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The affective effect: Exploring undergraduate students' emotions in giving and receiving peer feedback

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ABSTRACT

While the peer feedback process has an important role to play in student learning and has many benefits, it is not without its challenges. One of these is the effect that emotions may have on the way that students engage with the feedback. Yet, the specific emotions experienced during peer feedback is relatively underexplored. Therefore, this exploratory qualitative study unpacks the range of emotions experienced by students during peer feedback. Using Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions to analyse students' questionnaire responses, the study found that students largely exhibited positive emotions, which may be due to their perceptions of themselves in relation to the process, as well as the various scaffolds put in place. Knowing which emotions students experienced during peer feedback may enable a greater understanding of the role of emotions in peer feedback, as well as enabling student feedback literacy development.

KEYWORDS

Peer feedback; emotions; student feedback literacy; undergraduate students; academic literacies

Introduction

Developing student feedback literacy – that is, the ability to effectively engage with and learn from feedback – is an important, though often taken for granted part of teaching and learning (Carless & Boud, 2018). One way of enabling the development of student feedback literacy is through peer feedback (Nicol et al., 2014). Peer feedback is a reciprocal process that involves students providing feedback on their peers' work and receiving feedback on their own work (Nicol et al., 2014). Peer feedback may be provided both verbally and in writing, in a face-to-face context or an online context, and peers may be either anonymous or known.

Peer feedback has many benefits, such as increasing performance (Li et al., 2010; Topping, 2003), stimulating knowledge development (Falchikov, 2001), aiding the development of self-regulated learners (Boud, 2000), preparing students for professional employment (Moore & Teather, 2012), and fostering life-long learning (Malan & Stegmann, 2018). Moreover, since students are often both feedback giver and receiver, they therefore play a more active part in the feedback process, which not only affords them a greater understanding of feedback in general (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), but also the ability to become (more) feedback literate (Carless & Boud, 2018).

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Research into peer feedback has generally focused on students' perceptions of or attitudes towards the process (Mulder et al., 2014; Praver et al., 2011). As these studies have shown, although students may appreciate the benefits of the peer feedback, it is often perceived in a negative light as something that causes discomfort, anxiety, or even embarrassment (Praver et al., 2011), especially since students often play the role of both feedback giver and feedback receiver, and they may feel that their peers are not able to give reliable or useful feedback. These studies seem to suggest that students' feelings related to giving and receiving peer feedback are consequently largely negative. Yet, to date, the specific feelings that might arise during the giving and receiving of peer feedback process has not been focused on explicitly. As learning how to manage the inherent emotions in the feedback process is an important part of becoming feedback literate (Carless & Boud, 2018), it is important to understand the emotions that students may experience during feedback generally (Hill et al., 2021) and peer feedback specifically, in order for educators to better enable the development of student feedback literacy. At the same time, it is also important to understand why specific feelings are engendered during the process.

This paper therefore presents an initial exploration into the emotions that students experience when giving and receiving feedback. Using Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions, this paper aims to show firstly which emotions students display and secondly how an understanding of these emotions may impact student feedback literacy development.

Theoretical framework: Emotions and student learning

The research is framed by the control value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). This theory provides a framework for the effects of emotions in academic settings and therefore enables us to conceptualise the effects that emotions may have on learning. Emotions are seen as 'multi-component, coordinated processes of psychological subsystems including affective, cognitive, motivational, expressive, and peripheral physiological processes' (Pekrun, 2006, p. 316).

Emotions are an important, unavoidable part of learning (Dirkx, 2001), and a learner who is emotionally engaged is more likely to learn (Weiss, 2000). Moreover, some emotions may be more conducive to learning than others. For example, positive emotions that foster motivation and boosts confidence are more likely to result in learners being more open to learning (Dweck, 2000) whereas negative emotions such as frustration and disappointment may affect learning negatively (Pekrun, 2006). Knowing which emotions students experience during peer feedback, therefore, may greatly enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of peer feedback as a tool for learning and developing.

Although experiencing emotions when receiving feedback is a natural part of the assessment cycle (Hill et al., 2021), emotional responses may result in 'emotional backwash' (Pitt & Norton, 2017, p. 512); that is, emotions may interfere or impede students' ability to engage with feedback. This may be more pronounced during peer feedback, precisely because it is peers, possible friends or even 'foes', who are giving and receiving feedback to and from one another.

