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Improving the Effectiveness of Group Feedback; A Study of Undergraduate Business Studies Students

Abstract

This study examines changes in undergraduate student satisfaction and performance over three years in response to variations in group-level feedback. The findings of the study show that an increased level of critical feedback targeting at the group had a positive impact on individual student performance, but a corresponding negative impact of student satisfaction scores. It is argued that by targeting feedback of the level of the group, the negative impact of critical feedback on student motivation and satisfaction was decoupled from their ability to react to such criticisms.

Key words: Student Feedback, Group feedback, Performance, Student Satisfaction

Introduction

Feedback has been highlighted as a key element in both student satisfaction and learning, with many pointing to the importance of high-quality feedback in meeting students' expectations (Brown & Knight, 1994; Higgins et al., 2001, 2002). A number of meta-analyses have argued that feedback is central to student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Hattie et al., 1996), providing them with the information they need to compare their actual performance against desired outcomes (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Mory, 2004; Ramaprasad, 1983) and empowering students to be self-regulated learners (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). However, whilst a number of studies focus on the positive benefits of formative feedback on student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998), others are more cautious in drawing such conclusions (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009). First, UK students in annual National Student Surveys continue to show dissatisfaction on the detail, timeliness and clarity of feedback given (Beaumont et al., 2011; Higgins et al., 2001). Research further highlights the dissatisfaction of tutors who bemoan that the students do not make use of the feedback (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; Burke, 2009; Evans, 2013; Fisher et al., 2011; Handley & Cox, 2007). So whilst the majority of tutors view feedback as prompting discussion, only a small minority of students respond in the same way (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Second, students are dissatisfied with feedback as a result of its negative impact on their self-perception and confidence (James, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000). In some cases, feedback may even be seen to reduce student performance (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). As a result, the link between feedback, learning and satisfaction is unclear, and exploring this relationship is important given policy and institutional drives towards student satisfaction in higher education.

This study reports findings of student satisfaction and performance on an elective intermediate-level undergraduate module, offered as part of a degree in business studies. The module in question had two modes of assessment – a mid-semester formative group assignment and a summative end-of-semester individual essay. The study tracks changes in student satisfaction and performance over three years, with changes made to the way in which tutor feedback was given in the second year. The findings of the study show that an increased level of critical generic feedback had a positive impact on individual student performance, but a corresponding negative impact of student satisfaction scores. Thus whilst the student cohort experienced a sense of collective despair, this did not constrain their ability to change and adapt to the feedback given. As a result, the negative impact of critical feedback on student motivation and satisfaction was decoupled from their ability to react to such criticisms. It is argued that this was in part achieved by targeting critical feedback at the collective as opposed to the individual level. As a result, whilst the feedback still had a negative impact on student satisfaction, a collective strength was found in their collective despair. It is argued that instead of triggering a process of self-reflection and peer comparison, the group feedback given, increased team spirit and collective action, resulting in improved performance.

Theory and Hypotheses

The Effectiveness of Feedback on Performance

The link between feedback and student motivation highlighted above has been shown in numerous studies. Whilst critical feedback can demotivate students (Ryan & Deci, 2000), positive feedback on the other hand, is seen to build student confidence, self-esteem and intrinsic

motivation (Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003; Weaver, 2006). Students point to the need for positive feedback to ameliorate the potentially negative effects of critical feedback on self-esteem and motivation (Lizzio et al., 2003; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). However, it is unclear how effective this positive feedback might be in terms of improving student performance (Evans, 2013). Martens et al. (2010) for instance found no difference in student performance whether feedback was positive, neutral, or negative. Draper (2009) even argues that positive feedback damages learning.

