Using a Student-Centered Approach to Feedback that Fosters Active Learning and Knowledge Construction

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Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable is to invite participants to examine the ways and extent to which their methods of engaging students in feedback processes support a student-centered approach to feedback. The authors will introduce a research-based model of feedback that analyzes how college students apply feedback to their writing.

Background

Writing is at the core of any academic discipline. Despite the crucial role that writing plays for the development of literacy and thinking skills in adult learners, writing has largely been undervalued in higher education (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Reports indicate that while many college graduates can write satisfactorily, many do not possess a level of writing that exhibits analytical and evaluative skills (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003). Research framed by Experiential Learning Theory strongly advocates empowering learners to make decisions about their work because it reflects how adults learn best (Sheckley, 2003). The role of feedback in the writing process, for example, requires learners to understand why a change in their composition is necessary. Yet, the movement toward a more active role for learners in formative assessment and feedback has been slow (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The manner in which some instructors give feedback still reflects a highly teacher-centered paradigm where the instructor has control of the feedback process. To introduce a more student-centered feedback process, instructors of writing first need to critically examine their conceptions of the students' role in the feedback process. During the roundtable discussion, the authors will introduce a model of feedback that evolved from their research on how college students interpret and apply feedback to their writing.

Feedback Model

The model (Orgnero, 2007) highlights students' perspectives on the feedback process and the interactivity that occurs with their instructors. Two theoretical perspectives, Complex Systems Theory (Davis & Sumara, 2001) and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984; Sheckley, 2003) formed the framework for this model. Complex Systems Theory provided an understanding of the role that the environment plays in students' interpretation and application of feedback; specifically, how feedback comes from a variety sources and how a change in performance in response to feedback influences subsequent performance and feedback. The model explains that feedback comments from an instructor do not occur in isolation because they are embedded within a larger framework that shapes students' interpretations of feedback. The four modes of Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle provided a framework for understanding the individual experience of making meaning of feedback and how prior experiences with feedback play an important role in students' interpretation and application of current feedback. First, when students initially engage with feedback it is a Concrete Experience. This experience lays the foundation for the interpretation of feedback and manifests as physiological reactions (e.g.,

emotions) that students' experience when they receive feedback. Second, the experience with feedback may lead students to reflect on the information received, engaging in the mode of Reflective Observation. During Abstract Conceptualization, students may consciously or non-consciously connect current feedback experiences with prior experiences stored in their mental models. Mental models are comprised of individuals' beliefs about feedback, learning, and writing and become the lenses that they use to interpret feedback (Eckert & Bell, 2005). Students confirm or modify their knowledge with each new experience. Finally, during Active Experimentation, students test out their interpretations of feedback that manifest in the changes they make to their drafts. As students assess the outcomes of their efforts (e.g., during peer reviews, teacher-student conferences), they engage in a self-regulation process (Sheckley, 2003). The insights from this regulatory process contribute to students' calibration of their performance in relation to a desired goal or standard. Together individual and environmental factors may enhance or inhibit students' interpretation and application of feedback into subsequent drafts.

This model also points to the epistemological nature of feedback (Orgnero, 2007), suggesting that feedback becomes a key component in students' construction of knowledge—an essential component of student-centered approaches to learning.

Significance

The current model of feedback supports a paradigm shift towards empowering students in the decisions they make about their learning and subsequent knowledge development. Participants will be exposed to multiple perspectives on feedback and encouraged to reflect on their own position and to think of new ways to enhance their students' writing skills.

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