

Chapter 9

What counts as quality feedback? Disciplinary differences in students' and teachers' perceptions of feedback

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Abstract

As the literature has shown, students and teachers in different higher education settings often perceive the quality of feedback in varying ways. Recognising that the discipline is important for the way students and teachers perceive teaching and learning in higher education, we assume that the perceived quality of feedback is related to the specific teaching-learning environment in which it is embedded. To that end, we explore in this chapter what students and teachers perceive to be quality feedback in their courses and how these perceptions are related to those of their own teaching-learning environments. We draw on interviews with students and teachers from three different courses that vary in their disciplines and pedagogical approaches. The findings show that the criteria for what counts as quality feedback vary across course contexts and between students and teachers. The differences are related to the importance attributed to certain structural, epistemic, and relational-affective characteristics of the course environment. Based on these findings, we suggest that it is important to develop more context-sensitive ways of evaluating and developing the quality of feedback in higher education.

Introduction

One of the main strands of the current discourse on quality in higher education focusses on ways to ensure the quality of the feedback students receive. The assumption that feedback has a powerful effect on student learning and motivation is supported by a large body of research and is generally accepted among educational practitioners (Evans, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). As such, quality feedback is typically considered essential to quality in higher education. Those engaged with ‘quality work’ are consequently required to understand what quality feedback entails and how it can be achieved in practice. As to what quality feedback looks like in practice, however, there is little agreement. Several empirical studies have shown that the perception of what counts as quality feedback can vary greatly between different course participants, including both students and teachers (Adcroft, 2011; Carless, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Most of these studies have focussed only on the general perception of feedback, without referring to the concrete course context. As Evans (2013, p. 77) notes, even when studies are situated in a certain discipline, the ‘importance of the domain and relevance of specific types of feedback are often not developed and the context not sufficiently explained’.

Other research has shown that the context is essential for how course participants perceive teaching and learning in higher education and what kinds of practices they engage in (Huber & Morreale, 2002; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). This idea is related to the notion of ‘quality of teaching and learning’ being deeply embedded in the discourses and practices of the discipline and its respective teaching-learning environment (Wittek & Habib, 2013).

Hence, we need to take into account the characteristics of the specific teaching-learning environment when studying perceptions of quality feedback. To this end, this chapter draws on data from case studies of three higher education courses to examine the following questions: 1) *What do different students and teachers (i.e. course participants) perceive as*

quality feedback in their courses? 2) What elements of the teaching-learning environment do course participants emphasise as central to quality feedback in their courses?

The cases used to address these questions are part of a larger project called Quality in Norwegian Higher Education.¹ The primary data sources are interviews with students and teachers; observational data of the course contexts also provides supplementary insights into the course elements that students and teachers emphasise as important.

In the remainder of this chapter, we first provide a review of the empirical literature on perceptions of quality feedback, followed by a presentation of our analytical perspective based on Yang and Carless's (2013) work. Second, we present each case's findings, which then serve as the basis for our discussion across all cases. The chapter concludes by elaborating on how our study contributes to the understanding of quality feedback in higher education and how this understanding is relevant for 'quality work' at the course level.

Previous research on the perception of quality feedback

The growing concern among practitioners and policy-makers about the quality of feedback in higher education has contributed to an increased focus on the way both students and teachers perceive feedback. While some studies have indicated that perceptions of feedback tend to be relatively similar among students and teachers (e.g. Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, et al., 2018; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016), others have shown considerable divergence both within and between these groups (e.g. Carless, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). These findings paint a complex picture that makes it difficult to draw a clear conclusion about what students and teachers generally perceive as quality feedback, which

¹ www.qnhe.no; see report for further information on the project's aims, methodology, and case descriptions (Nerland & Prøitz, 2018).

relates to the common challenge of reconciling findings from research conducted in different higher education disciplines and environments.

It is important to find ways of accounting for the discipline-specific teaching-learning environment the feedback takes place in to make sense of how and why different course participants might agree or disagree on what quality feedback is. One interesting approach stems from recent work in which feedback is re-conceptualised as a *set of processes by which information about the quality of a student performance is generated, made meaning of, and acted upon* (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Esterhazy, 2018). From this view, feedback is achieved in interaction between students, teachers, and the teaching-learning environment. Which forms of feedback will eventually emerge in a course is therefore influenced by the respective discipline and its established pedagogical practices that have developed over time (Ajjawi, Molloy, Bearman, & Rees, 2017; Esterhazy, 2018; Yang & Carless, 2013). We can conclude from this idea that students' and teachers' perceptions of quality feedback are deeply embedded in the discourses and practices of their discipline. Following this conceptualisation of feedback, we can understand quality feedback as a context-dependent phenomenon that can only be perceived in close interrelation with the teaching-learning environment.

