

# The impact and role of power within feedback communications in undergraduate, online higher education

## What are the aims and objectives?

Feedback is touted as ‘one of the most powerful learning processes’ (Winstone et al., 2021a, p. 1). Yet, it is widely recognised that students may not use their feedback (Jonsson, 2012; Mahoney et al., 2019; Winstone et al., 2017). Further, it is widely recognised that students consistently report that feedback is provided sub-standardly in higher education (HE) (The Social Research Centre, 2021). Many of the criticisms relate to the emotional impact and quality of feedback as well as the one-way, transactional nature of feedback (Martin, 2020; Winstone et al., 2021b). Jonsson (2012) takes a broad view of the criticisms of feedback and describes undemocratic feedback practices among several reasons why students may not use feedback.

To understand feedback within higher education (HE), it’s both fascinating and valuable to delve into the dominant conceptual metaphoric language used to describe it. Between 2009 and 2013, “information” was one of the most frequent modifiers and nouns of the term “feedback” (Jensen et al., 2021; Winstone et al., 2021a). Recent feedback literature has begun to see a shift from feedback as information-transmission toward feedback as a holistic, communicative process (Winstone et al., 2021a). Yet, despite the lip-service we give to fostering democratic practices in HE, the feedback process still sends students an undemocratic message. Thus, this project seeks to explore how power is shared and negotiated through feedback interactions in online HE.

## What is the focus of my research?

This research aims to interrogate the concept of power as it pertains to feedback within the instructor-student dyad in online HE. Instructors mark and monitor students’ performance, and the provision of feedback is a main component of the facilitation and teaching role. Power is a widely disputed concept and has been conceptualised as *power-over* relations (e.g., imposing one’s will over another) as well as one’s *power-to* do something (e.g., one’s capacity to carry out their own will) (Allen, 2016). The research will focus on the various forms of video feedback – screencast, talking head, and combination (Mahoney et al., 2019; Henderson & Phillips, 2014).

## Why is my research important? What is the context of the research, its background and significance?

Feedback has cognitive and affective consequences for students (London, 1995; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). This research is important as it seeks to interrogate and challenge the dominant use of feedback as authoritarian, information-transmission (Mayo, 2013; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999; Winstone et al., 2021b) toward feedback that prioritises student subjectivity.

It has been argued that feedback is inherently relational (Esterhazy, 2018). Students’ application of course content may be positively or negatively influenced by feedback from interactions such as

formative and summative assessment (Jonsson, 2012). Control-dominated (e.g., *power-over*) feedback and relationships within HE may be a barrier to student affect toward the unit and instructor which subsequently may reduce action and hinder improvement (London, 1995; Xu & Carless, 2017). Authoritative feedback is generally not perceived by students as fruitful (Jonsson, 2012) and is conceived by Jensen et al. (2021) as *feedback as command* and *treatment*; it is feedback that reflects a dominate/subordinate relationship within the instructor-student dyad. Such feedback may elicit unpleasant emotions and has the potential to be perceived as indoctrinating (hooks, 1994; London, 1995; Mayo, 2013; Noddings, 2015).

Feedback is not just a medium for information on performance; it is also a medium for power (Ball, 2013; hooks, 1994). The exertion of power is a communicative behaviour in which people may be encouraged and empowered or discouraged and inhibited. Thus, the delivery, framing and response to feedback are determined and reconciled by attributes of the feedback message and provider (Oh & Ki, 2019). Constructive, expressive and supportive feedback that prioritise shared power and student subjectivity (e.g., *power-to*) may create improved learning opportunities (Arghode et al., 2017).

The information-transmission model of feedback has, traditionally, encouraged control-dominated feedback over a model that prioritises affect, interactivity, support and subsequently, shared power (London, 1995; Winstone et al., 2021). This is unsurprising. The information-transmission model is reinforced by upholding disparities in power. This model is further bolstered through the shaping of HE institutions and feedback as a commodity rather than a community (Payne et al., n.d). Given the already steady growth toward fully online HE, which has been catalysed by Covid-19 (The Social Research Centre, 2021), it is even more vital to reflect feedback practices that may be inadequate for today's circumstances (Winstone et al., 2021a).

What gaps exist in the current, published knowledge? How will my research help to fill these gaps? What is novel or unique about my proposal? Does it follow on from research that I have already been involved in?

The intersections of feedback for improvement, learning and power between feedback providers and receivers have been underdone in the context of full online HE, and HE is, historically, rooted within systems of authority and power (hooks, 1994). Instructors' roles are rife with authoritarian trappings, and students' positions are bound in assumptions about deferential status and behaviours (hooks, 1994).

Building from research conducted for my master's thesis, yet pivoting away from constructivism toward critical theory, this research will differ from many studies of feedback; it will not only include instructor and student perceptions, which have served as the main data source (Mahoney et al., 2019) but also *symbolic artifacts* (e.g., language used) (Gravett, 2020).

What is your research plan? What are the project aims, design, and methodology?

Using a transformative worldview and poststructuralist theoretical paradigm, the research plan will focus on 'how' rather than 'why' questions (Holloway, 2021). The program will consist of two, sequential studies. The first study will be a review of the literature regarding power and students' positionality and subjectivity. The second, empirical, study will focus on the ways in which these discourses are played out

through the analysis of video feedback content and semi-structured interviews. My methodology will pair self-reported methodologies, e.g., semi-structured interviews, with Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of video feedback. Unlike the participant population in Thomas et al.'s (2017) content analysis study, my teaching staff participants will be gender-diverse and from a range of fully online HE disciplines, like my master's study.

What is the scope of your project? Is it narrowly focused on a particular issue or will it seek to answer broad questions?

The scope of the empirical study will focus on formative and summative feedback interactions.

What outcomes do you expect from the project? What changes to our understanding might come out of it, and who will benefit?

The outcomes seek to provide insight into the ways in which power and the provision of feedback impact learning. Outcomes may demonstrate ways in which instructors negotiate and share power to build students' capacities. Specifically, I aim to enhance understanding on the impact of feedback monologues on students and generate new knowledge which will inform and benefit pedagogy.

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