Students may therefore experience negative emotions, such as stress and anxiety (Pope, 2005) during peer feedback due to interpersonal variables like peer pressure (feeling like they have to be nice to friends) and social discomfort (providing feedback

that may be perceived as being negative) (Topping, 2003). These negative emotions may lead to students being demotivated from engaging with and implementing feedback (Boud, 2015). While specific positive emotions related to giving or receiving peer feedback have not been focused on explicitly in the literature, it stands to reason that positive emotions may encourage students to engage with and implement feedback (Pekrun, 2006). It is therefore useful to understand the emotions that students may experience during peer feedback.

Plutchnik's wheel of emotions

Emotions have historically been difficult to define for analytical purposes and even reaching a consensus about what is an emotion is often challenging (Plutchnik, 2001). Consequently, we are drawing on Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions, which proposes that there are eight primary emotions – anger, anticipation, joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, and disgust (see, Figure 1). These primary emotions exist in opposition to one another 'as

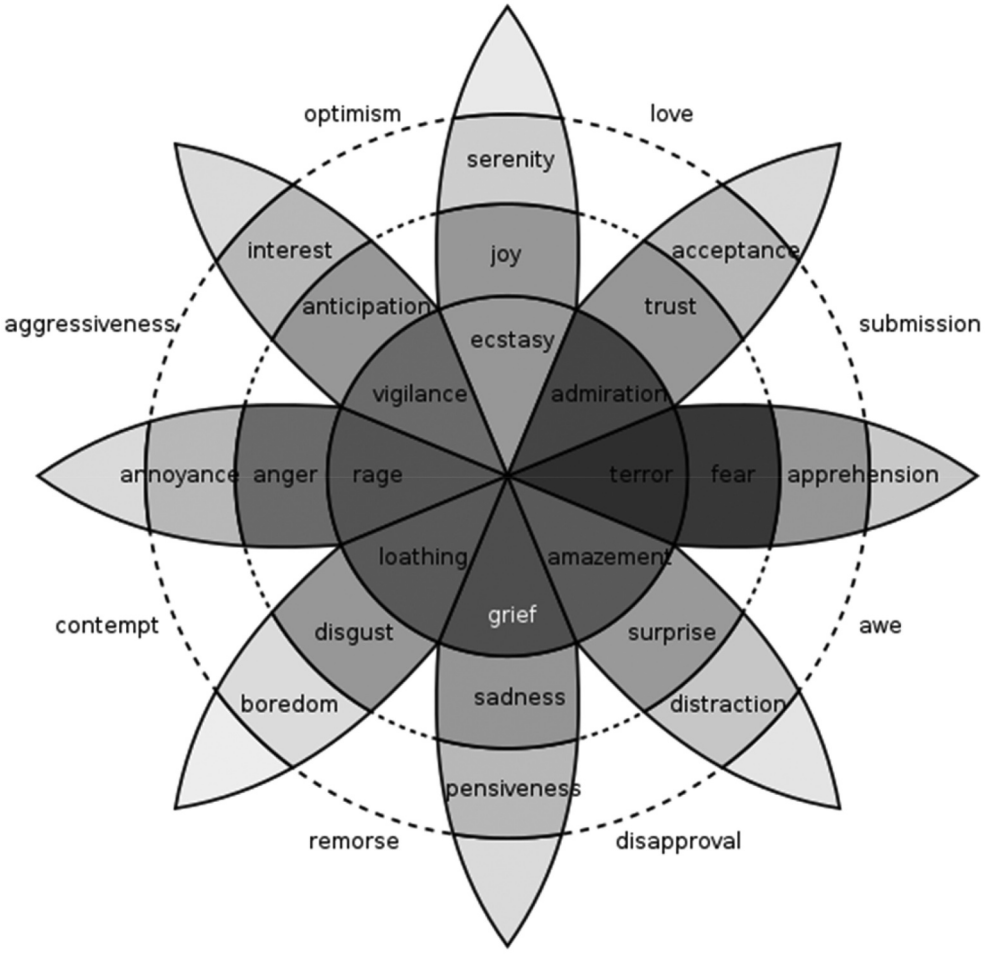

Figure 1. Plutchnik's wheel of emotions (Plutchnik, 2001).

four pairs of opposites' (Plutchnik, 2001, p. 349). These emotions may also have different intensities (stronger towards the middle of the cone, while less strong towards the outside). These primary emotions may also combine to form 'primary dyads', that is emotions that exist as a combination of two primary emotions. Using this wheel provides a theoretical grounding for emotions that enables us to have a consistent use and understanding of emotions, which in turn is useful for aiding our analysis of students' reported feelings on giving and receiving peer feedback.