Reviewing the empirical research on feedback perceptions from this perspective yields a number of interesting findings that support the idea that the teaching-learning environment plays an often implicit, but nonetheless central, role in the perceptions of quality feedback. One insight from the literature is the importance of the *structural aspects* of the course environment for the way feedback quality is perceived. For example, students and teachers acknowledge the importance of timing and access to resources as being relevant for productive feedback (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). In general, teachers seem to refer more often to structural elements such as timing, task sequence, and modes of feedback when describing quality feedback (Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, et al., 2018).

Several studies have also shown the significance of *relationships and emotions* for the perception of quality feedback. Generally, people perceive feedback as being good when it promotes confidence, increases motivation, and builds positive relationships (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Price et al., 2010). Several studies have shown that students differ greatly in their emotional response to feedback, which then influences how good they perceive it to be (Carless, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Ryan & Henderson, 2017).

Finally, several studies have shown that the *disciplinary content* of the specific course is relevant for the perception of feedback quality. Both teachers and students appreciate feedback that clarifies task requirements, positions students within their disciplinary environment, and inducts them into the demands of the course (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). It appears, however, that teachers tend to think that good feedback serves to engage students with the knowledge content of the course, while students judge the quality of feedback more according to how well it has communicated the tutor's requirements in order to receive a good grade (Orsmond & Merry, 2011). This situation is related to other findings that have shown that students tend to judge feedback quality on the content of the feedback comments and how they relate to the knowledge and learning challenges relevant to their discipline (Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, et al., 2018; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Price et al., 2010).

In summary, the literature supports the idea that the teaching-learning environment and its structural, relational-affective, and epistemic dimensions matter to perceptions of quality feedback. This review has also revealed, however, that despite these discipline-specific characteristics, most studies portray quality feedback as a phenomenon that can be studied independently of the disciplinary context. This chapter contributes to the field by exploring and discussing course participants' perceptions of quality feedback in three

different disciplinary contexts and by drawing special attention to the dimensions of the specific teaching-learning environments relevant for feedback quality.

Analytical perspective

Our analytical perspective is based on a recent study by Yang and Carless (2013), who proposed a normative model that helps to identify which elements of a disciplinary course context are most relevant to promoting those dialogic feedback practices that help students to develop the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. According to this model, every teaching-learning environment can be described according to three closely inter-related dimensions that shape the way the feedback process emerges in a particular course in a discipline.²

First, the discipline consists of the resources, procedures, and rules that influence the structure from which feedback interactions can emerge (*the structural dimension*). Second, the discipline is characterised by a typical distribution of responsibilities and social conventions, which in turn influence the typical relations between students and teachers and the emotions involved during feedback interactions (*the relational-affective dimension*). Finally, the discipline is made up of different types of knowledge content that course participants must engage with in a course, thereby influencing the knowledge that is shared within feedback interactions (*the epistemic dimension*).

Yang and Carless's (2013) perspective provides a promising approach to studying the way teachers and students perceive quality feedback as embedded in the respective teaching-learning environment. The following section presents our methodological approach and outlines how we have analysed our empirical material according to Yang and Carless's (2013) three dimensions.

² We employ a slightly adapted version of these dimensions in this chapter.

Empirical context and data

Case study design

This chapter draws on three case studies of courses in different disciplines in Norway: a) an undergraduate course in biology, based on portfolio assessment; b) a graduate course in law, using moot courts; and c) an undergraduate course in nursing, using simulation as part of clinical practice. The three cases were selected for the following reasons: first, they included feedback as a central element of their course design; second, they provided insight into both professional (in the law and nursing cases) and non-professional (the biology case) disciplines; finally, they employed types of pedagogical approaches common to the respective disciplines.

Course contexts

The biology course was a 21-week-long portfolio-based course module on ecology at a large research-intensive university in Norway. A total of 27 students were enrolled in the course, taught by one main teacher and four co-teachers. The goal of the course was to provide an introduction to basic ecological theory and to develop students' ability to think and write scientifically. The majority of the 266 hours of workload (based on 10 ECTS) involved student-organised activities, such as reading the syllabus or working on different assignments, both individually and in groups. Only 10% of the planned workload involved teacher-led activities such as lectures, tutorials, and feedback sessions. The portfolio tasks entailed nine written assignments, one oral presentation, and one peer review. During the semester, the assignments were presented successively as students were provided with different deadlines for voluntarily submitted drafts for formative feedback. Students could also attend oral feedback sessions with their teachers to discuss the written feedback they had received on their drafts. After the final deadline was reached, an average grade was calculated for each student based on all submitted portfolio tasks.

