

Feedback Practices of School-Based Mentors in the Work Intergrated Learning Programme in South Africa

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that feedback is an essential facet of assessment in the learning environment because it enhances learning. However, little known about the feedback given to student teachers when they are on teaching practice and students' viewpoints about the role of feedback is not well understood as well. This study fills the gap by illuminating the feedback given to preservice teachers when they are on teaching practice. A qualitative content analysis approach was utilised to analyse three hundred and fifty journals. Alongside 10 students were interviewed to draw their perceptions and how they respond to feedback written in their journals. The researchers focused on written feedback which was written in student teachers' journals by mentor teachers. It was found out that feedback practices reflect mentors' personal belief systems and are constrained and influenced by their educational contexts. Some of the students interview responses reflected that the feedback they are given does not enhance learning. This then creates discrepancies, and such feedback interventions turn to disappoint. It is recommended that if feedback processes are to enhance learning, instructors should move beyond a view of feedback as transmission and acknowledge the impact feedback has on and the part students play in such processes. Instructors should give constructive feedback that enhance learning and develop deep disciplinary expertise. Feedback should be conceptualised as a developmentary dialogue that is positive and motivational.

Keywords: Feedback, School-Based Mentors, Work-Integrated Learning, Preservice Teachers, Content Analysis

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Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes are designed to enable students to apply their academic learning to the workplace and adopt professional practices. Providing feedback to students is an important part of the work integrated learning programmes, as existing research points to the positive impact of feedback on students' development of work-based knowledge and skills (Richardson, et al., 2009). Research shows that effective feedback practices do not have to be teacher regulation but also student directed. Teacher feedback is input that, together with students' own internal input, will help the students decide where they are regarding the learning goals they need or want to meet and what they will tackle next (Bookhart, 2008, Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In the context of initial teacher education, assessment feedback during work integrated learning, is commonly provided by the school-based mentors or supervisors and can be both formative and summative as suggested by William and Black, (1998). The institutions do not necessarily provide prior training for these school-based mentors to assess student teachers, but assessment guidelines and rubrics are provided and often contained in the students' journals. Although this is the case, clear feedback guidelines are not often provided to these school-based mentors resulting in mentors giving ad hoc feedback to students (Rens et al., 2020).

Despite studies been conducted on feedback provided to students by lecturers in most programmes in the higher education, little is known about the feedback practices given to student teachers by school-based mentors when they are on work-integrated learning or teaching practice. Furthermore, student teachers' perspectives on the role of feedback is not well understood as well. This paper draws from the literature on formative assessment and best feedback practices to examine the feedback practices of school-based mentors in the work integrated learning programme of one university in South Africa.

What is Feedback?

As alluded by Henderson, et al., (2019), scholars are working to reposition and reimagine feedback as a student-centred process. They see feedback as a process in which student teachers make sense of information about their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or teaching competences. Drawing from the definition by Hattie and Timperley (2007), conceptualize feedback as Information provided by an agent (e.g., school-based mentor) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. A teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response. Feedback thus is a "consequence" of performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In the light of the statement above, feedback is seen as a main element of formative assessment and one of the factors that have the strongest influence on learning thus developmental in nature (Havnes, et al., 2012).

Effective Feedback Practices

Literature on assessment identified feedback as an integral part of formative assessment and that not all feedback provided to students enhance learning nor guides the student on the next steps to take (Shute,2007; Hattie &Timperely; 2007; William & Black, 1998). The value of providing useful feedback to students, and the appropriateness of the way in which this is

accomplished, is well documented in literature. This study draws from the good feedback practices as proposed by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) to understand the feedback practices of school-based mentors in the work integrated learning.

Nicol and MacFarlane propose seven principles of good feedback practice to facilitate the development of student self-regulation and to aid in the active construction and acquisition of knowledge and skills by students. These scholars found that students can only achieve learning goals if they understand the goals, assume some ownership of them, and can assess progress. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) describe the seven principles as being constitutive of good feedback.