To be effective, positive comments need to be credible and informative (Brophy, 1981), and premature praise may confuse students and discourage revisions (Cardelle & Corno, 1981). In addition, whilst positive feedback can increase the likelihood of a student accepting negative feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), it can soften criticism and as a result diminish its developmental value (Benedict & Levine, 1988; Young, 2000). Hyland and Hyland (2001) found that tutors' attempts to mitigate against the negative effects of criticism caused confusion and misunderstandings. They thus recommend that tutors are more directive and frank in their criticisms, so as to avoid confusion (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). As they note 'indirectness... can open the door to misinterpretation' as students, they argue 'are adept at recognizing formulaic positive comments which serve no function beyond the spoonful of sugar to help the bitter pill of criticism go down' (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). By diminishing the value of critical feedback, positive comments can therefore undermine opportunities for learning, as the students shift attention to what they did well, and away from less palatable criticisms and areas for improvement. Positive feedback can thus blur the directness of critical feedback. Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: Directing feedback at areas for improvement only, increases the directness of feedback, and increases the potential for student learning and performance.

Negative Feedback and Student Satisfaction

Such direct and critical feedback can however lead to defensiveness and a loss in confidence (Boud, 1995), upsetting students and leading them to being unreceptive to tutor comments (Boud, 1995; Hounsell, 1995). However, this negative relationship between critical feedback and self-esteem doesn't hold for all individuals. Young (2000) found that students with low self-esteem tended to view feedback as a judgment of ability, whilst those with high self-esteem did not. Students with high self-esteem showed a positive approach to receiving feedback, even if this was negative (Young, 2000). Indeed, these students did not feel the need for positive feedback, viewing feedback as a reflection of their work and not themselves (Young, 2000). Low self-esteem students however view feedback in the reverse manner, seeing it as a definitive judgment of ability, as opposed to a potential to change (Young, 2000). Knight and Yorke (2003) further argued that whether negative feedback demoralized a student depends on whether the student views this negative feedback as a reflection on him/her personally or as an opportunity to improve his/her learning (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Whilst stronger students seem more receptive to feedback, weaker students are more at risk of being discouraged (Carless, 2006). As Black and Wiliam (1998) note, feedback which draws attention away from the task and towards self-esteem, can have a negative effect on attitudes and performance. Critical feedback can thus negatively affect a student's self-esteem and satisfaction, potentially undermining their ability to learn. Therefore,

Hypothesis 2: Directing feedback at areas for improvement only, negatively affects individual student satisfaction, and potentially impairs student learning and performance.

Group Feedback and Student Performance

Past research has tended to focus on individual-level feedback as opposed to that directed at the group (London & Sessa, 2006). As a result, it is unclear how the effects of feedback on student performance and perceptions, described above, might change at the level of the group. Nadler (1979) highlights important differences between feedback given to individuals and groups. First it may be difficult for group members to interpret to what extent the group-level feedback reflects their individual performance. Second, each group member is limited by the group in their response to this feedback, given the collective involvement (Nadler, 1979). Therefore, the connection between group-level feedback and individual performance becomes blurred. Some argue that individual feedback leads to higher levels of task performance when compared to group-level feedback (Archer-Kath et al., 1994), as each individual can reflect on person-specific feedback. Others however, point to improvements in group productivity as a result of group-level feedback (Pritchard et al., 1988). Perhaps the greatest benefit of group-level feedback centers on its link with group cohesion. Group feedback is seen to help the development of shared mental models, and help generate interpersonal congruence between members (London & Sessa, 2006; Polzer et al., 2002). Berkowitz and Levy (1956) found that group feedback was more effective than individual feedback, and encouraged group members to have greater pride in their group and to be more task-oriented. Group feedback is thus seen to improve cooperation, interpersonal attraction, motivation, group-level esteem (Frye, 1966; Nadler, 1979), and reduce interpersonal

strain (Zander & Wolfe, 1964). This increase in interpersonal cooperation, motivation and group-level esteem can be seen to potentially counteract the negative impact of critical feedback on individual-level esteem. Therefore,

Hypothesis 3: Directing critical feedback at the student group as a whole, will increase group cohesion, and with this the resilience of the group to respond to critical feedback.

Method

This study reports findings of student satisfaction and performance on an elective intermediate-level undergraduate module over a three-year period. In the first year, a total of 109 students took the module. All these students were in year 2 of a three-year undergraduate program, 57 were male. In the second year, a total of 128 students took the module (80 were male), and in the third year, a total of 84 took the module (46 were male). Retrospective institutional ethical approval was given for the study, and all data have been anonymized in accordance with university ethical procedures.

