), students tend to associate video and audio feedback as being more authentic and this may make it a suitable way of providing feedback on 'sensitive' topics or on assessments that require student autobiography or personal reflection (Dixon, 2015). Students also find that tone of voice, facial expression and intonation can improve comprehension of comments and result in an enhanced richness to learner-teacher communication (Mahoney et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2016). For students who are less familiar with

the language and culture of academic critique, the potentially more direct nature of video and audio feedback may also be an advantage, particularly for students who find traditional academic practices and cultures to be alienating and/or not congruent with their personal and learner identities (Carless & Boud, 2018; Pearson, 2018). Finally, the experience of listening and/or watching feedback may disrupt practices of skimming written feedback and focusing on number/letter grades (Pearson, 2018).

Despite these advantages, caution is required to not equate a new method with a new approach. Video and audio feedback risk becoming new ways of *telling* students what to do unless they are underpinned by a dialogical approach to feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2019). Furthermore, evaluation studies tend to emphasize that video and audio feedback is best utilized as one of a range of feedback methods, rather than as a panacea to the perceived ills of traditional written feedback. This is because video and audio feedback are likely to support as much as to challenge students, depending on their individual learning styles and previous experiences of feedback. Furthermore, the ability to learn and adapt to new technologies and methods is as relevant to educators as to students, who will have their own preferences, skills and views on how to provide and receive feedback. It is important therefore that teachers are also literate in audio and video methods and committed to using them according to dialogic principles (Carless & Boud, 2018; Dixon, 2015)

Piloting video feedback

The pilot video feedback project reported here took as its starting point that video feedback may provide an enhanced opportunity for dialogue between students and teachers. Echoing findings across other disciplines, social work students on the course we teach have reported in recent National Student Surveys (NSS) that feedback is too often inconsistent, ineffective and for some students, experienced as unfair. Thus, the project sought to better understand students' experiences of feedback and, more specifically, to investigate the value and feasibility of using video feedback methods given its potential benefits. The project was designed by a team of social work educators and received institutional ethical approval. To date, there has been limited research about how student or qualified social workers engage with feedback, despite the pedagogic emphasis placed on feedback as a tool to aid critical reflection and professional development (Szwarc & Lindsay, 2020).

At the start of the academic year, we invited first year undergraduate social work students to take part in an anonymous online survey (Survey 1) about their previous experiences of assessment and feedback ($n = 44$). The survey identified that the majority ($n = 33$) of students associated assessment and feedback with negative emotions (commonly anxiety and confusion) and that few students had experience of tools such as marking rubrics ($n = 7$), digital feedback ($n = 6$) or self-assessment practices ($n = 18$). These initial insights helped us to understand the practical issues that students may face receiving and using feedback, as well as some of the feelings they associate with these processes.

For the pilot, we trialed using video rather than written feedback on two modules: Research and Evidence-Based Learning (Term 1) in which students completed a summative assignment exploring their motivations for becoming social workers

and a discussion of a social work topic of their choice (2500 words) and the module Psychology for Human Development (Term 2) in which students completed a formative assignment (1000 words) asking them to critically consider the relationship between psychology and social work and to explore a psychological theory in a social work context. For both modules we created feedback scripts, the aim of which was to enhance consistency for students by providing a structure for teachers, addressing the assessment criteria. We also created a one-page guide for students that explained how to access the video feedback and provided suggestions about engaging with their feedback (e.g. finding a private space, listening more than once, making notes). The videos and advice were integrated into the existing marking platform for ease of accessibility for students and educators. Videos were also accompanied by auto-generated captions and students were able to pick up and loan good quality headphones, which could be taken away from campus. Following submission, feedback videos were provided alongside a short, written summary of key 'feedforward' points. Module leads provided drop-in sessions for students to discuss feedback following its release so that students were able to meet with the markers to discuss their feedback and seek clarification or guidance on their assignment.