Methods

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant ethics committee at the university in question (Ref: HS/17/3/10). Since it is a research-led module, the cohort of students signed a general research consent form at the beginning of the year. This research is part of a broader study on the peer feedback process that was conducted at a University in South Africa and in an academic literacies (AL) module (see, Bharuthram & Van Heerden, 2020; Van Heerden & Bharuthram, 2021). The module is compulsory for first-year students from the Community and Health Sciences Faculty. The purpose of the AL module is to develop students' respective disciplinary literacy practice. The module is a semester module and amongst others, consists of two major essays. The process approach to writing (Steele, 1992) is used whereby students go through a multiple drafting process. The first draft involves peer feedback, the second draft tutor feedback, and the third is the final submission which is then graded.

To aid students through the peer feedback process many scaffolds are put in place (Gibbons, 2015). For instance, an ongoing practice in the module is the use of assessment rubrics which are designed for every assessment task, and which is explained to students at length during a lecture. Students are encouraged to work closely with the rubric during the peer feedback process. To attain and maintain focus and commitment to the peer feedback process students are also given a peer feedback sheet, which contains a set of questions related to the assessment task that they have to address while reviewing their peers' work. In addition, informal discussions are held with students on the purpose of the peer feedback process, what aspects they should focus on, the types of comments they could make, the manner in which to provide their comments, and the manner in which to receive feedback.

The peer feedback process took place in a tutorial period. Students were asked to exchange their essays with the person seated next to or in close proximity to them. After they had provided their peer with feedback, they then returned the essay together with the peer feedback sheet. They were then given time in the tutorial to read through the comments on the essay and the peer feedback sheet and discuss these with the reviewer. Of note, to ensure that students take the peer feedback process seriously, they are required to attach their peer draft, as well as the peer feedback sheet, and the tutor draft essay to their final submission. This allows the tutor/lecturers to monitor whether students made use of, and the extent to which they used, both the peer and tutor feedback.

A total of 64 first year university students participated in this study. They were a mixed group of first and English additional language speakers who were all registered for the academic literacies module.

As part of the broader study students had to complete a questionnaire on their perceptions of the peer feedback process. The questionnaire consisted of both qualitative and quantitative questions. The student data used in this paper is qualitative in nature and emanated from the questions that asked students how they felt about giving feedback to and receiving feedback from their peers.

The completed questionnaires were then anonymised by assigning a number (R1 to R64) to each student. The data was analysed semantically and thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by first making a note of the particular adjective used by the student to describe their feelings. Then these were used to code the underlying emotion using Plutchnik's wheel of emotions. These codings were refined through iteration.

Findings and discussion

Giving feedback

Of the 64 students who completed the questionnaire, the majority of them (51) used positive descriptors to describe their feelings when giving peer feedback while a few students (11) used negative descriptors. These descriptors were coded using Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions by thematically analysing the emotion underpinning the descriptor (for example, a descriptor like 'enjoyed' indicated 'joy', while descriptors like 'worried' or 'anxious' were coded as 'apprehension'). From this thematic analysis, four main emotions emerged, namely Acceptance, Interest, Joy, and Apprehension. The most reported emotion was 'joy' (45%), while 25% of responses indicated 'interest', 13% indicated 'acceptance' and 17% indicated 'apprehension'. Each of these will be discussed separately.

Joy

Responses were coded as indicating 'joy' when students' descriptors indicated that they enjoyed helping others. This joy in helping others was split along three lines. Firstly, students indicated joy at the opportunity to help others improve their work. For example:

'I enjoy giving feedback that will help the person improve on their work' (Respondent 5)

'Felt good because I was able to help my peer' (Respondent 37)

Secondly, the enjoyment was related to the actual process; that is, students simply enjoyed the act of giving feedback, regardless of the perceived benefit for the receiver. For example:

'I enjoy reviewing & critiquing things' (Respondent 28)

'I enjoy giving feedback' (Respondent 5)

Thirdly, their enjoyment was related to their sense of confidence related to their own expertise and knowledge. For example:

'Good because I got to use my knowledge to better one of my friends work so that they can do better' (Respondent 7).

' . . . I feel that I am fairly good at writing and can give decent feedback' (Respondent 8).

In all three instances, therefore, the emotion of 'joy' was related to a sense of pride – that is, the sense that they could positively contribute to someone else's improvement, whether because they enjoy the actual act of giving feedback or their own perceived confidence, which suggests that these students used giving feedback to a peer as a way to

affirm what they know. Joy is considered a positive emotion which is closely associated with achievement (Pekrun, 2006). It could be postulated that, as these students are more receptive to giving feedback, they may also be more receptive to receiving feedback.