Changes in Tutor Feedback

In all three years, the module included a number of methods for providing feedback to students. First, face-to-face feedback on set tasks was given to students in fortnightly tutorial sessions. Students completed these tasks in groups of five, presented their analysis to the class (maximum of 15 students in attendance), and then received feedback from the class tutor. Second, students

received written formative feedback on a mid-semester piece of group work. Third, students received one-to-one feedback on questions posted on the Blackboard student support site.

In the second year of the study, the nature of the feedback was altered to explore the hypotheses given above. In addition to the forms of feedback noted above, additional critical feedback was given to the entire cohort of students at the start of each weekly lecture. This was critical in the sense that it pointed directly to gaps between actual and ideal performance (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008) or “areas for improvement only”. The feedback was also generic in the sense that it was not directed at any one student, but at the full cohort. This feedback covered two key areas. First an overview was given each week on the performance of the cohort, including where relevant, statistics in relation to marks given on the assessments. Second, this generic feedback focused on what students could do to improve their work (see appendix for an example), thereby facilitating a feedforward in student learning (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2002; Knight & Yorke, 2003). This generic feedback was based on both the mid-semester assessment, and tutorial performance from the previous weeks. By focusing purely on areas for improvement, the feedback might be labeled as critical or negative. In summary, a quasi-experimental design was used, in which the year 2 sessions were compared against the control sessions (i.e. years 1 and 3)

Dependent Variables

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction was captured through an anonymous questionnaire, distributed in the final lecture of the module (and before students received their mark for the final summative

assessment). Specific questions focused on ten different categories ranging from feedback, assessment methods, quality of teaching, to enthusiasm of staff, with students being asked to rate each on a 5-point Likert scale (5- strongly agree, 1- strongly disagree). Descriptive statistics for each of these categories was analyzed to assess overall student satisfaction in each year. Students were also asked open-ended questions on what they liked, and disliked about the module. Excerpts from these comments are also included below.

Student Performance

Individual student performance in the module was assessed using an end-of-semester 3500 word summative essay. In each of the years under study, two examiners independently evaluated these essays, and a selection was second marked to ensure consistency of marking. These results were compared with student performance on a second 'control' module in all three years. Students completed the latter module over the same time period as the module in question.

Results

A univariate analysis (ANOVA) was used to explore the effect of changing tutor feedback on student satisfaction and performance over the three years.

Student Satisfaction. Variances in responses to four different questions were compared across the three years. First there was a significant difference found between the three groups in terms of the average student satisfaction scores (across the full range of questions asked), $F(2,159)=6.67$, $p=0.002$. Descriptive statistics are given in table 1. It is seen from these findings that average

student satisfaction scores dropped from an average above 4.07 in years 1 and 3, to 3.70 in year 2 (see figure 1).

Year	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Year 1	39	4.07	0.53	0.09	3.90	4.24	2.45	5.00
Year 2	74	3.70	0.76	0.09	3.53	3.88	1.18	5.00
Year 3	49	4.08	0.53	0.08	3.92	4.23	2.80	5.00
Total	162	3.90	0.67	0.05	3.80	4.00	1.18	5.00

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Between Group Change in Student Satisfaction Scores