At the end of the academic year, students were invited to take part in a second online survey about their experiences of feedback, with a focus on video vs. written feedback ($n = 9$). Questions were posed in such a way that students were invited to consider experiences of video feedback over the academic year rather than their experience of receiving video feedback on two, different, modules. The findings were analyzed and integrated with those of a student focus group ($n = 4$). Participation in the survey and focus group was lower than expected although the contributions from participating students were valuable and detailed. On reflection, the project plan did not realistically consider the academic year cycle and the challenges of engaging students following end of year assessments. We set out in the following section the principal findings from the focus group and Survey 2, informed by our reflections, as social work educators, of designing and delivering video feedback to students.

Findings

We first consider some of the perceived limitations of video feedback before presenting findings that suggested students valued the approach. Students reported that one of the major limitations of video feedback was that it was initially more difficult to access and understand. On receiving video feedback, some students reported feelings of frustration when they were not able to quickly access or understand their grade or comments because listening to the video took longer and required more 'time to think'. The 'slow' nature of accessing video feedback was identified as a cause of discomfort for students who associated waiting for a time to engage with the feedback (rather than be able to scan comments or see grade) with raised feelings of anxiety. Some students also found the requirement to find time and space to listen to video feedback was inconvenient and cumbersome, particularly when using the feedback to inform a future assignment:

> I found the video feedback useful to hear the tone of the assessor, however, re-accessing it to go over the feedback again can be tedious to find the particular feed I was after. Survey P7

To improve clarity, several students suggested that the process could be aided by better audio transcription and/or annotation by the marker of the assignment (i.e. using screen casting as well as a 'talking heads' function of the video). This recommendation spoke to students' concerns that they could miss something important in the feedback and that this in turn would disadvantage them in preparing for future assignments. Video feedback was also perceived to require a greater degree of interpretation on the part of students, and this was generally seen as undesirable. Students' call for specificity in feedback was evident in both the survey and focus group data. Time and again, students identified that what they appreciated most from educators were concrete examples and clear recommendations about what they should do in their next assignment, across all feedback formats:

> Tell us exactly what is wanted. This may be "spoon feeding" us, but as first year students it was hard to grasp what was wanted: examples should have been more available (for some modules). Survey P6

> I wish we were given feedback in a checklist structure with more clear points that we can use for the next assignment. Survey P4

Initially students in the focus group identified that clarity of feedback helped in the process of being able to '*compartmentalise feedback*' (focus group P2)—i.e. if the feedback messages were clearly defined then choices could be made about when and how to consider those messages. Having this choice was seen to be an important aspect of managing the potentially negative emotions that assessment and feedback could evoke for students. The process of compartmentalizing feedback was also associated with a preference for feedback to be more 'objective' and 'professional' which were attributes which seemed to be synonymous with written feedback for some students:

> I think with the written (feedback) it feels a bit more detached and a bit more professional. So, when you are getting criticism it's like you know it's constructive whereas when it's the video you do feel kind of attacked. Focus group P4

> It's really hard to not take it personally and that's so much easier when it's written because you can look at it objectively. Focus group P1

It is noteworthy that these comments were made by students training for a profession that emphasizes the importance of emotional literacy and relationship-based practice, as the students superficially appeared to not welcome this type of communication with educators. It was not the case however that all students disliked the 'personal touch' or perceived intimacy of video feedback. Rather, eight out of nine survey participants reported that video feedback was one of the '*most helpful*' types of feedback they had received during their first-year studies. Survey participants identified that video feedback was '*more personal*' and that '*it was helpful to have different types of feedback throughout the year*'. Focus group participants also attested that hearing teachers' tone and intonation—and watching their non-verbal cues—enhanced their understanding of the feedback. Some students also valued the seemingly more authentic nature of video feedback,

linking this to the credibility of receiving direct feedback from an educator that they knew:

> I think it (video feedback) is more personal, but you take that as good or bad. I took it as a good thing really. And I felt like it was nice because to have a person that teaches you actually feeding back on your assignment and you can actually see that person as well. It was like there was just more continuity to it, rather than that it could just be anybody. Focus group P3

> I did feel like in some ways there was more depth to it. I think that because it did feel more personal, it felt like they had really read my work, they had understood my work and now they are giving me some useful feedback. Focus group P4

