Editorial

Taking into account the role of the learner in feedback and assessment processes

In this issue, Oh, Williams and Hodgson's paper "Radiography students' preferences regarding assessment and feedback" reminds me of our need to better understand how students experience feedback and assessment. Typically, assessment and feedback within a program are seen (and experienced) as something the teacher cooks up and serves to a learner. We focus on how assessment aligns to learning outcomes, but we often don't focus enough on the effects of assessment, summative and formative, on the learner (Dawson et al., 2018). These effects may be in the form of knowledge and skill gains but may also manifest as changes in learner affect or identity.

Oh et al. explores the question of student experiences of, and preferences for, feedback and assessment in a radiography program. Students favoured assessment embedded within computer-based image analysis and practical skill tasks, both of which have high authenticity. Given that these assessment tasks are closely linked to activities that are performed as part of professional practice, it reinforces the view that students find these assessment tasks relevant and worthy of investment. Considering this concept of student preferences, Billett, Cain and Hai Le (2016), in their research on workplace learning in healthcare settings, found that students are not time poor but rather "time jealous", that is, they make judgements constantly about what tasks (assessed or otherwise) are most important for their learning, and they invest effort according to these personal judgements. Oh et al.'s research findings are a reminder of the importance of understanding how learners experience feedback and assessment. In this survey-based study, we have insight into learners' self-report of utility and effect. The next step is to gain insights into the effects that are visible through changes in knowledge or behaviour. As educators, this is the direction we need to head in, as a way to advance our understanding.

The "focus on effects" was a central contention of the recent 3-day International Feedback Symposium in Prato, Italy (September 2018), which I attended as part of the host team. Leading feedback and assessment researchers, coming from cognitivist, constructivist and social constructivist frames, were invited to participate. We spent most of the first day debating the definition of feedback (delightful tensions arising from the diversity of philosophical perspectives within the room). While we did not reach consensus on how to define feedback, there was great unity when we discussed the types of assessment and feedback designs that "make a difference to students' learning". Some of these principles included: 1) engaging students in authentic tasks (less demand for teachers to provide a compelling rationale for engagement because students experience the "organic lock" when they undertake tasks), 2) ensuring the timing of the assessment is well considered to allow students to engage with performance-related information and transfer these new learnings into subsequent tasks and 3) developing students' "feedback literacy" (Carless & Boud, 2018) in a purposeful and iterative way throughout their programs.

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Research on the development of learner feedback literacy, the "understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies" (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 2) is gaining traction in both the higher education and health professions education literature. Noble et al. (2018) undertook a study, funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), to explore the development of learner feedback literacy in the clinical environment. In this study, students from across the health professions were exposed to an online priming module on feedback, a 3-hour interprofessional feedback workshop (with learner-centred feedback front and centre) and follow-up reflective tasks (feedback log and interview post placement) to examine uptake of feedback knowledge and skill within the clinical setting. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that students were prepared to challenge the unidirectional feedback culture and did so through asking supervisors to comment on certain aspects of their performance (pre-task and post-task) and that they were better prepared with language to contribute to dialogic exchanges post performance. Another exciting finding was students' proactivity in "hunting down" opportunities for similar tasks (i.e., cannulation or taking blood) that would allow for practical opportunities to enact new strategies identified in feedback exchanges (Noble et al., 2018). The findings illustrate the importance of building student capacity in feedback, both in understanding the broader notion of feedback as a process (not as comments) and also in having the language and confidence to enter into these processes.

As illustrated in this issue in Oh et al.'s study, student capacity and preference for feedback can change as students move from the classroom to workplace setting. In the clinical workplace setting, students need to work hard to access feedback opportunities, and these are mediated through social encounters (Telio, Ajjawi, & Regehr, 2015, Noble et al., 2018). Much of the research and thrust of professional development activities designed to improve feedback and assessment in clinical education centre on reducing or "putting to the side" emotion that can "interfere" with learning. Increasingly, we are understanding that affect is an important component within these learning exchanges and can be an important output also. Carless and Boud's (2018) theoretical exposition of feedback literacy acknowledges that "managing affect" is a key component of learners' capacity to understand and use feedback for their own means.

The findings from Oh et al.'s study in radiography remind us to design assessment and feedback for learning and the importance of the active role of the learner in these processes in order for them to have any effect. Research efforts aimed at better understanding learner feedback literacy (what it looks like and how to attain it) will be key in continuing this important work. Additionally, increasing access to technology-mediated feedback (such as learners having access to feedback information based on learning domain or specific learning outcomes) rather than an aggregated grade on a single assessment task means that students, over the course of their programs, can collect these traces and reflect more meaningfully on areas of strength and areas for development.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

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