When feedback signals failure but offers hope for improvement: A process model of constructive criticism☆,☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Although receiving critical feedback during learning situations can be an indicator of failure, constructive feedback can help a learner improve from that failure. Many theories have outlined various components of the feedback process, but models for constructive feedback that integrate both the interpersonal nature of the feedback process as well as the vantage point of the feedback receiver are few. To understand better how constructive feedback is perceived to leverage failure for enhanced thinking, motivational, and learning processes, we conducted a series of focus group interviews with undergraduates (n = 38). Using grounded theory, we developed a process model to address underlying mechanisms for constructive criticism. The three main aspects of our model included that for feedback to be perceived as constructive, (a) criticism needed to be embedded in perceptions of care from a respect-worthy feedback giver; (b) the feedback message itself needed properties of being well-intentioned, targeted appropriately, and providing guidance as to how the work can be improved; and (c) uptake of the feedback, that is, responding to its guidance by changing the work, occurred in the context of the feedback receiver’s emotions and motivation. Implications for theory and practice are discussed to promote the important role of failure and feedback while learning.

1. Introduction

When students receive criticism, they often interpret the feedback as an indication of failure. In the field of psychology, there is a long-standing precedent of using feedback that negatively evaluates another’s products, performances, or attributes, terming it as failure feedback (Brockner, 1979; Svensson, 2015; Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Much of this work has involved lab experiments that induced perceptions of failure by providing participants with a low score or negative evaluation of their performance on an experimental task (e.g., Elliot et al., 2000). In the classroom, students experience failure upon receipt of a poor grade, identification of flaws or shortcomings, or evaluations that imply worse performance relative to peers. However, when criticism is perceived to be constructive, students see it as simultaneously identifying gaps in understanding and providing specific directions for improvement (Fong et al., 2016). Therefore, upon receipt of constructive criticism, the feeling of failure, often linked with unpleasant emotions, low
self-efficacy, and anxiety, is coupled with a sense of hope and a recognition of the potential towards greater learning and goal progress. In other words, failure can be framed positively when feedback is interpreted as providing a path to improvement.

Although research has recommended ways to provide feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), instructors struggle whenever they try to provide critical feedback that is both motivational and instructive (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). Beyond the appropriate phrasing of a feedback message, contextual and relational mechanisms and processes (i.e., relationship between feedback giver and receiver) have been underemphasized thus far. Because the existing research had not often taken into consideration students’ views of how feedback affects them or of the conditions that would need to be in place to make feedback more useful and effective, we embarked on a qualitative exploration for two reasons. First, qualitative approaches are recommended when there is a new area being explored with little previous work to guide choice of measures. Second, in comparison to quantitative approaches, qualitative approaches are better suited to descriptions of a process, and in this case, the process of constructive criticism has not yet been mapped. We conducted focus group interviews with undergraduates to understand how they perceived failure experiences, focusing in particular on their response to receiving constructive criticism, both in terms of intellectual outcomes such as their thinking, learning, and creativity and in terms of affective outcomes such as motivational, emotional, and relational issues. For the purposes of these data, we define failure as learners’ assessment that their performance falls short of their personal goals. In the following sections, we review literature that informs the need for this study under the assumption that, as with any qualitative study, new constructs arising from the data require a return to the literature that would then be presented in a discussion of findings.

1.1. Importance of feedback

Research has overwhelmingly supported performance feedback as one of the most influential factors in learning (Brown, Harris, & Hartnett, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & Denisi, 1996; Shute, 2008; Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017). Generally understood as the procedure used to tell a learner if a response or expression of current understanding is right or wrong (Kulhavy, 1977), the use of feedback as an instructional strategy is widely accepted by both educators and learners and endorsed in multiple theoretical models of learning. From as early as Thorndike’s Law of Effect (1927), feedback, or knowledge of results, has been examined as a critical aspect of human behavior and performance in a wide variety of skill-based domains, ranging from academic subjects such as writing (e.g., Hillocks, 1982; Kulhavy & Stock, 1989), employee training (e.g., Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979), athletics (e.g., Horn, 1985), and the arts (e.g., Vispoel & Austin, 1993).

Feedback valence, whether feedback signals a positive or negative outcome, has been of interest to both researchers and educators. Positive feedback or praise, perceived as a reward for their performance, is often associated with complex motivational and emotional appraisals from the feedback receiver (Fong et al., 2018; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Although praise may bolster one’s sense of confidence, it may also undermine one’s motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Because of such mixed psychological outcomes, teachers are often advised to reduce the amount of praise given to students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008), or when needed, to target praise on the process or on student effort. However, providing criticism or indicating failure on a task is also a challenging form of feedback to deliver (Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Teachers may hesitate to offer failure feedback in fear of dampening student motivation despite their intention to encourage improvement (Cohen et al., 1999; Fong, Williams, Warner, & Schallert, 2013; Sansone, Sachau, & Weir, 1989).

These latter concerns often expressed by teachers as they anticipate delivering negative feedback to their students led to an interest in what is known about differences that may obtain when the relationship between teacher (feedback giver) and student (feedback receiver) varies. Drawing from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), we hypothesized that a number of qualities of the feedback giver-receiver relationship may influence the impact of feedback, also known as verbal persuasions, on the self-efficacy of the feedback giver. For instance, the more credible the feedback giver is perceived to be, the more the feedback receiver will trust the learning process.

Beyond critical variations in the feedback giver’s and receiver’s relational dynamic, the learner’s perspective of the feedback process has often been neglected in previous research. Most studies measure the impact of various forms of feedback on student learning outcomes and ignore the perceptions, motivations, and emotions of the learner as to what makes the feedback process constructive (Kluger & Denisi, 1996). Additionally, the research that does incorporate student perceptions focuses more on the types of feedback they prefer (Poulos & Mahony, 2008), rather than how students perceive the feedback process and the elements that constitute constructive feedback. This was the gap in the literature that our study was meant to fill.

The integration of the feedback giver’s perspective is useful for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, focusing on the feedback receiver as the main agent in our model is aligned with many other social-cognitive theories (Winstone et al., 2017). These models posit the reciprocal relationships between individuals’ cognitive and affect processes and the environment around them to determine subsequent behavior (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the way feedback givers perceive environmental factors such as the tasks in which they engage in and the feedback they receive for them is a key determinant of their actions, namely, to uptake the feedback
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