The nursing course was an obligatory 10-week practice course module in ‘supervised clinical practice in medical nursing’ within a part-time bachelor’s programme in nursing at a university college in Norway. Eleven students were enrolled in the course, which was taught by two teachers. The aim of the course was to develop students’ knowledge about factors that influence basic needs in acutely and chronically ill patients and to enable students to reflect on their personal and professional development. The course had two fundamental elements (300 hours total): a supervised clinical practice in a hospital with an individual assignment, and one pedagogical presentation with simulations replicating an acute-care situation with a patient dummy. During practice, the students spent a total of two days at the simulation lab for simulation and pedagogical presentation. They wrote mandatory reflection papers at the end of each day of practice at the hospital. The students were encouraged to work together in groups on challenges they experienced during their practicum. The simulation included a set time allotted for preparation before the case and feedback and debriefing afterwards. The simulation was performed in the context of a reflection seminar, where the simulation was explicitly connected to reflection as an activity. The seminar was framed as a retreat, where participants could pause from their busy hospital practicum and work on experiences in a different setting, with other inputs and more room for thinking about the relations between actions and the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the practicum. The students were asked to reflect on a) the simulation, b) their student presentations, and c) how, halfway through the period, they had experienced the practicum. In addition to the ongoing feedback provided during the simulation in the form of comments and gestures, it was also provided in the form of oral debriefing sessions immediately after the simulations, where the teacher provided immediate feedback on the students’ performance. While the debriefing was primarily directed towards those students who had performed the simulation, it also included the other group participants. The students also received immediate ad-hoc feedback during

practice, short written comments on their reflection papers and daily plans, and oral feedback within formal evaluation sessions with their main teacher. The course was graded on a pass/fail basis.

The law course was a 12-week-long work-related (15 ECTS credits) course module in criminal law at a research-intensive university in Norway. The course included 99 fourth-year students and was taught by four main teachers. The aim was to introduce students to fundamental principles of criminal justice issues and to encourage them to critically apply and analyse these notions in relation to the contemporary social and political context. The majority of the workload was related to two fundamental elements (lectures and seminars) in addition to working with the syllabus and different assignments, both individually and in groups. The course included several instructional activities ranging from online lectures, teacher-led lectures, and diverse seminars (a writing seminar and procedural seminars / moot courts). In the moot courts, the students signed up to act as counsellors or prosecutors in a simulated court. The sessions also included the students' teachers and one professional state prosecutor, both of whom acted as judges. The participating students primarily received peer feedback during the preparation phase and direct feedback from everyone involved in the moot court, as well as debriefing feedback from the teachers and judge. The students received feedback on their reasoning and use of the available materials as well as on their enactment of various situations. The remainder of the students, who participated as audience members, had to write the final judgement following the hearing. When receiving feedback in the following feedback lectures, all students could take part in the feedback sessions from their various viewpoints of involvement. During the semester, the students were successively presented with voluntary assignments and could receive formative feedback from their teachers and peers; they also attended oral seminars that included opportunities for immediate feedback on

their reasoning. Each student had to have one oral presentation approved by the teacher during the semester.

Table 1 provides an overview of the main characteristics and data collected from the different cases. Further details on the three case studies may be found in the project report (Nerland & Prøitz, 2018).

Table 1.

Main characteristics and data collected from the three courses

	Biology course	Nursing course	Law course
Number of teachers	5	2	4
Number of students	28	11	99
Course period	20 weeks	10 weeks	12 weeks
Number of interviewees	3 student group interviews (N = 9); 2 teacher interviews (N = 2)	2 student group interviews (N = 10); 3 teacher interviews (N = 3)	3 student group interviews (N = 11); 2 teacher group interviews (N = 4)
Main feedback features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Portfolio assessment with nine written assignments Written feedback comments by teachers on drafts Face-to-face feedback sessions with teachers Opportunity to resubmit drafts after feedback Peer feedback on one assignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written feedback on reflection papers Written feedback on daily plans Individual halfway-point feedback Constant ongoing oral feedback during practicum at the hospital. Debriefing after simulation Oral feedback on presentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers' written feedback comments on drafts Face-to-face feedback sessions with teachers in seminars Opportunity to visit the teachers' offices for direct individual or group-based feedback on queries Collective feedback on submitted work in lectures Peer feedback on assignments (formal and informal peer feedback in group work)
Teaching and learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group work Lectures Tutorials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simulation Presentations Regular practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lectures Seminars Procedural seminars

Data and analytical strategy

The primary data sources include pre- and post-course interviews with teachers and post-course interviews with student groups collected in each case. This data was supplemented by course documents and observations of course activities. We analysed the interview data in two steps using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we identified excerpts in the interviews where students or teachers had mentioned feedback either

explicitly or implicitly (e.g. referring to interactions in which students obtained knowledge about the quality of their work or how to improve it). The aim was not to provide a comprehensive description of all feedback interactions that took place in each case (and how students and teachers evaluated these interactions); instead, the excerpts were summarised to identify typical interactions that students and teachers recognised and acknowledged as quality feedback in their courses.