Reflections from the student group suggest that some of the students who valued authenticity and a feeling of connection with educators had also initially felt 'attacked' by the more intense nature of video feedback, whilst other students had found it 'unprofessional'. This suggests that students sometimes feel conflicted about what feedback is helpful and why. Similarly, although students initially emphasized the importance of clarity and accessibility of feedback, they also commented on the value of needing to listen and pay close attention to an educators' feedback via video. This process was described as *'forcing (sic) me to engage'* (focus group P4) and *'forcing me to listen to what the lecturer was actually saying'* (focus group P3). One student observed that despite their reservations about the accessibility of video feedback: '*It definitely took me longer (to understand it) but I definitely reflected more (on my feedback)*' (focus group P2). Overall, the experience of focused listening and being 'forced to reflect' was described by students as being a more memorable and motivating learning experience than receiving written feedback, irrespective of whether the feedback was perceived to be positive or negative. These experiences of feedback—and of thinking about feedback—in turn seemed to play a role shaping students' developing sense of their learner identity and skills:

> Obviously, it is horrible at the time, and we all complain (laughing) but looking back, it has helped. Focus group P1

> It's (the ability to take on criticism) about personal growth across the course. So, I feel like that there is not a lot that you (as educators) can change because everyone is going to feel a bit vulnerable coming (to the course) … when they are starting something new. Focus group P2

The ability to 'tune in' to video feedback thus appeared to be connected to students' feelings of confidence and security as learners, which in turn shaped the emotions they associated with feedback and what they did with these emotions. In the final section we reflect on the findings and briefly discuss our plans to use and improve the use of video feedback on our programmes.

Limitations

This article reports a small-scale pilot study of an educational enhancement research project. The study findings draw on 'small' empirical data which limit their transferability to other social work education and learning environments. As educators and researchers, we have sought to make transparent our dual roles and to report the pilot in a way that

conveys the iterative and reflective nature of our learning. We recognize that by not collecting demographic data of participating students, we have not been able to offer more contextually sensitive analysis about how factors such as gender, race, class, disability and other protected or minoritised characteristics may affect learner's engagement with and experience of education, including feedback processes. Finally, we encountered some practical challenges during the project. Some students reported that the accuracy of the captioning of feedback videos was inconsistent and this may have impaired some students' ability to understand and process their feedback. Secondly, the study purposefully aimed to capture students' views on their experiences of feedback throughout their first year however we experienced challenges recruiting students to take part in face-to-face activities after the end of teaching, thus potentially limiting the range and number of students who contributed their views.

Discussion and conclusion

At the point of entry to higher education, students are likely to have had varied experiences of assessment and feedback and at least some will find the process anxiety rousing and exposing (Putwain et al., 2010). In addition to the emotional maturity required to engage in assessment and receive feedback, students require skills to listen, reflect and implement a plan of action to address the recommendations made by their markers. Indeed, experienced practitioners associate feedback with strong emotions and report that perceived negative feedback can lead to feelings of low mood, confusion and distress (Szwarc & Lindsay, 2020). In turn, experienced practitioners sometimes need to withdraw from aspects of their work and/or take time to process and assimilate feedback: both coping mechanisms that may be hard to implement when working in a pressured and busy environment (Szwarc & Lindsay, 2020). This underlines the importance of recognizing the emotional dimensions of feedback processes at every level of social work education and practice.

   In the context of this pilot study, it appeared that students were not always well-equipped to listen and reflect on feedback—i.e. to 'make sense' of it, nor to seek assistance when they encounter assessment and feedback barriers. Academic help seeking (AHS) is a complex *'achievement behaviour involving the search for and employment of a strategy to obtain success'* (Ames & Lau, 1982, p. 414). At the lower end of the AHS spectrum, students may require clarification of what the educator is recommending. At the other end, they may require detailed, skills-based learning opportunities to break down academic processes such as research, evaluation, analysis and critique. AHS behavior required at any point along this type of spectrum requires self-regulation and self-direction (Zimmerman, 2008). It also requires the ability to manage the realization that help is required, which can itself be a challenging or uncomfortable experience (Ryan et al., 2001). Educators should consider that first year students are more likely to be in the process of developing foundational academic skills, whilst also practicing the metacognition and self-regulation skills required to process their feedback and make decisions about their academic development. The expectation that first year students should be ready to enter dialogues about video feedback may therefore be unreasonable, as may be the case in relation to other feedback methods. In line with a dialogue-based conceptualization of feedback, learners' reluctance to initiate discussion about feedback may reflect