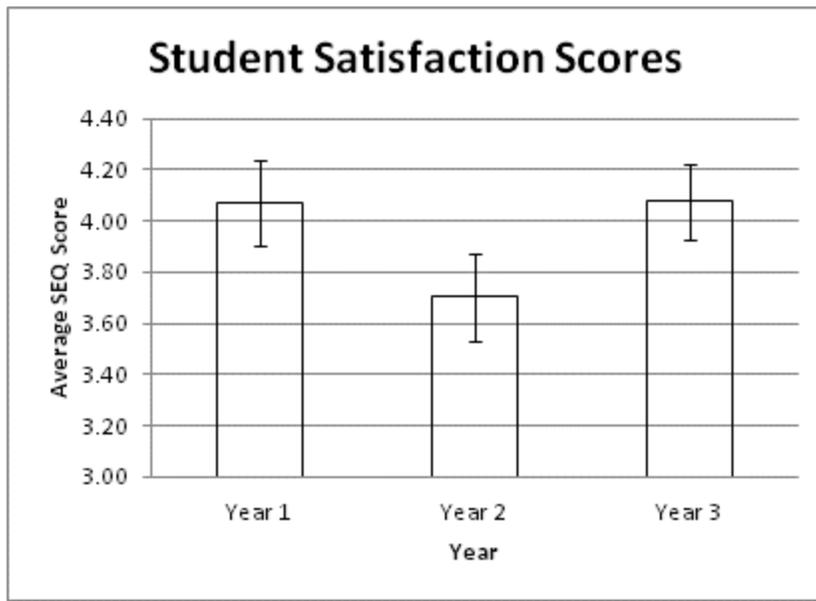


Figure 1. Change in Average Student Satisfaction Scores between Years

Second there was a significant difference found between the three groups when answering the question, ‘Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this module’, $F(2,157)=3.64$, $p=0.028$. The average score here dropped from means of 3.95 and 4.11 in years 1 and 3 respectively, to 3.65 in year 2.

Third, with regards to specific questions on feedback (i.e. feedback has helped me clarify things I didn’t understand), there was again a significant difference found between the three groups, $F(2,157)=5.55$, $p=0.005$. The average score dropped from means of 3.87 and 4.04 in years 1 and 3 respectively, to 3.43 in year 2.

Finally, this changing satisfaction with feedback also affected the students’ views on the assessments set. When answering the question, ‘assessment requirements and marking criteria have been made clear’, a significant difference was found between the three groups,

$F(2,156)=6.46, p=0.002$. Here, the average score dropped from means of 3.77 and 3.94 in years 1 and 3 respectively, to 3.32 in year 2.

Students were also given the opportunity to make open-ended comments on the student satisfaction questionnaires. Two boxes were provided for positive ('if you think there were some particularly good features of the module please explain what they were') and negative feedback ('if you were unhappy with any aspects of the module please suggest how it might be improved'). For each year, the total number of comments added in each category is given in table 2. Included in this table, are the number of comments given in each category specifically relating to feedback. It can be seen that a higher proportion of negative comments were given in year 2 when compared to years 1 and 3.

Year	Total number of returned forms	Total number of positive comments	Number of positive comments on feedback	Total number of negative comments	Number of negative comments on feedback
Year 1	39	15	4	9	8
Year 2	74	9	0	22	20
Year 3	49	12	6	9	5

Table 2. Number of open-ended comments given on student satisfaction forms

A representative sample of the student comments specifically relating to feedback given in the evaluation questionnaires is provided in table 3. As noted, it is seen that in year 2 a greater

number of negative comments were given, compared with the other two years (see table 2). In addition, this feedback was seen to be increasingly emotive in nature, commenting on the feedback being ‘negative’, ‘de-motivating’ and even ‘offensive’ (see table 3). Furthermore, no positive comments relating to feedback were given in year 2 (see table 2). On the other hand, in years 1 and 3, a balance of both positive and negative comments were given, with most commenting on specific details of the feedback given, such as clarity of communication, and means of communication.

Year	Positive	Negative
Year 1	<p>...Liked the feedback on tutorial presentations – made assignment more clear...</p> <p>...Good to go through practice essay questions to help with assessment...</p> <p>...Assessment methods were appropriate + well explained...</p>	<p>..The assessment criteria for the presentation were not made clear and I think the Business Report weighted more than the presentation for the final mark and I did not understand why this was the case...</p> <p>...Need more clear criteria for the essay...</p> <p>...Feedback on group coursework should be put online, so it’s easy for all participants to access...</p>
Year 2		<p>...We felt harshly done by as we hadn’t got the proper</p>