Second, we used the three dimensions adapted from Yang and Carless's (2013) work to identify elements of the teaching-learning environment that interviewees emphasised as important for quality feedback in their descriptions. For each case, we focussed on the differences/similarities in the elements of the teaching-learning environment that the respective students and teachers had highlighted when describing quality feedback in their courses. These findings were then integrated to address the overarching question of what role the teaching-learning environment played for understanding what counted as quality feedback among students and teachers.

Findings

Biology case

When asked to identify feedback situations in their course, the biology students generally talked about the written feedback comments they received on their drafts and the oral feedback sessions as a supportive element of this written feedback. The teacher used a wider definition of feedback and also referred to tutorials and lectures as opportunities for students to seek feedback on their assignments.

The students and teachers had slightly different opinions on which structural elements were important for quality feedback. For the structure and timing of the portfolio tasks, the teacher believed that quality feedback entailed creating opportunities for revising assignments

after having received feedback comments. He explained that the ‘key rationale for including feedback and the opportunity for [students] to respond to it is that that’s ... where the learning happens’. Students understood the intention of having early deadlines to engage them in continuous work from the beginning of the semester. Nonetheless, they experienced a breach in trust when feedback emphasised weaknesses and gaps in their drafts that would not have existed had they submitted the drafts later. The structural and relational-affective aspects of the environment were closely intertwined and together influenced the experience of quality feedback. Another important structural aspect for quality feedback was the way it activated relevant resources. The textbook used in the course structured most assignments, but the teacher and students alike perceived it as being rather general and lacking in detail, which gave the students difficulties in using it to address certain tasks. The students hence perceived the feedback as limiting when the teacher emphasised that they should use the textbook more in their assignments. As one student explained, ‘I think it’s okay to ask us to use the textbook when it’s clear where in the textbook he wants us to find information’. The implication is that, for students, quality feedback entailed activating relevant and useful resources.

Several relational-affective aspects mattered for the students’ and teachers’ perceptions of feedback quality. For the students, quality feedback primarily implied positive emotions. One student reported on her frustration upon receiving critical comments: ‘I stopped sending [the assignment drafts] in because I didn’t want assignments that would make me feel bad’. For the teacher, good feedback sometimes also required students to engage with ‘painful’ activities such as revising their work. He described quality feedback interactions as those in which students did not take feedback as personal criticism but were able to ‘absorb comments and make use of them’. For him, good-quality feedback interactions therefore required a trustful environment that would make it less threatening both for students and teachers to expose their work and expectations. While the students tended to agree, they

nonetheless reported that having to discuss their work face-to-face with the teacher was emotionally taxing. Consequently, both students and teachers saw the teacher-organised peer review as a good way to engage with feedback in a safe environment. The teacher noted of the peer review that it ‘was a really positive experience. ... If I did anything else differently [in the future], I’d give them more than one [chance] to review’.

The students and teachers had different views about the knowledge that should be shared within feedback interactions. The students mostly discussed written comments and appreciated those that provided information about the quality and content of their assignments rather than technical elements such as spelling or formatting. They also thought that comments should provide specific information about how they could improve their work. The teacher was more concerned with the ‘right level of difficulty, [which is] where they struggle a bit’. He explained that knowledge shared in feedback should neither be too trivial nor too demanding. For him, good comments should never provide the correct answers but should instead generate realistic challenges that will invite students to meet within their groups.

The students and the teacher disagreed about whether good formative feedback should entail assessment, such as in the form of grades. The students desired clear and tangible indications of the quality of their work; one student suggested the teacher could say: ‘As it stands right now, this is a B, but if you fix this, this, and this, it would be an A’. The teacher, in contrast, believed that good formative feedback should never indicate grades. He argued that this system was ‘important to build up trust, so that [the students] will actually try things in the first draft version and not worry about it being part of their final grading’.

Overall, the students and the teacher in the biology course had similar understandings of quality feedback but emphasised different characteristics as being most important. For the students, quality feedback was characterised by a) relevant content of the comments, b) clear linkages to relevant resources, c) positive emotions and an unthreatening environment, and d)

good timing in providing the comments. For the teacher, quality feedback entailed a) a trustful and transparent environment where students could safely explore ideas; b) dialogue between teachers and students, as in an authentic science context; c) feedback comments that challenged and motivated students to work; and d) the engagement of students who could tolerate critique and make use of feedback comments.

Nursing case

The students and teachers in the nursing case emphasised that feedback in the simulation activity differed from regular written feedback, in the sense that a teacher continuously provided feedback during the activity and that students experienced immediate responses to their actions. When asked about the quality of the feedback, the students and teachers alike stressed that the feedback should be supportive and constructive in order to avoid mistakes during the simulation, be consistent with theory, provide guidelines for future assignments, and prepare them for their professional lives.