Feedback is effective when it clarifies in unambiguous terms the goals, criteria, and expected standards in a learning context. This is essential to narrow the gap in understanding. Another approach that has proved particularly powerful in clarifying goals and assessment requirements has been to provide students with ‘exemplars’ of performance (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2002). Exemplars are effective because they define an objective standard against which students can compare their work. In a work integrated learning context exemplars of what good performance is are commonly set by the institutions in accordance with requirements from the council of higher education and are made available in the teaching practice journals.

Good feedback practice facilitates the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning as suggested by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006). A key principle behind self-assessment and self-regulation is that students are involved both in identifying the standards or criteria that apply to their work and in monitoring and making judgements about how their work relates to these standards (Black &William, 1998). In the work integrated learning student teachers are expected to be able to engage in self-assessment and critical reflection on their WIL experiences. Because of the complex nature of critical reflection, it cannot just be assumed that a student teacher will be able to critically reflect on his or her WIL experience. It is imperative that each student teacher has an expert mentor who directs him or her to an accepted level of self-reflection, using questions, comments, and suggestions to reach a meaningful level of critical reflection (Rens, et al., 2020, p:). Researchers in this study concur with other scholars that effective feedback from school-based mentors should enable student teachers to have the opportunity to augment their critical reflection ability while training and as Rens et al., (2020) suggest in a safe and supportive environment. While this is the case, sufficient knowledge of school-based mentors’ feedback practices in relation to the above-mentioned principle and how student-teachers view the feedback given to them by mentors is needed.

The other principle involves the notion that good feedback encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning. Good Feedback practice is conceptualised more as a dialogue rather than as information transmission. (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol & Milligan, 2006) Feedback as dialogue means that the student teacher not only receives initial feedback information but also can engage the school-based mentor in discussion about that feedback. Discussions with the school-based mentor assist student teachers to develop their understanding of expectations and standards, to check out and correct misunderstandings and to get an immediate response to difficulties. This principle guided the understanding of the school-based mentors’ feedback practices.

Good feedback practice provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. Closing the gap is about supporting students through feedback that should be used by students to produce improved work, which might involve redoing the same assignment or providing opportunities for resubmission at specific moments of the feedback cycle. (Perrotta & Whitelock, 2017; Nicol & Milligan, 2006). Feedback by school-based mentors should support and help student teachers to recognize the next steps in their work integrated learning experiences and re-do or take action to improve their teaching competencies while they are learning.

Good feedback practice delivers high quality information to students about their learning, where quality can be interpreted as insight that focuses not only on pinpointing strengths and weaknesses in student work but also offering corrective, constructive advice for improvement that relates back to the goals of the assignment (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). Quality feedback is descriptive rather than evaluative; it provides information about the gap between current student performance (effect) and the goals, standards and criteria that define academic competence. Comments that provide non-specific advice such as praise/blame or exhortations (e.g., 'try harder') or unclear statements ('this essay is poorly structured') do (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). The researchers in this study are of the opinion that reimagining and re-thinking work integrated learning in terms of the seven principles of good feedback practice help develop self-regulation. Descriptive information about performance in relation to stated assessment criteria is more effective and more likely to be acted upon by students' teachers.

Richardson et al. (2009) describe the role of the work-based mentor or supervisor as educational and supportive in developing the students by teaching knowledge and skills and assisting the students to transfer their theoretical knowledge to practice. This supportive function involves encouraging the student in their development of self-confidence as a professional and more broadly work awareness towards the establishment of a reflective practice.

Good feedback practice in this instance, should also encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem. The principle mentioned by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, which suggests making multiple low-stakes assignments that are intended to generate feedback for the purposes of helping students gauge progress and achievement rather than to focus on grades as indicators of success or failure. Compared to the academic environment where performance is quantified by grades, performance in the workplace is often unclear, intangible, and based on the perception of others. This requires student teachers in the workplace to be patient because it is impossible for them to know everything about the school from the outset. Hence students-teachers need to adopt learning styles that quickly build their confidence (Martin & Hughes, 2009) School-based mentors can help this process by providing support, encouragement, reinforcement, guidance, positive criticism, and feedback.

Finally, and consistent with with the aims of assessment in higher education, good feedback practice should also provide useful information for lecturers that can be used to improve subsequent activities and courses.