	<p>feedback in the first place, + couldn't improve...</p> <p>...[The lecturer] was incredibly negative, which I found both unhelpful + offensive... our average marks are dreadful. Most of us will apparently do badly on our essay. What is the point?..</p> <p>...Found the wording of both essay questions quite vague/difficult...</p> <p>...The lecturer repeatedly tells us that [it] is very probable for us to fail the module. I do not [think] this is the right attitude...</p> <p>...Very negative – talks about failure a lot. Advice for writing essay unclear...</p> <p>...Too difficult to do well, which is made clear by module leader from very first lecture. Very negative...</p> <p>...Many aspects of module are unclear + unfair. Harsh marking requirements. Very negative lecturer...</p> <p>...Tutorials should be more detailed and have better feedback...</p> <p>...lecturer made it very unpleasant!..</p> <p>...Often [the lecturer] was negative about our work... wasn't very motivating. Essay titles seem vague, unsure how [they] link to topics in course... The hours that you expect us to work are ridiculous and impossible –</p>
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		completely unrealistic...
Year 3	<p>...During the module I've grown confident in expressing my own views + perspectives on things + has encouraged me to develop them further and gave me overall confidence in my abilities + attributes...</p> <p>...Tutorials really helpful for assignments...</p>	<p>...In some of the tutorials, wrong information regarding the exam essay was given...</p> <p>...Assessments could be explained better – how to write – what you want to see...</p>

Table 3. Anonymous comments on student satisfaction with the module

Student Performance. There was a significant difference found in student performance between years, $F(2,318)=4.62, p=.01$. Descriptive statistics are given in table 4. It is seen from these findings that student performance increased from an average of 53% and 55.7% in years 1 and 3 respectively, to 57.7% in year 2 (see figure 2).

Year	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Year 1	109	53.0%	14.8%	0.014	50.2%	55.8%	0%	75%
Year 2	128	57.7%	8.8%	0.007	56.1%	59.2%	30%	78%
Year 3	84	55.7%	11.3%	0.012	53.2%	58.1%	20%	80%
Total	321	55.6%	11.9%	0.006	54.3%	56.9%	0%	80%

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Between Group Changes in Student Satisfaction Scores