Regarding which structural dimensions influenced the feedback provided in the course, both teachers and students emphasised that a clear and well-organised activity structure and explicit aims concerning the theoretical knowledge and feedback were essential for the students to succeed in the simulation activity. During the debriefing, the students appreciated supportive comments and proper acknowledgment from their teacher for their actions and judgements through comments such as ‘I think you did very well!’ and ‘That was a very good observation!’ The students expressed great satisfaction with the debriefing and the structure of feedback and said it allowed them to reflect on their actions and on issues regarding best practice.

During the regular practicum at the hospital, the students were obliged to produce daily plans for their nursing duties and to corroborate those plans with their supervisor’s comments. As a final exercise, they wrote daily reflections, comments, experiences, and

afterthoughts according to the plans. They all accentuated this writing as a critical element of their feedback experience. The responses they received on these reflections were crucial for adjusting their practice and actions. They had various opinions about the quality of the responses they received. Some students felt the feedback to be somewhat overloaded by reflections and wished that their investments in writing had been more proportionate to the amount of feedback the teachers and supervisors had provided. Even though they acknowledged the teachers' and supervisors' efforts and the time-consuming workload the feedback entailed, most students desired more detailed and constructive feedback on their performances. As one student said, 'Feedback like "Good" doesn't say much about my performance and doesn't give me further directions to improve my skills'. Since most of the feedback tended to be oral, informal, and arbitrary throughout the practice period, some students expressed a wish for written feedback at the end of the course that would say something about their performance in practice and with a close orientation towards their future professional work. One student said that written feedback 'could confirm your skills in practice, and be something nice to bring along when you're looking for a job. That would be great feedback to students'.

The teachers were aware of these opinions but emphasised that the evaluation meetings they had with each student near the end of the course were sufficient. Despite the desire for more written feedback, the students expressed satisfaction with the context of the reflective seminar arranged in connection with the simulation. They perceived such seminars as providing more space for afterthoughts, critical questions, and rethinking than the daily practice and feedback in the regular practice in the hospital allowed.

The relation-affective aspects played a major role for the students in the simulation activity. The students emphasised that the simulation activity was a stressful and vulnerability-inducing situation that they hence worked hard to prepare for. If they did

something wrong and the teacher needed to assist them, they felt exposed before the other students. The teacher was aware of this situation and noted that ‘I, as a former leader, have tried to practice providing praise frequently and [providing] the not-so-positive feedback in a more private setting’. The teachers told of students making mistakes during the simulation activity, which caused the patient dummy to ‘die’ and distressed the students. The teachers elaborated on these situations as an important factor in the amount of feedback to provide during an activity. The teachers regularly discussed the extent to which they should interfere (if at all) and provide feedback to students who did something wrong, or if they should let them fail and discuss the matter later. They worried about their students’ vulnerability during the simulation and the cautious feedback they needed to provide while observing their capacity to face challenges and to reflect on site and during the situation. The teachers underscored the care they had to show for their students as they provided gentle guidance and feedback when students seemed bewildered or missed something ‘obvious’ in the nursing procedure. Despite the emotionally taxing simulations, the students thought the fact that they were only acting was affirming. They understood that mistakes caused no harm but were instead welcome points of reflection and critique due to the affirming caregiving they received from the teacher during the activity.

For the epistemic aspect of feedback, the students emphasised the importance of being prepared for the simulation activity and of having sufficient theoretical knowledge and procedural competencies about the case to be able to translate and apply the feedback they received into practice. As one student said, ‘If you don’t know your theory, you’ll fail in the simulation and you’ll need a lot of ongoing feedback during the activity, which makes you more vulnerable’. The questions and feedback during the simulation helped the students to develop their theoretical knowledge related to different procedures in their professional work. The other students in the adjacent room appreciated the opportunity to discuss, reflect, and

learn through the ongoing situation and to assess the performing students. One teacher highlighted the importance of how the students applied the feedback to develop their own practice: ‘What I emphasise is not the mistakes they make in the clinic lab but their ability to spot what was incorrect and what they have to do to get it right [the next time] ... I think that how they receive the feedback is a much more important factor than what they know right there and then’.

Overall, the students and teachers emphasised that simulation, as an activity, requires conscious and attentive feedback due to the exposed nature of the context. The students emphasised that quality feedback in the nursing course was characterised by: a) teachers paying attention to the affective and relational aspects when providing feedback; b) a need to feel taken care of during the exposed situations during simulations; c) the importance of dialogues and the variety of instruction, questioning, and reflection within the activities; and d) more constructive, profound, and detailed feedback on their written reflections and performances throughout the course.

The teachers emphasised the following as important elements for quality feedback: a) the sensitivity expressed during feedback situations, b) the timing and balance of when to interrupt with feedback during simulations, and c) the assurance that students would be prepared and would have sufficient theoretical competencies.