Aims of the Research

The focus of this paper is on examining the feedback practices of school-based mentors in the work integrated learning programme of one university in South Africa. The study addressed the following questions:

- *What are school-based mentors' feedback practices?*
- *How do student-teachers view the feedback given to them by mentors?*

In this research paper the principles discussed in the preceding paragraphs assisted in finding out what type of feedback was given to student teachers when they are on teaching practice. Feedback given to student teachers is important because such feedback shows if there are points of progression and areas which needs improvement (Perrotta & Whitelock 2017).

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach which is rooted in the interpretative paradigm (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Qualitative approach was chosen to provide specific understanding of feedback given to preservice teachers by mentor teachers. Qualitative approaches are for the most part, intended to achieve depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This is the reason why qualitative research method appeared to be the most appropriate method for this research because the researchers were after an in-depth understanding of feedback to preservice student teachers by mentor teachers. The importance of feedback also stimulated researchers to sort for deeper analysis of the feedback given to preservice teachers when they are on teaching practice.

Feedback is one of the major factors of learning and teaching process and is recognised as a core component of the learning process, so depth of understanding is needed. In support Chernikova et al (2020 p.1) are of the view that “feedback functions as an instructional scaffold that can enhance reflection, consequently fostering student teachers’ professional competence”. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) provided variable principles of feedback practices which we thought can assist in unshing the type of feedback given to preservice teachers by mentor teachers. The seven principles are highly esteemed for cultivating students’ ability to self-regulate their own performance (Perrotta & Whitelock 2017).

Population and Sampling

In research population does not refer to people only, it also refers to total quantity of the things or cases which are the subject of research (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, (2016). For this research population refers to 350 preservice teachers’ journals of third year students who were in a BEd programme. Researchers focused on written feedback which was written in student teachers’ journals by mentor teachers.

Convenience sampling was employed to analyse 30 journals because researchers were faced with quite many journals. Most researchers agree on the fact that convenient is useful especially when randomization is impossible like when the population is very large (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, (2016 p 1). Furthermore, convenience sampling techniques stresses a lot on the importance of generalisation making sure the data gathered adequately represent the population the sample is drawn from. In cases where it is impossible to collect data from everyone in the population it is necessary to employ convenient sampling when the research is qualitative in nature. However, it is the nature of research that gives researchers direction in terms of the type of sampling to adopt. Thirty journals were therefore, sampled for data collection. These thirty journals (30) were easily accessible to the researchers because one of the researchers was teaching the students. In support some scholars are of the opinion that convenience sampling is affordable, easy and the subjects are readily available (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, (2016). Alongside 10 students were interviewed to draw their perceptions and

how they respond to feedback written in their journals. Semi-structured interview questions were asked to 10 students. This type of interview was more appropriate to compliment content analysis—because it addressed the areas of which were not captured by the written feedback.

Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) from the University. The participants were informed about the study and the relevant information such as the title, purpose of the study and the objectives. The participants were provided with the consent forms that they had to sign. The anonymity of the participants was kept private and confidential (Creswell and Guetterman 2019). The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they can withdraw from participating at any given time. The data gathering process was carried out in line with the Government COVID-19 regulations and guidelines.

Results and Discussion

It was found out that feedback practices reflect mentors' personal belief systems and are constrained and influenced by their educational contexts. The educational contexts of these school-based mentors are still clinging to the traditional way of teaching and assessment which is teacher centred not learner focussed. The feedback practice of school-based mentors seemed to revolve around principle 6 which emphasise feedback that encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem. Although the feedback given by mentors is motivational, it is not specific nor descriptive enough. It is not linked to the learning that is expected and highlights key issue like faulty interpretations and lack of understanding. The feedback does not also direct students-teachers of the next steps to take to the improvement of their teaching competencies. This happens even though the exemplars of what 'good work looks like, which embraces principle1, are provided in the teaching practice journals as per the institution requirements.

The analysed journals and interviews data do not say anything about principle 1 to 5 and 7. Accordingly all principles should be the focus because feedback should be geared towards an on-going improvement of teaching skills as student -teachers learn to enact the pedagogical theories into practice in an authentic environment/ real classroom environment during work integrated learning season.