Interest

Responses were coded as indicating 'interest' when students' descriptors suggested that they were open to the process and curious about the perceived benefits for *themselves*. For example:

'Felt positive, as I was giving feedback I realised some of the mistakes I did on my paper & how I could improve it' (Respondent 26)

'Found it useful because it brought my attention to what I possibly did wrong & could improve on in my own essay' (Respondent 53)

Although the focus is often on the perceived benefit for the receiver, research has found that giving feedback is as, or more beneficial, to the giver as it is to the receiver (Li et al., 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Nicol et al., 2014). It is possible that the positive emotion – interest – that these students associated with peer feedback may therefore be due to the 'self-gain' factor; that is, because they found it useful for their own writing, they were positive about giving peer feedback. It does, therefore, raise the question as to whether these students would be as accepting of the peer feedback if there were no perceived value to themselves.

Acceptance

Responses coded as 'acceptance' indicated that students were open to the process as a whole and welcomed the perceived benefits for *both parties*. There therefore seemed to be a sense of welcoming the experience. For example:

'I felt that giving feedback benefitted both the reviewer and the writer. It is because the writer had a chance to fix her mistakes before the final draft was due. Myself as the reviewer would benefit to see the structure of assignment from another pupil' (Respondent 4)

'It not only benefits them but me' (Respondent 27)

In these few instances, the students are acknowledging that giving feedback to a peer was beneficial to both the giver and receiver. This is similar to other studies which found that generally speaking students appreciate the perceived benefit of the peer feedback (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Kwok, 2008). The positive emotion – acceptance – experienced here suggests that students are more open to the process.

Apprehension

Only one negative emotion emerged from students' responses to giving feedback, namely apprehension. This was largely due to students indicating a sense of nervousness, worry or anxiety. For example:

'It makes me kind of nervous because I'm scared of giving someone the wrong advice but I always try my hardest best' (Respondent 11)

'Nervous, I was unsure of whether my feedback was useful or not' (Respondent 60)

These students indicated an interrelated concern between lack of expertise and the possible resultant 'incorrect information'. These anxieties about their own ability to give feedback resulted in their experiencing negative emotions during the peer feedback

process. When students experience negative emotions such as anxiety stemming from their nervousness and being uncomfortable with the process, they are less likely to engage effectively, and learning may be inhibited (Weiss, 2000).

Receiving feedback

As in the case of giving feedback the majority of students (57) used positive descriptors to describe how they felt about receiving feedback from their peers. There were 5 students who viewed the process negatively, while 2 students did not respond to the question. Using Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions, five main emotions were identified from students' descriptors: acceptance, annoyance, apprehension, joy, and trust. As with giving feedback, 'joy' was the biggest underlying emotion (55%), while 'trust' was second biggest (25%), while 'acceptance' (9%), 'annoyance' (5%) and 'apprehension' (3%) made up the rest. Each one will be discussed individually.

Joy

Responses were coded as indicating 'joy' when they suggested that students were pleased and appreciative of the feedback they received, especially since it gave them an opportunity to improve their essay. For example:

'I appreciated it because it improved my essay' (Respondent 10)

'I feel very happy because she reminded me about important things that I forgot to include in my assignment' (Respondent 47)

In these examples, it was the fact that students saw the feedback as helpful and as a way to improve their essay that made them experience positive feelings. This is similar to other studies who found that generally speaking students value receiving feedback from peers (Liu & Carless, 2006; Nicol et al., 2014). This positive emotion – joy – suggests that students will be more open to the feedback they have received.

Trust

Responses were coded as indicating 'trust' when they suggested that students may trust the feedback they got from the reviewer, thereby seemingly creating a sense of 'safety' where students could learn from their own mistakes. For example:

'I felt comfortable with it as my reviewer is competent enough' (Respondent 1)

'Felt good because the feedback was useful and I know that the reviewer is reliable because of the feedback she gave' (Respondent 14)

This sense of competence and reliability of the reviewer could enable students to feel more confident about paying attention to the feedback given. This is in contrast to other studies (Liu & Carless, 2006) where the reliability and quality of peer feedback was highlighted as a possible downside to peer feedback. In this study, the students seemed to indicate that they trusted their peer feedback giver; since 'trust' is a positive emotion it may therefore lead to students being able to learn from and engage with peer feedback more effectively.