Law case

The students and the teachers in the law case primarily referred to features of quality feedback within three different parts of the study contexts: the *oral feedback* provided in seminars on the students’ written assignments, the *triple feedback* situations during the moot court sessions, and the *peer feedback* in small, informal, closed peer groups formed by the students themselves. Even though all interviewees pointed to the same types of feedback, their

perceptions of feedback quality differed, both between students and teachers as well as among the student groups.

The students and teachers alike indicated that the structure of the realistic physical surroundings and the work-oriented rules of procedure and collaboration were important for their perceptions of quality feedback. In one of the assessments related to the moot court, the students had 48 hours to prepare for the moot court exercise (double the time professional lawyers typically have to prepare for similar situations). The ambitious students appreciated the realistic timeframe as a part of the requirements that structured their preparation for the different feedback interactions that lay ahead. One of the students expressed his perception of quality feedback: ‘We had realistic case documents and had to do an overview ourselves. It was exiting to get a challenge where we could think, “This is what it’s like in professional life”’.

The students and teachers expressed slightly different opinions about how different structural elements (such as resources, tools, procedures, and rules) mattered for feedback quality. In the seminars, for instance, the students pointed to quality in the way the teachers modelled reasoning in a systematic, step-by-step approach during the students’ assessment tasks while simultaneously commenting on each step. The students appreciated this approach; one noted that ‘We want to learn how the teacher does this. He’s the skilled one; we need to know how he’s thinking and doing his reasoning in relation to the challenges we’re given’. For the students, feedback quality related more specifically to ‘doing the discipline’, to use the common parlance in the field; they called for feedback on procedural and other knowledge from the teachers that could make such knowledge explicit. The students differed from their teachers, who saw quality feedback as a contribution to encourage students’ participation and to influence the knowledge construction shared within the feedback interactions. The teachers

related quality feedback to activating knowledge forms and the students' reflections on 'theory in action'.

Not all the important relational-affective aspects were perceived as positive emotions. Those students who performed in the moot court said that they went 'all in' during the role-play and described themselves as deeply stressed as well as emotional and personally involved; they wanted to experience realistic challenges. But several of the students wanted more specific, structured, and concrete feedback to develop their understanding. One student expressed his perception of the feedback after the moot court: 'They were too kind [in their feedback]. There was no concrete, in-depth feedback about what we really did and could've done better'.

Another important relational-affective aspect of quality feedback was the peer feedback and the close relations that framed the diverse feedback activities within their peer groups. The group members challenged and cared for each other and provided immediate and honest feedback; they also provided continuous feedback over time so they could all make progress together. As one student noted, 'We're sitting near each other in the library to read individually, but we're also discussing and giving each other feedback all the time.... We're close to each other, so we have each other available. We also use Facebook chats during our ongoing discussions, like "What do you think about that" or "What does this mean" and so on'. The students described this supportive, but also challenging, feedback as being crucial, particularly when the challenges were too difficult or people struggled with motivational issues.

Both the students and the teachers perceived the epistemic content of the feedback interactions as essential for the quality of the feedback within the course. The authentic cases that students received feedback on before, during, and after the moot court sessions challenged the students to use their textbooks and all relevant available material. As one

teacher explained, ‘The students are challenged to reflect on theory “in action” in relation to the realistic feedback situations they were provided with, which also involved teachers acting as judges as well as the prominent public prosecutor we invited for the course, who also provided feedback after the session was finished’. The students especially appreciated feedback from the people whom the students referred to as ‘professionals’ who represented work-related experience from ‘the outside world’. One student said, ‘I was a bit excited when I stood before the state prosecutor, but I enjoyed it; it was fun’. The students appreciated feedback that was relevant to real life. As another student said, ‘I wanted more feedback on the procedures and how I behaved. Should I have been more or less aggressive, or formulated my actions differently, or should I have built up my answers differently, and so on’. We also found that those students who were very committed to working hard and who collaborated intensely with peer groups tended to appreciate more complex feedback situations, while those who put in less effort perceived ‘quality feedback’ in a much more narrow and teacher-led fashion.

To summarise, the students and teachers in the law case shared many similar understandings of quality feedback, but our findings are also characterised by the fact that the law students were experienced fourth-year students. The students emphasised quality feedback in relation to a) ‘doing the discipline’, b) work relevance and real-life challenges, and c) their close, long-term peer groups. Their outlook differed from that of the teachers, who related quality feedback as being closer to a) the knowledge construction shared in the course; b) independent and work-related actions, as well as the students’ participation and reflections on ‘theory in action’; and c) the timing and connections between the diverse feedback activities to challenge the students to see the broader societal picture.