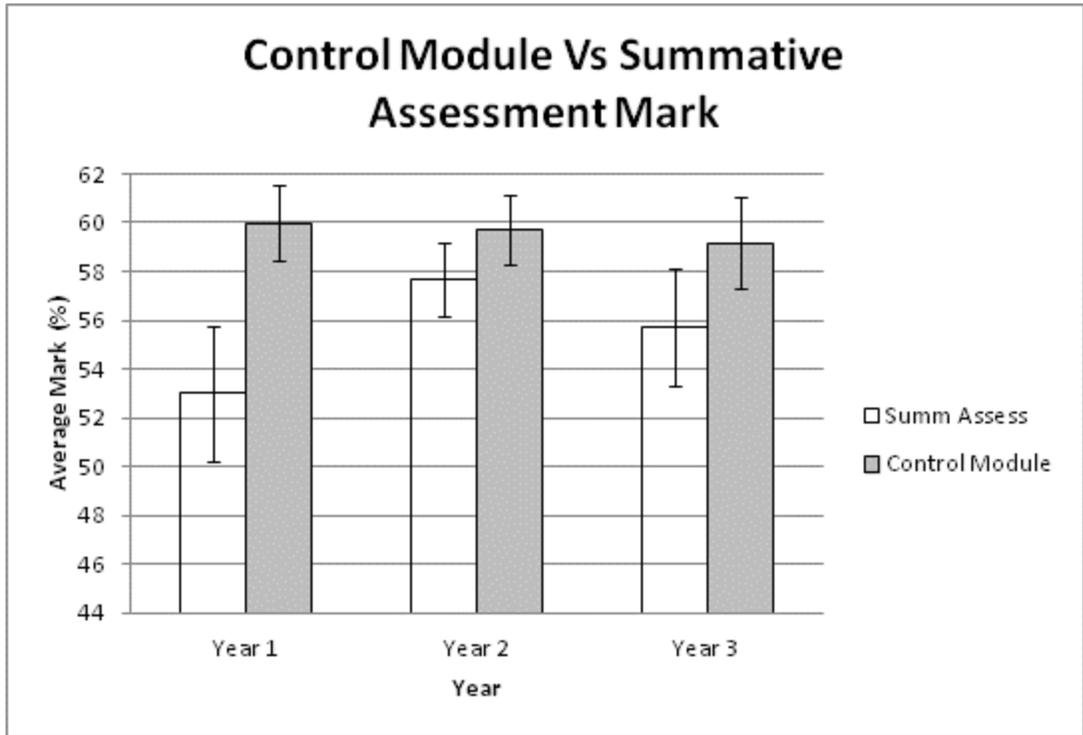


Figure 2. Change in Average Student Performance between Years

Student Performance in Control Module. There was no significant difference found in student performance across the same three years in the control module. As shown in figure 3, average student performance in this control module across the three years was between 59% and 60%, for the same group of students. In summary, the changes observed over the three-year period, do not reflect a general trend in student performance on other similar modules.

Discussion

The findings of the study show that an increased level of critical generic feedback had a positive impact on individual student performance, confirming hypothesis 1. Whilst this direct feedback did negatively impact on student satisfaction, it did not, contrary to hypothesis 2, negatively

impact their learning and performance. Whilst one would normally expect decreasing levels of student satisfaction and esteem to adversely affect a student's ability to perform and learn (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2003), this was not the case in this study, as noted above. Providing critical feedback at a group level did not reduce the negative effects of critical feedback on student satisfaction. Instead the student cohort experienced a sense of collective despair, as evidenced by the dramatic drop in student satisfaction scores and the nature of comments given. This increase in negative affect did not however constrain the group's ability to change and adapt to the feedback given, partially confirming the increased resilience of groups referred to in hypotheses 3.

As noted above, the response of an individual to negative feedback depends on their self-esteem and the way in which they perceive such feedback. Dweck and colleagues contrasted responses to feedback between those they labeled as "mastery-oriented" and those they called "helpless" (Dweck & Leggett 1988; Elliott & Dweck 1988). Whilst mastery-oriented children were seen to have a positive and resilient orientation to problems, seeing them as challenges, helpless students saw failure as a reflection of their (perceived low) ability, and gave up easily when faced with difficult feedback (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). They argued that helpless students seek to maintain positive judgments on their work and avoid negative feedback, asking the question, 'Is my ability adequate?' Such students attribute failure to low ability, resulting in a deterioration in performance and threatening self-esteem (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In contrast, mastery-oriented individuals focus on developing their ability over time, asking the question 'How can I best acquire this skill or master this task?' (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Failure in these cases triggers the search for new strategies or increased effort, as students focus on 'improving ability over time,

not on proving current ability' (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). In various studies, students with a mastery orientation continued to show optimism in the face of failure, maintaining and even increasing positive affect (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The orientation a student assumes, is further linked to whether they believe their intelligence is fixed (the 'entity view'), or malleable (the 'incremental view') (Dweck, 1999). If an individual assumes the former then the negative feedback is interpreted as a reflection of their low ability, and students are likely to give up. If the student believes their intelligence is malleable, then they are more likely to interpret negative feedback as a challenge, and increase their effort.

Whilst this present study did not measure for fixed or malleable orientations, Yorke and Knight (2004) found that in one third of a sample of 2269 undergraduates, students held beliefs in fixed intelligence. If one assumes a similar representation within the studied cohort, then one would expect an increase in negative affect when faced with increased levels of critical feedback (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Alongside this, one would also expect to find a withdrawal of effort and decrease in student performance (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Whilst the current study did show an increase in negative effect, this was, in contrast, accompanied by an improvement, not a deterioration, in student performance. In other words, whilst we may expect entity-oriented students to react negatively to critical feedback, we would also expect to see a deterioration, not an improvement in performance.