that they feel more exposed (academically and emotionally) and not comfortable with this learning culture. We are mindful, for example, that experienced social work practitioners also do not consistently solicit feedback and this may reflect the hierarchical nature of practice organizations whereby feedback was 'given' rather than sought (i.e. the learning culture) (Szwarc & Lindsay, 2020). For undergraduate students, the ability to solicit and process feedback is likely to grow with exposure and experience: an idea that is congruent with findings that students' approaches to feedback become increasingly sophisticated over the course of their studies, which in turn better equips more varied and nuanced feedback practices (Carless, 2020). Based on the experiences of this project, there is scope for further research about what types of feedback students benefit from, at different stages of social work training and education (including post-qualification routes).

The findings also hint at a potential conflict between students' desire for complete clarity and the need for them to foster their own skills in self-assessment and reflection as learners (Carless & Boud, 2018). The latter are important skills for student social workers who are entering a profession where lifelong learning and reflection are seen as core professional commitments, closely linked to the upholding of professional ethics and integrity (Whitaker & Reimer, 2021). As a teaching team, we reflected that we had overestimated student preparedness for video feedback and could have better supported students by more explicitly setting out why we were adopting video feedback and its relevance to social work teaching and practice. For example, its promotion of deep listening practices and skills in interpreting non-verbal communication cues and reflection-on-self. In the future, discussion of these potential benefits could be included when teachers introduce module assessments, as well as featuring in written guidance. To better prepare students for the experience of receiving video feedback, we also suggest that teachers provide in-class simulation exercises and that the activity is authentic in that headsets and devices are used. Critically, we suggest that emotional dimensions of receiving and processing feedback are explored as it was unclear whether students have always found the experience of receiving feedback challenging or whether it is the shift to new forms of assessment and feedback in the HE context that is unsettling or undermining of their previous abilities to cope with performance processes. Whatever the cause, we suggest that in addition to the procedural discussions about assessment and feedback processes, educators reflect upon and acknowledge *with* students, the emotional dimensions to learning generally (see Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014) and assessment and feedback loops specifically. This echoes guidance for social work practice educators who are encouraged to self-evaluate their performance and learning practices (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2022). Open dialogues of this kind may encourage psychological preparedness for a professional analysis of strengths and critique of their capabilities. As experienced professionals, we are steeled for scrutiny in performance cultures and perhaps underestimate how much work is required to adapt to and thrive within them.

Finally, it was surprising that some students associated being 'professional' with the absence of emotion and, concurrently, considered written feedback as more 'objective' than verbal communication. This suggests that students are likely to require sensitive scaffolding support before they can engage more critically with questions about the nature and credibility of forms of knowledge and how this links to feedback processes

in practice and academic contexts. This scaffolding work is likely to suit modules where communication and reflective skills are themselves core topics. Such teaching enables 'meta narratives' about feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2019) and the modeling of relational and/or dialogical feedback processes, which students value (Fox and O'Malley, 2023). In the future, we aim to trial video feedback with first and second-year skills-orientated modules and to explore how video feedback could play a role in preparing students for receiving regular, often diverse, feedback from practice educators and service users when on practice placement. This project underlines the valuable role that video feedback could play in the training and education of qualifying social workers, not least because of the reflective and metacognitive skills required to make use of it. However, for students to experience video feedback as part of a constructive learning process, they need to possess—and be supported to foster—emotional and practical skills that enable them to feel the video is part of an ongoing dialogue with educators and, critically, with themselves as reflective learners.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

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Ethical statement

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