Discussion

This chapter has examined what course participants in different teaching-learning environments perceive to be quality feedback and how that perception is related to the structural, epistemic, and relational-affective elements of the course environment. Our analysis shows that students and teachers across all cases perceived quality feedback to have certain common features. First, they considered feedback to be of high quality when it was *relevant for student learning*: feedback that helped students to understand in detail what was good and what should be improved, and how to identify mistakes for themselves in their respective fields of nursing, biology, and law. They also perceived feedback to be relevant to student learning when it focussed on future professional life and challenged students' own thinking and reasoning.

Second, the participants perceived quality feedback to be *embedded in the knowledge domain* of the respective course. They mentioned that good feedback modelled the ways of thinking and writing in the knowledge domain, was consistent with theory, and activated relevant and authentic resources. The implication is that the participants perceived those feedback exchanges that occurred in an authentic setting and resembled later situations in professional life as being high quality in all three cases.

Finally, the participants saw quality feedback as that which evoked a *feeling of safety*, especially for those students with less experience. They mentioned that good feedback entailed trustful relationships in which students felt safe to explore their ideas. For these relationships to develop, courses had to offer structures in which students could reflect upon their actions, revise their work after the feedback interactions, or collaborate and reflect together within their informal peer groups. For the students to perceive feedback as safe, it also had to be fair and considerate of students' vulnerability and dignity.

These brief summaries of what counts as quality feedback from the course participants' perspectives show that similar themes are woven throughout all three cases. A closer look, however, reveals that certain elements in the teaching-learning environment were highlighted more predominantly in some of the courses and by some of the participant groups. For example, the affective-relational aspect of sheltering students from negative emotions during feedback exchanges was particularly pronounced in the nursing case. Those students perceived that learning from feedback was most effective when they felt secure and safe in the situation. In the biology and law cases, the students judged the quality of feedback not as much according to the positive emotions it evoked; rather, they tolerated that they might experience resistance and challenging feelings and did not think this posed a problem for quality, especially among the better-prepared students. In the law case, the powerful emotions were first and foremost related to the direct feedback in the moot court settings, where only a select group of students engaged in the challenging performance and feedback situations. These findings add to our increasingly differentiated understanding of the significance of relationships and emotions for the perception of quality feedback (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Ryan & Henderson, 2017).

Another example relates to the structural dimension of the teaching-learning environment and the way tasks and relevant resources were arranged within the course. In those courses that required students to engage with textual resources on their own (such as biology and law), the students tended to judge the feedback quality according to the extent to which the feedback directed them to relevant text resources and information to improve their assignments. This aspect was less visible in the nursing case, where the purpose of feedback was more focussed on helping students to become better in nursing rather than improving their assignments. While previous research has also found structural aspects to be important

(e.g. Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, et al., 2018; Price et al., 2010), our study provides concrete, context-specific examples of how structure relates to perceived quality feedback.

Our final example relates to the epistemic dimension of the environment: the relation between perceived quality and the way feedback corrects mistakes or stimulates one's own thinking. The cases differed in their assessment requirements of what students needed to know and do in order to pass the course. The nursing case required the students to *demonstrate and reflect* on their knowledge in practice, while the law and biology students had to *critically explore and apply* knowledge in written assignments (and, in the law case, during the moot court). Accordingly, the perceived quality of feedback was linked to the different knowledge practices (i.e. demonstrate, reflect, explore, and apply) required in the courses and how feedback interactions helped students to engage in this work. Expanding on previous studies that have suggested the relevance of disciplinary knowledge for the perception of feedback (e.g. Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Poulos & Mahony, 2008), these findings provide a more specific illustration of how feedback perception is related to the epistemic dimension of different contexts.

In addition to the differences between the course environments, we also found interesting variations in the way the different participant groups in the cases perceived the quality of feedback.

The biology case showed differences between some students highlighting the importance of feedback making them feel good, while other students and the course teacher thought that good feedback needed to be challenging. In the law course, students who took active roles during the moot court perceived quality feedback differently from those who observed. Those who played active roles viewed good feedback as honest and challenging towards their arguments and performance, while the observing students drew on different criteria to judge the quality of the feedback interactions they observed. This situation could be

related to their being less personally involved or being among the academically weaker students, and therefore choosing to acquire their course credits through a less exposing task than playing an active role in the moot court. The nursing case generally showed a more coherent picture; the students and teachers tended to agree on what they perceived as quality feedback.

While previous studies have mostly focussed on revealing differences between students and teachers in perceiving feedback (Carless, 2006; Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, et al., 2018; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015), our findings also provide insight into the potential reasons that might be central to the different perceptions of the students in the three cases. Even though the students generally agreed on many aspects of quality, the students in the different courses seemed to operate with different criteria when referring to quality feedback. These criteria emerged from the concrete design and organisation of the courses but were also related to their wider understandings of what they saw as appropriate within their disciplinary context (Ajjawi et al., 2017; Esterhazy, 2018). For example, the law students were generally engaged in more competitive practices and therefore appreciated more challenging feedback, as long as it yielded learning benefits. The law students appeared to view the availability of quality feedback as a limited commodity in law education that they needed to compete for. They had to be prepared and brave enough to participate in the moot court if they wanted to be rewarded with feedback on their own performance, while the observing students only had access to feedback by proxy (i.e. not on their own performance, but only on the performance of their peers) during these situations.