The findings of this study instead point to the generic and collective nature of the feedback given in the affected year. Giving critical feedback has the potential to negatively affect the motivation and confidence of students, as seen in the study. However, it is argued here that the collective

nature of the feedback allows students to respond to such critical feedback in a collective manner. Past research has shown that group feedback can help build interpersonal attraction and congruence within groups (London & Sessa, 2006; Nadler, 1979; Polzer et al., 2002), resulting in a greater sense of group pride and task-oriented behavior (Berkowitz & Levy, 1956). On the one hand, groups might have capitulated on masse, collectively seeing such feedback as a reflection of their low ability. However, as proposed in hypothesis 3, the strengthening of group bonds, can also act to increase the resilience of groups in the face of critical feedback. In which case, they might have rebelled in the face of such criticisms, and attempted to ‘prove the tutor wrong’. The latter appears to have been the case. In other words, the group may have found collective strength in their collective despair.

The process might be compared to that of the army boot camp, in which the sergeant major knocks recruits into shape through firm and critical words. However, by targeting criticisms at the group and not the individual, individual self-reflection and negative processes of peer comparison are not triggered. Instead the ‘sergeant major’ or tutor becomes the target of collective negative thoughts, or the ‘common enemy’, as the group becomes more cohesive and resilient, with a strengthening team spirit. As noted at the beginning of this paper, critical feedback connects directly to improved learning and performance, albeit with a consequent negative impact on individual student satisfaction. However, given the mix of both fixed and malleable orientations (Dweck, 1999) of students within a cohort, it becomes difficult for educators to tailor feedback for each of the very different responses from both types. By re-targeting critical feedback at the level of the group, the tutor leverages the power of the

collective to counteract the negative impact critical and direct feedback might have on individual student self-esteem and performance.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study is subject to a number of limitations linked to the relationships between feedback, student performance and levels of satisfaction. First the study did not capture individual level differences in satisfaction and performance, as the former measures were anonymized. As a result, it was not possible to see how individual levels of performance and satisfaction might vary across the cohort of students. Future research should therefore include such measures of individual satisfaction and self-esteem. Furthermore, future research should include measures relating to group cohesion, interpersonal coordination and group-level esteem.

Second, this study focused on the comparative effect of changes in one module towards more generic and critical feedback. It was therefore not possible to explore how different forms of feedback, such as; positive versus negative feedback, individual- versus group-level feedback, or generic versus task-focused feedback might have influenced student performance and levels of satisfaction.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight an important dimension of critical generic feedback. Critical feedback is seen to be more direct and targeted than positive feedback, and as a result has the potential to lead to a process of self-regulated learning (Benedict & Levine, 1988; Draper, 2009;

Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Young, 2000). However, such critical feedback can at the same time demotivate students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and undermine a student's ability to respond and change (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Neutralizing the detrimental effects of critical feedback on a student's self-esteem can thus enhance the potential for that student to learn from formative feedback. In this study, it is argued that the negative impact of critical feedback on student motivation and satisfaction has been decoupled from their ability to react to such criticisms. This has been achieved by targeting critical feedback at the collective as opposed to the individual level. As a result, whilst the feedback still had a negative impact on student satisfaction, a collective strength was found in their collective despair. Instead of triggering a process of self-reflection and peer comparison, the feedback increased team spirit and collective action, resulting in improved performance.

Appendix

Example of generic feedback

In the second tutorial, students completed their first project presentations to the tutor in groups of five. The task involved developing an idea for a product or service which the groups would 'sell' to other students. Immediately following each presentation in this tutorial, groups were given specific feedback on how they could improve their ideas. In the week following these presentations, the tutor opened the module lecture with critical generic feedback on overall performances across all groups. The tutor highlighted key mistakes made and thus areas for improvement across all groups. In this specific session, this feedback included a) a lack of secondary research completed to support ideas, b) a failure to draw on relevant theoretical

models to structure the presentations, and c) a lack of novelty in terms of the originality of ideas presented. The tutor then linked these three issues to criteria within the assessment again focusing on areas for improvement only. No specific groups or ideas from groups were identified or discussed in this feedback.

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