Good feedback should give students the opportunity to develop their ability to self-assess and self-correct. In support Dawson, Carless & Lee (2021) argue that 'authentic feedback' should have processes that resemble the feedback practices of the discipline, profession or workplace. The comments in the analysed journals did not also develop reflection which involves metacognitive reasoning (Rens et al., 2020). Apart from that, there was no room in the comments of the mentors to facilitate peer assessment which often involves giving of feedback. This is contrary to Strijbos and Sluijsmans (2010), who believe that peers are legitimate providers of feedback. Mentor feedback and peer feedback assist students monitoring their learning, utilising their own and external feedback about their progress (Harris, Brown, & Harnett, 2014). Principle number 2 as outlined in the above findings was not adequately addressed by the school-based mentors.

Interview data revealed that principle number 3 which involves the notion that good feedback encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning was lacking in the school-based mentors feedback practices. Most feedback given was written and did not allow student-

teachers opportunity to engage the mentors in discussion about it. Even peers were not accommodated in this feedback contrary to what good feedback model as proposed by Nicol and Mac Farlane-Dick (2006). Hence the feedback was more transmissive than developmental.

The analysed data and interview results also showed that feedback given by school-based mentors did not provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. Written feedback on the analysed journals were not explicit enough in guiding the next steps student should take after lesson presentation. Interview data also revealed that student-teachers did not have an opportunity to re-do the lesson which or re-focus their lesson on the aspects the mentor has identified as lacking. This contrary to principle number 4 as outlined by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) which is about good feed-back practice being about closing the gap between current and desired performance.

The results showed that mentors feedback practices did not embrace principle number 5 which states that good feedback should give students high quality information to about their learning. The feedback given seem to be lacking as no constructive advice for improvement that relates back to the goals or criteria outlined in the teaching practice journal (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). Feedback given is evaluative not descriptive and provides no information about the gap between current student performance (effect) and the goals, standards and criteria that define academic competence Comments given did not provide student teachers with specific advice to improve their competencies in teaching and planning of the lesson.

As researchers in this study, we also reflected on the feedback given by mentors and found it to be lacking in informing us about the extent to which our students have developed expertise so that we can adapt our teaching accordingly. Hence the last principle which involves the notion that good feedback provides information to teacher-educators that can be used to help shape their teaching was missing in the feedback practices of these mentors.

In addition to the how mentor feedback is experienced by the student-teachers, some interviewed students articulated that they support peer feedback but most of the students were alone in the schools they were practising. To them receiving feedback from peers is motivating and encouraging since they have the same experiences. Though there is this controversy that “students seem to like receiving multiple forms of feedback and may prefer teacher feedback to that generated by themselves or peers due to concerns about accuracy” (Harris, Brown, & Harnett, 2014, p. 111). Feedback should be centred around professional development and to monitor learning progressions. There is the notion that feedback contributes to growth in learning and teaching and that the expertise of a mentor as a legitimate source of good and authentic feedback. Feedback should, therefore, focus on improving learning rather than mask it (Brown et al. 2012).

The results on feedback practices above, raise concerns regarding how assessment in the work integrated learning programme of the initial teacher education programmes is handled. As alluded in the introduction of this paper, assessment in the work integrated learning can be both formative and summative. Formative assessment which involves both mentor and peer-feedback seem not practiced at all by mentors in schools. The feedback assessment that is commonly provided is summative which involves feedback that is centred on the mark or grade. This feedback is often evaluative and does not improve student knowledge and skills (Black & William, 1998).

Implications

The implication is that the institutions need to re-imagine formative assessment which involves both mentor and peer feedback as a core of its practice in the work integrated learning programme. Seven principles as outline in the preceding sections need to be used as theoretical model for this. The teaching practice journal and related assessment tools and activities need and to be revised to align with the formative assessment based on the model.

Conclusion

to support the delivery of teacher and peer feedback even though more research is required to This research adds to the body of knowledge on school-based mentor feedback in the work integrated learning. This study also adds to our understanding of what feedback school-based mentors give and how student teachers experience and understand feedback. The conclusion is that mentor feedback needs to be aligned to the seven principles. Good feedback should be a vehicle to enhance student-teachers' knowledge and skills of their practice.

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