Acceptance

Responses were coded as indicating 'acceptance' when they suggested an openness to the process as a whole. These comments were almost 'neutral' in tone, as they suggested a kind of passive acceptance that the process is what it is. For example:

'Neutral, after all we are colleagues and they are just offering guidance where required' (Respondent 19)

'I felt that it was necessary' (Respondent 23)

These comments seem to suggest that the students felt that peer feedback was something they had to participate in, and that, because they were expected to do so and because there was no perceived threat to themselves, they were open to the process. This is similar to Nicol et al. (2014) who found that students are largely receptive towards peer feedback.

Negative emotions: Annoyance and Apprehension

Students also indicated that they experienced negative emotions namely 'annoyance' and 'apprehension'. For example:

'I felt worried because there was a lot that was wrong and some things were confusing me so it took a lot for me to understand stuff' (Respondent 17)

'Intimidating. I felt like my peer reviewer would criticise my ability to write' (Respondent 38)

Either way, the manner in which students are able to understand and make sense of their emotions impacts on their engagement with feedback that they may perceive as being critical in nature. Negative emotions may also impair cognitive processing of information (Falchikov & Boud, 2007).

Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to examine the emotions students experience when giving and receiving peer feedback. The findings reveal that although there were some negative emotions for both giving and receiving peer feedback – namely apprehension and annoyance – students generally experienced positive emotions, such as joy, acceptance, interest, and trust. This is in contrast to other studies which found that students largely had negative perceptions about peer feedback which led to negative emotions (Praver et al., 2011). This suggests that students' emotions while giving and receiving peer feedback are more complex than the seemingly solely negative ones implied in the literature. It is possible that the positive emotions experienced may be due to the scaffolding activities put in place to better enable students to have the necessary confidence to both give and receive feedback from peers.

Moreover, the positive emotions in the current study may also be largely due to how students saw themselves in relation to the peer feedback process – that is, the perceived value of the feedback to their own writing and to their self-esteem shaped the emotions that they experienced. Similarly, the negative emotions were often also self-directed to their insecurities about what to give feedback on and having someone give feedback on their work. While it could be conjectured that the positive emotions may have led to students being more amenable to engaging with and implementing feedback, further research on matching students' emotions with the essay revisions could be more definitive. Moreover, the familiarity with their peer feedbacker may have eased the process (Van Heerden & Bharuthram, 2021).

A noteworthy finding which contrasts to most literature on peer feedback is that there was a much greater positive reception of feedback from peers. Students rarely critiqued the actual feedback they received and tended to focus on their contributions. Students

were therefore critical of their ability to give good feedback, but rarely saw their peers' feedback as lacking somehow, suggesting two possible aspects: firstly, students may be more critical of the feedback they give than the feedback they receive, and secondly, students may be more receptive to feedback – regardless of quality – if it leads to some perceived benefit. This openness to feedback from various sources is a characteristic of a feedback literate student (Carless & Boud, 2018).

The findings of this study contribute to the literature of peer feedback. Firstly, for the educator, the study highlights some of the emotions that students may experience during peer feedback. This could increase the educator's sensitivity to students' emotional challenges. Secondly, it highlights the importance of incorporating the affective dimension in student feedback literacy development in more thoughtful and engaging ways. In particular, both the positive and negative emotions that may arise from giving and receiving feedback – as presented earlier – could be drawn on in open discussions with students so that they begin to understand that these emotions are a natural part of learning. This could contribute towards them engaging more positively with their emotions which may ultimately result in their becoming feedback literate. Thirdly, it highlights the importance of having many scaffolds in place to assist students with giving and receiving peer feedback. Lastly, the paper has also shown the value of using Plutchnik's Wheel of Emotions as an analytical tool in studying emotions in feedback.

The authors acknowledge that this study is relatively small scale. Nevertheless, it provides a useful starting point for understanding the emotions that student experience during peer feedback. Given the relative dearth of information on emotion and peer feedback, recommendations for future research include examining the link between emotions and learning outcomes, and specifically how emotions elicited during peer feedback may impact student engagement, learning and development. Future studies could also examine the emotions experienced in a range of contexts across different years of study, as well as the impact that different kinds of scaffolds might have on the emotions experienced during peer feedback. Similarly, the link between the emotions experienced and the final essay (and grade) could also be examined more explicitly. Understanding what engenders certain emotions and how those emotions may impact engagement during peer feedback may ultimately lead to improved learning and development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

S Bharuthram is an Associate Professor in academic literacies at the University of the Western Cape. Her research focus is on reading and writing in higher education as well as on assessment practices. Professor Bharuthram has published in national and international journals and has participated at local and international conferences.

Martina van Heerden is a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, where she teaches English for Educational Development to students in the Science, Law, and CHS faculties. Dr van Heerden's research interests include feedback, peer review, academic literacies, and academic development.

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