The nursing students, in comparison, were more interested in maintaining a safe, positive atmosphere within the feedback interactions. They saw good feedback as being more related to safeguarding the students' well-being and ensuring that they could master difficult situations in their future professional lives.

Finally, the biology case was somewhere in the middle, with students understanding the benefits of challenging feedback for their learning while also expressing the need to have feedback that would make them feel good. These insights are in line with theoretical ideas that the perceived quality of teaching and learning in higher education is always embedded within the discourses and practices of the discipline (Wittek & Habib, 2013).

Conclusions

In this chapter we have shown how different perceptions of quality feedback can only be understood in the context of specific teaching-learning environments. What people perceived as quality feedback in each course was closely intertwined with the way students and teachers perceived these structural, relational-affective, and epistemic characteristics of the respective courses. These findings are in line with previous research that has highlighted the importance of how students and teachers perceive their teaching-learning environments (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Similarly to previous research, we also found that students and teachers differed in their perceptions of feedback (Orsmond & Merry, 2011; Yang & Carless, 2013). The students in our study generally identified quality feedback either as that which made them feel good or that which made them understand and improve their learning. While the students judged feedback quality based on their personal experience, the teachers seemed to identify quality feedback more from a normative standpoint. That is, they had certain ideas about what their feedback practices should ideally look like and what outcomes they should lead to. These ideas usually provided the basis for their perception of what counted as quality feedback. Sometimes, however, the teachers also seemed to judge quality in relation to their emotions, such as when they reported feeling good when their students learned something in a productive feedback interaction.

Conceptually, our study has illustrated an empirical application of Yang and Carless's (2013) proposed conceptual perspective. Their original work proposed a normative model to help identify those elements of a disciplinary course context that are most relevant for promoting dialogic feedback practices and self-regulated learning. In our study, we have refrained from taking a normative stance and have used the three dimensions of structure, epistemic, and relational-affective as analytical notions to analyse the interview data. We also shifted our focus away from the cognitive aspects highlighted in the original perspective and more towards a perspective that emphasises the relational and epistemic dimension in the environment. Instead of stressing how the context influences the ways in which students self-regulate and process feedback information, we argue that it is more relevant to study the way course participants perceive the epistemic relations in their courses and how the knowledge content they work with influences what counts as quality feedback to them.

To make students recognise – and engage with – quality feedback in a course thus entails careful considerations of the epistemic relations between tasks, assessment forms, and activities generated within a given course design. We hence should view designing for teaching-learning environments in which students may perceive and use quality feedback as a central activity in 'quality work' related to a course or study programme.

Finally, the differences we found between the cases in our study provide an important argument that we need to account better for contextual factors when studying and evaluating feedback quality. We argue that, in a course evaluation with negative ratings on feedback, one should not merely assume that certain generic measures can be applied to any course to improve the feedback quality. Examples of such generic measures might include increasing the quantity of written feedback comments or introducing new and purportedly promising digital feedback formats such as video or automatic feedback (Dawson, Henderson, Ryan, et al., 2018). Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of these different feedback formats

depends on the structural, relational and epistemic dimensions of the concrete teaching-learning environment. For example, introducing automatic feedback comments is not likely to increase the perceived quality of feedback – that is, the student ratings – in contexts where students place the most value on a safe atmosphere and being seen as human beings. This insight teaches us an important lesson about what we need to consider when working with quality in higher education. The examples used in our study relate to feedback quality, but the quality of other educational practices is often perceived in relation to the teaching-learning environment. This situation has implications about whether student ratings can be comparable between contexts and how much knowledge we can gain from simple Likert scales used to measure student satisfaction with a particular element of the course (e.g. lectures or assessment).

This idea can also be extended to the normative discourse about quality in higher education. Taking the example of feedback, there is a widespread understanding that there is one ideal way of giving students feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013). While many will argue that we have not yet found that ideal way, the field is in general agreement that quality feedback can be measured objectively and is implementable in any course. Based on our analysis and discussion, we argue that this way of thinking about the quality of educational practices is problematic. The use of generic ratings has several important limitations and may not be useful for everyday quality work, which requires solutions to local and often very context-specific challenges. Rather, we should invest more time in developing tools for evaluating and assuring quality feedback (and other educational practices) that will go beyond simple student satisfaction ratings and will provide teachers with more context-specific insights into their students' experiences.

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