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An Unstructured Way: How Students Learn to Provide Feedback in a Reading Club

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Abstract: While peer feedback is beneficial for students' learning, students are not always ready to provide constructive feedback to their peers. Prior studies have used cognitive scaffolding, such as review forms, to support students' feedback provision, yet the social context of learning has been overlooked. In the current study, we investigate how students naturally learn to provide feedback within a reading club. Over ten weeks of participation in receiving and giving feedback, students' feedback became more specific and targeted to their peers' work. By participating in community activities, students shared perspectives and knowledge with their peers and found their own ways to provide constructive feedback.

Introduction

Despite the potential of peer feedback for learning (Kollar & Fischer, 2010; Liu & Carless, 2006; van Popta et al., 2017), research consistently shows that students, particularly novices, struggle to provide constructive feedback (Burgess et al., 2021; Simpson & Clifton, 2016). Prior studies have approached this problem by developing structured supports, such as review forms, to guide students (Yuan et al., 2016). However, this approach often neglects students' agency and the social dynamics of learning within a community (Wood, 2022).

This study bridges that gap by adopting a participatory lens of learning to investigate how students learn to provide feedback in a research reading club (c.f. Sfard, 1998). This club becomes a community of practice (CoP) that brings together junior and senior students and a professor to engage in authentic academic critique. We conceptualize the learning not as mere mimicry of format or content, but as behavioral evidence of a change in their internal sensemaking of what constitutes effective feedback, i.e., when one member adopts the ways other members give feedback. To that end, this study aims to answer two research questions: First, what changes happened in students' feedback provision over the semester? Second, how does the adoption explain students' learning in providing feedback?

Method

This study employs a naturalistic case study design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to explore how students learn to provide peer feedback in an academic reading club. The case is a ten-week graduate-level reading club with one professor and six graduate students. Two students had prior peer-review experience, while four were considered novices. The data for this study are archival from the club's weekly activities, including students' review essays and feedback from the professor and peers. After the club concluded, the institutional review board approved analysis of the pre-existing dataset, and all participants provided oral consent.

We used qualitative content analysis to explore students' changes in feedback provision. First, we used a codebook based on Sommers (1982) to identify feedback topics in 232 lines of data. The codebook classifies content into three main categories: higher-order concerns (evaluating foundational elements like argument, evidence, and structure), lower-order concerns (addressing sentence-level clarity and grammatical mechanics), and meta comments (capturing meta-cognitive reflections on the writing or reviewing process itself). After coding the data, one author reviewed the dataset and identified qualitative changes in students' behaviors. Following that, two authors searched for pairs of feedback that were similar to each other, received and provided by one student, indicating that the student understood the feedback they received and could provide similar feedback to others.

Results

RQ1 What changes happened in students' feedback provision over the semester?

First, students' feedback shifted from general and vague to specific and detailed. These changes are evident in the emergence of codes during data coding. Initially, students tend to write long, general feedback, indicating a vague sense of what providing feedback means to them at the beginning of the semester. In contrast, students were more specific when given feedback in later weeks, clearly addressing specific areas of the writing. This shift indicates

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a growing understanding of providing feedback, which extends beyond leaving a comment and engaging peers meaningfully.

Besides being more specific, the target of students' feedback changed from the article to peers' writing and research over the semester, indicating a shift in their role from co-readers to constructive peers. Initially, students focused their critiques on the article's content, acting as discussants of a shared text. As the semester progressed, we observed that students began to provide feedback focused on their peers' research development. This change signifies a deeper understanding of the purpose of feedback: moving from discussing a text to using the text to become better researchers.

RQ2 How does the adoption explain students' progress in providing feedback?

Two types of adoption, perspective-taking and knowledge, explain students' progress in learning to provide feedback. First, some students adopt a reader's perspective. That is, after reading and understanding the feedback they received, students learned from their peers that sharing feelings as readers was an essential part of feedback and that it helped authors improve their work. Such adoption may change their positions as a feedback provider. This, in turn, is associated with the content they considered valuable to include in feedback (e.g., moving from rich but irrelevant comments to comments focused on research analysis, as reported in the findings of RQ1). Another perspective-related adoption is students adopting a researcher's perspective. This reflects students' view that feedback should be generalizable, addressing broader research considerations rather than being limited to the specific study reviewed. This adoption is supported by the following section of the adoption, i.e., the increasing of knowledge.

While perspective-related adoption occurred both from expert to novice and among novices, knowledge adoption in feedback occurred only from expert to novice. The expert in this community plays a unique role as a source of knowledge, identifying knowledge gaps revealed in an individual's practice and filling them. The expert's knowledge further became shared knowledge within the community through students' adoption.

Discussion

In this study, we presented an unstructured approach for students to learn to provide feedback. While junior students were initially unable to provide constructive feedback, through ongoing participation in the community activities, they explored perspectives and sought knowledge to support them in offering helpful feedback. While providing review forms is effective in supporting students' cognitive development (Harland et al., 2017), we highlight that knowledge and perspective-taking may take different roles in explaining students' agentic participation in providing feedback.

Over 10 weeks of practice, the community accumulated knowledge of journal quality and APA format as the professor and peers provided feedback. They served as resources participants could use to write their own feedback. Without increasing their knowledge, especially understanding of good research and writing, students might not be able to provide constructive feedback and ask meaningful questions (Raz & Kenett, 2026). Meanwhile, perspectives, such as being a reader or researcher, inform how students select resources and write feedback for peers. This perspective-taking is similar to the concept of framing that shapes students' learning (Berland & Hammer, 2012), i.e., a question of what's going on in students' minds. These perspectives shape how they make sense of feedback and how they participate in this activity.

Community affords a concrete context for the above learning to occur. Both the professor and peers provided rich resources for learners who have just started their sociocultural practice, providing feedback. Specifically, students exchanged ideas with different people about providing feedback. By doing so, a distributed understanding of feedback is integrated into a whole sensemaking of the practice within the community. Such sensemaking denotes a rich understanding of reading, writing, and researching (Reddy et al., 2021).

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